

Troubling questions about Doug Ford's move into the Greenbelt

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The Ontario government's sudden and poorly explained decision this month to open protected land in the province's Greenbelt to housing development is extremely troubling.

It is impossible for a reasonable person not to feel unease about it. It is also possible for the Ford government to provide transparency on the issue, and to demonstrate that its decision was justified, putting the matter to rest. The real problem is that this has not been done and doesn't appear to be forthcoming.

What is known publicly at this point is as follows:

Premier Doug Ford vowed during his leadership campaign in 2018 to carve out "a big chunk" of the Greenbelt for development. The Greenbelt was created in 2005 to protect the headwaters of the rivers that flow into Lake Ontario, to preserve valuable farmland and to connect the forest and wetland ecosystems that run in an arc across the top of the Greater Toronto and Niagara regions. It covers about 2 million acres.

The subsequent political and public backlash forced Mr. Ford into full retreat. He vowed in the 2018 provincial election campaign that he would never touch the Greenbelt. By one count, he and his Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister, Steve Clark, repeated that promise 18 times from 2018 to 2021.

The Ford government's insistence that it would never open up the Greenbelt to development somehow did not stop land speculation inside its boundaries. An investigation by The Globe and Mail found at least nine properties on land to be carved out of the Greenbelt were sold for a total of more than \$300-million after Mr. Ford became Premier in 2018.

One of them is a piece of land lying largely in the Greenbelt that sold for \$80-million in September, just weeks before the government revealed its new plan.

The Globe's investigation, and another done jointly by The Toronto Star and The Narwhal, also found that at least four developers who bought the properties the Ford government wants to remove from the Greenbelt have donated generously to the PC Party since 2018.

The Ford government insists that the parcels of land in question were chosen based on strict criteria: having the potential for homes to be built in the near future; being adjacent to existing Greenbelt boundaries and urban areas; and being on or near readily

serviceable land. But to date it has refused to say how many pieces of land fit the declared criteria, and why it selected the properties it did.

The government equally insists that the betrayal of its promise not to develop the Greenbelt was forced on it by the province's housing crisis. But that is contradicted by a report from the Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force, an expert government panel that concluded in February that "a shortage of land isn't the cause of the problem."

It is further troubling that, according to the government, the Greenbelt carve-outs will produce only 50,000 new homes. The Ford government's overall goal is to build 1.5 million homes over 10 years; in other words, it can presumably build 1.45 million homes – well within an acceptable margin of error – without rewarding speculation in the Greenbelt.

And it comes as no reassurance whatsoever when the Ford government says that, if homes aren't being built on the carve-outs by 2025, the land will be returned to the Greenbelt. That's as believable as Mr. Ford's promise not to invade the Greenbelt in the first place. Any sensible person knows the land will be gone for good.

Perhaps most troubling of all, Mr. Clark was asked three times on Tuesday in the Ontario legislature whether he or anyone in his government tipped off developers about the Greenbelt plan, and three times he failed to say he hadn't. But asked the same question the next day in the same venue, he changed his answer to a hard no.

Ontario's integrity commissioner is now reviewing a request from the Opposition to investigate possible ethics breaches. And the NDP has called on the province's Auditor-General to examine the Greenbelt plan for "conflicts of interest and sharing of insider information," and to "refer any evidence of misconduct to the appropriate authorities."

Those are welcome developments. Everyone agrees that Ontario needs to build more homes, and to do it quickly. But few would argue that this justifies the way the Ford government plans to open up the Greenbelt. The odour coming from it is too strong to ignore.