

Auditor General deems Greenbelt changes benefit certain developers

By Mark PavilonisEditor

The selection of lands removed from the Greenbelt by the Province was both "biased" and "dismissive," according to Ontario's Auditor General. Bonnie Lysyk released her report on changes to the greenbelt last week, criticizing the government and its methods. "Provincial government actions in 2022 to open parts of the Greenbelt for development failed to consider environmental, agricultural and financial risks and impacts, proceeded with little input from experts or affected parties, and favoured certain developers/landowners," Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said in the special report. Lysyk also noted that the owners of the 15 land sites removed from the Greenbelt could ultimately see more than an \$8.3 billion increase to the value of their properties. "The exercise to change the Greenbelt boundaries in fall 2022 cannot be described as a standard or defensible process," Lysyk stated. "The truncated and highly restricted land selection exercise excluded substantive input from land-use planning experts in provincial ministries, municipalities, conservation authorities, First Nations leaders, and the public, while giving preferential treatment to certain developers with direct access to the Chief of Staff to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing." The audit found that:

- The government's target to increase housing did not require removing land from the Greenbelt. According to the government's Housing Affordability Task Force and the Chief Planners of the three affected regions (Durham, Hamilton and York), the removal of Greenbelt land sites was not needed to meet the government's housing goals. In fact, in late October 2022, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (Housing Ministry) had already allocated housing targets to regions to build 1.5 million homes, before land sites were approved for removal from the Greenbelt.
- Political staff had substantial control over the entire Greenbelt amendment exercise. The Housing Minister's Chief of Staff provided a small team of non-political public service staff in the Housing Ministry the criteria to be used in the selection process, directed the team to alter the criteria to facilitate the selection of many sites provided by the Chief of Staff, and imposed a three-week timeline and confidentiality provisions, limiting the team's time and ability to assess the land sites and provide alternatives.
- Even though hundreds of site removal requests had been submitted to the Housing Ministry since the Greenbelt was established in 2005, only 22 land sites were considered in the 2022 selection exercise. Of those, only one was proposed by the Housing Ministry's non-political public service staff, while 21 were provided directly by the Housing Minister's Chief of Staff. Of the 15 land sites ultimately approved for removal in Dec. 2022, 14 were brought into the exercise by the Housing Minister's Chief of Staff and one was identified by the Housing Ministry's non-political public service staff.
- About 67% (4,900) of the approximately 7,400 acres ultimately removed from the Greenbelt are on two land sites for which information was given by two developers to the Chief of Staff in September 2022 at an industry function they all attended. One of these developers subsequently provided information on the removal on three additional land sites, one of which related to a third developer. Overall, 92% (6,800) of the approximately 7,400 acres ultimately removed from the Greenbelt related to five land sites involving three developers.
- Greenbelt removals were approved without full consideration of environmental and agricultural risks, and were inconsistent with the vision, goals and processes of the Greenbelt Plan to provide important natural features and agricultural land with permanent protection, as well as previous amendments to the Greenbelt boundary. The 2022 boundary changes removed almost 1,000 acres of wetlands and woodlands from the Greenbelt. As well, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs indicated that about 83% of the area removed is classified as prime agricultural land, having the highest quality and capability for agriculture.
- Restrictions on the Housing Ministry's non-political staff team precluded an assessment of the cost to add needed infrastructure to each of the land sites proposed for removal, how the costs would be apportioned between the public and private sectors, or whether the affected municipalities would even allow those lands to be developed if the removals proceeded.

While additions were made to the Greenbelt to offset lands removed, 2,400 of the added acres are areas typically already protected and largely undevelopable, and do not contribute agricultural land protection "a core objective of the Greenbelt Plan. Further, although 7,000 acres of the Paris Galt Moraine were added as offsets, the Housing Ministry had recommended a larger portion be

added to encompass important natural features and agricultural land. Additions to the Greenbelt were necessary to offset removals because the Greenbelt Act, 2005, prohibits a reduction in the Greenbelt Area. While the people of Ontario deserve prompt action to solve societal problems like those generated by a need for housing, this does not mean that government and non-elected political staff should sideline or abandon protocols and processes that are important to guide objective and transparent decision-making based on sufficient and accurate information," Lysyk added. You can read the report at www.auditor.on.ca

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At a press conference in Mississauga Aug. 11, Premier Doug Ford said the government will implement 14 of the 15 recommendations recommended by the auditor general. He further stressed that "no one had preferential treatment." The report drew immediate response from opponents and environmental groups. Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence, said the lands must now be returned to the Greenbelt and legislation introduced to protect it from future attacks, as well as to protect other farms and forests from speculative developers. The decision to remove the specific lands should be revisited.

The Auditor General's report confirms that lands were removed from the Greenbelt as a favour to particular sprawl developers to enable them to make up to \$8.3 billion in windfall profits by building on land meant to be protected forever. Shockingly, this occurred despite clear and abundant evidence that lands in the Greenbelt are not required to meet Ontario's housing supply needs," Gray said. "There are 59,000 hectares of land designated for development in the GTA alone, without including the 3,000 hectares removed from the Greenbelt. If some of lands were developed at even the modest densities of Toronto's Trinity-Bellwoods neighbourhood, only 15,000 hectares would be consumed by the population projected for the region by 2051. Gray also argued there are also fixed supplies of materials and labour available for home building. Focusing them on creating low density sprawl means less can be made available to build the communities we need inside of our towns and cities. "Ontarians know that we can build homes in cities and towns where we already have services and where public transit and walkability lead to lower costs and higher quality of life. In fact a new public opinion poll conducted by Environics for the Alliance for a Livable Ontario shows that 83 per cent of Ontario residents want homes built within cities and towns where services exist " and not on the Greenbelt. They also do not find the Ontario government credible on the issue of land supply and housing. "The Ontario government is on the wrong side of the views of almost all Ontarians except for its developer friends. It needs to stop pushing forward senseless environmental destruction and focus on getting homes built where they are needed, and at prices people can afford. "Now that Ontarians can see the full picture of what has occurred with the Greenbelt, immediate actions are necessary. These include: "Full investigation of the relationship between the provincial government and development industry by the OPP. "Lands removed from the Greenbelt must be returned immediately and the Greenbelt boundary legislatively protected. "The Greenbelt should be expanded to protect much more of southern Ontario's farmland. "City and town boundary expansion should only be permitted after it can be proven that there are no more opportunities for building within the existing boundaries. "The Ontario and the federal governments must get back into the business of directly creating affordable housing. "The finding that just two developers own 92 per cent of the property excised from the Greenbelt and stand to gain \$8.3 billion in profit from this land swap is extremely disturbing. And to have confirmation that a high-level staffer was giving preferential treatment to select developers, even letting the developers directly suggest parcels for excision. This is putting 1000 acres of wetlands and woodlands in jeopardy in southwestern Ontario, where the historical rate of wetland loss has been among the highest in Canada. It is shocking," said Dr. Rebecca Rooney, wetland ecologist and professor at University of Waterloo.

Ontario Greens vow to keep up the fight. The Green Party is calling for the following measures to redress the harms committed by the Ford government: A commitment from the Ford government to accept the Auditor General's recommendation to reverse their 2022 decision to alter Greenbelt boundaries. The resignation of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and his chief of staff. An OPP investigation into whether there was any criminal activity by members of the Ford government.

Ford's Greenbelt giveaway on the backs of everyday Ontarians. "All along, this government's agenda has been to favour wealthy, elite insiders at the expense of everyday Ontarians. Now, we have a report that shows it " and the evidence is staggering," said Ontario Greens leader and MPP for Guelph Mike Schreiner. "What this demonstrates to me is a total lack of care for the people of Ontario " a willingness to break all the rules to sell off the land that feeds us and protects to wealthy insiders, leaving the rest of us to foot the bill. "While the rich get richer, we lose thousands of acres of prime farmland, wetlands and woodlands."