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Death by a thousand cuts

By Skid Crease

?A culture is no better than its woods,? wrote W.H. Auden.

The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance recently released a map to the Ontario government ?highlighting the potential harmful impacts of more than 650 requests, by developers and municipalities to remove land from Ontario's protected Greenbelt.?

The Greenbelt, from Caledon to York Region to Toronto to Hamilton, was designed to be a swath of protected forests, woodlots, farmland, and rivers ensuring clean water and healthy habitat for the present and future biodiversity of our communities.

This present approach of small, piece by piece land removal by speculators and developers with the approval of short-sighted local politicians is the antithesis of what the legislation intended ? permanent protection for the Greenbelt. Since there is already approved land the size of Mississauga and Oakville combined that is available for development, one has to wonder why the premier allows developers to ?pave paradise and put up a parking lot.?

There should be a complete moratorium on development that infringes on any watersheds, woodlands, and prime agricultural land within the Greenbelt. Local communities should raise their voices in collective outrage when their councils cave in to development pressures. Public shaming, at a minimum, should be heaped upon those who squander our communities' future for their personal short-term gains. The examples of violations against the Greenbelt, are plentiful in the GTA, including York and Caledon, and the Golden Horseshoe.

There is a dangerous trinity of profit, power, and politics that combines to give a privileged few free license to consume the resources of the global commons at the expense of the many. The rules that we thought applied to all of us in the Greenbelt don't apply when money and influence flows freely at City Hall.

This pattern of abuse is not confined to the Greenbelt. In neighbouring Caledon, the Region of Peel recently reversed a decade-long planning process by Peel Region and the Town of Caledon planners and opted for the cheapest choice. This long and expensive process ? economically, environmentally, and socially ? was the result of one development interest and an antagonistic Chamber of Commerce lobbying relentlessly to get their way.

Lands that had originally been part of a TRCA master plan for the Humber river watershed, were turned over to the Town of Caledon, who subsequently re-zoned the lands while incorporating their previous environmental concerns into any development projects. One developer who speculated on those lands saw the Town's planning going in a different direction and fought to have them changed. The story would read like a rurban version of Boardwalk Empire or House of Cards if we were allowed to tell it in full.

Suffice to say that the same pattern is rife throughout King and Vaughan. Powerful and wealthy speculators and developers influence politicians who use their positions of trust to abuse the public process. They stretch rules, ignore laws, by-pass regulations, threaten legal action, intimidate opponents, and make a lot of money doing so.

I have seen this at work in my own community and have read about myriad examples throughout history. Wealth gets concentrated in the hands of the few, and the many never really get the trickle down crumbs that fall off their table. It happened in ancient Sumer; it happened in the Roman Empire; it happened on Easter Island, and it is happening throughout the ?developed? world right now. The wealthy consume the rest of their community out of room and board until the whole thing collapses. The gap now between the richest and poorest is greater than at any other time in history, and the result will be the same as in ages past.

In the short term, a lot of money gets made and that excess of wealth leads to power and privilege. That power and privilege then leads to a sense of entitlement that drives people to get their own way in all matters. That need to get their own way leads to politicians being seduced by gifts, campaign promises and special favours. Those seduced politicians then make decisions not for the public good, but for their own enrichment, and their own safety, all on behalf of the wealthy few. He who dies with the most toys wins.

Ronald Wright, in A Short History of Progress, a book all of us should read, stated: ?We still have differing cultures and political systems (globally), but at the economic level, there is only one big civilization feeding on the whole planet's natural capital. We're logging everywhere, fishing everywhere, irrigating everywhere, building everywhere, and no corner of the biosphere escapes our haemorrhage of waste.?

Our Greenbelt was a symbol of hope locally, a way to protect our tiny portion of that biosphere. Our children are taught in school that it is OK to say, ?NO? to big and powerful people when they are doing something wrong. We tell our children that if you ignore

what the bully is doing, then you are as guilty as the bully. We tell our children all these things to keep them safe and strong, and in doing so we hope that they will remember us with love.
But they will remember us not for what we say, but for what we do.
As Edmund Burke once said: ?The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good people to do nothing.?

Skid Crease is an accredited member of the Association of Canadian Journalists. He is an award-winning outdoor and environmental educator, a keynote speaker, a storyteller, an author, and a community volunteer. He taught with the North York and Toronto District School boards for 35 years, and officially ?retired? from the Faculty of Education, York University, where he was a Course Director and Environmental Science Advisor. Skid has worked with scientists from Environment Canada (pre-2005), NASA, and the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in a quest to put an understandable story behind the wealth of their scientific data.