

With so many questions, Ontario's Greenbelt housing plan must stop

With more questions than answers, the province's Greenbelt development plan needs to stop.

By [Star Editorial Board](#)

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Doug Ford must halt his government's proposal to open up Greenbelt lands for housing.

The plan that would permit housing on once protected lands and mightily enrich the government's developers friends in the process is wrong-headed, ill-considered — like much of the province's housing strategy — and looks increasingly suspicious.

The entire scheme needs to be permanently stopped. If Queen's Park is unwilling to go that far, it needs to at least pause the plan until it can come clean on details of its concerning land dealings.

When first released early last month, the province's surprise plan to allow 7,400 acres of protected land to be used for housing was deeply worrisome. It would undermine the very purpose of the Greenbelt, which is to safeguard natural spaces and all their benefits, which include absorbing rainwater to reduce the risk of flooding, ensuring a continuous band of green space and simply providing restful places for residents to enjoy.

There are clear risks to the province's intention to pave over parts of the Greenbelt.

Just last week, a [report](#) from the auditor general on urban flooding noted that one big risk factor was development that “results in the loss of green spaces and other pervious surfaces, which absorb water, and the expansion of hard surfaces (such as roads, parking lots and buildings), which prevent stormwater from being absorbed.”

Associations representing farmers said that rezoning thousands of acres of farmland in the Greenbelt and near other urban areas is a “serious concern.”

In a letter to Ford, they urged “responsible land use planning” to minimize sprawl and save farmland.

The province has offered no sound explanation for why these parcels of land were chosen, beyond the rationale that housing can quickly be built. But that’s no justification. These lands will accommodate 50,000 homes, barely moving the needle towards the goal of building 1.5 million homes.

That brings us to our concerns about the propriety of these dealings, which stand to benefit developers, some of whom are generous donors to the Ontario Progressive Conservatives.

As we’ve previously highlighted, an investigation by the Star and The Narwhal found eight of the 15 areas of the Greenbelt now earmarked for development have been purchased since the Tories were elected in 2018. Just months before the Greenbelt announcement, one developer paid \$80 million for 700 acres of land in King Township that was untouchable at the time.

It seems curious to purchase land off limits to development. After all, Steve Clark, the housing and municipal affairs minister, had pledged in early 2021 that the Greenbelt would be protected.

But the developers may have been betting that Ford would make good on his own 2018 statement that he would open up a “big chunk” of the Greenbelt for housing, a plan hatched, he said, after conversations with “some of the biggest developers in the country.

“I wish I could say it was my idea but it was their idea as well,” Ford said at the time.

It’s hard then not to be suspicious about the chain of events.

Concerns were only heightened when Clark last week refused to clearly say “no” when asked if developers had been alerted to the Greenbelt plans. It wasn’t until the following day that he was able to deliver an unequivocal no. This is no small detail. It should not have taken Clark a day to deliver a clear answer.

We welcome then the calls for investigations.

NDP MPP Marit Stiles says the province's move would "instantly shift immense wealth" onto the landowners. She has asked the auditor general to look into how much the developers stand to profit and "whether this wealth transfer is in the public interest." She also wants an investigation into the economic and environmental impacts of the move.

Green Leader Mike Schreiner has asked the provincial integrity commissioner to investigate whether the land dealings have broken ethics rules. He also wants to know whether there was any improper lobbying by the landowners. "This doesn't pass the smell test ... we need to clear the air," Schreiner said.

Schreiner's right. With more questions than answers, the province's Greenbelt development plan needs to stop.