

Ontario Housing Minister won't say if he tipped off developers over Greenbelt changes

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Steve Clark, Ontario's Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, during a session with reporters at Queen's Park, failed to directly answer questions about whether developers, some of whom are large PC donors, got any advance notice of his proposal to carve out certain tracts from the Greenbelt. CHRIS YOUNG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark would not say whether he tipped off developers before announcing plans to break previous promises and allow housing on parts of the province's protected Greenbelt – plans expected to make the affected properties skyrocket in value.

Opposition NDP MPP Jessica Bell asked Mr. Clark three times in Question Period on Tuesday whether he, any government officials or Progressive Conservative Party officials shared any information with landowners before unveiling the Greenbelt proposal this month. Mr. Clark failed to provide an answer, at one point saying he “will meet with anyone.”

Afterward, in a 3½-minute-long session with reporters at Queen’s Park, Mr. Clark also repeatedly failed to directly answer questions about whether developers, some of whom are large PC donors, got any advance notice of his proposal to carve out certain tracts from the Greenbelt.

“I’m the Housing Minister,” Mr. Clark said. “I meet with a variety of people on housing all the time.”

The minister said he followed the province’s procedures for posting the proposed regulatory changes to the Greenbelt online for consultations. And he said the Greenbelt land was needed to meet the government’s goal of building 1½ million new homes over the next decade to address the housing crisis.

Earlier this month, Mr. Clark announced his proposal to allow the construction of 50,000 homes on 7,400 acres of the Greenbelt, while adding 9,400 acres elsewhere – some of which the government had already promised to protect – into the two-million-acre swath of land that arcs around the Greater Toronto Area from Niagara to Peterborough. On Tuesday, he also reiterated that if developers fail to show “substantial progress” on building housing by 2025, the lands would be returned to the Greenbelt.

The proposal is a stark reversal of repeated promises from Mr. Clark and Premier Doug Ford that they would not touch the Greenbelt – pledges made after Mr. Ford was caught on video before winning office in 2018 suggesting he would hand a “big chunk” of the protected area to developers. The reversal was never mentioned publicly during the spring election campaign.

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On Tuesday, Ms. Bell, the NDP’s housing critic, said the province does not need to open up the Greenbelt to meet housing demand, a conclusion the province’s own blue-ribbon panel on housing also reached.

“I asked the minister three very, very simple questions, where there was a simple yes-or-no answer; the minister just seemed incapable of responding,” Ms. Bell told reporters. “That surprises me. Ontarians want to know: Did you talk to developers first before opening up this precious Greenbelt land and this farmland to development?”

NDP MPP Marit Stiles, the only declared candidate in the party’s race to pick a new leader next year, has written the province’s auditor-general to call for an investigation into the Greenbelt plans.

Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner said Tuesday he had filed a complaint with the legislature’s integrity commissioner, J. David Wake, asking him to look into whether Mr. Clark or Mr. Ford broke the rules that govern MPPs and bar making decisions to further private interests or sharing insider information. Mr. Schreiner said he has also asked the integrity commissioner to probe if any lobbying by individuals not registered on the province’s lobbyist registry took place.

Mr. Clark's office has previously declined to answer similar questions about whether developers were given any advance notice of the proposed Greenbelt changes when asked in e-mails from The Globe and Mail.

A Globe investigation showed that at least 10 Greenbelt properties now earmarked for potential development have changed hands since Mr. Ford was first elected in 2018. One property largely in the Greenbelt sold for \$80-million in September, just weeks before the government revealed its new plan. At least four developers who bought the properties the government is now proposing to remove from the Greenbelt have either donated to the PC Party, hired Conservative lobbyists, or both.

Another high-value sale occurred in the spring of 2021, just five months after Mr. Ford had again publicly promised not to lift Greenbelt protections. The property in Vaughan, which included protected land, sold for \$50-million. The buyer was TACC Developments (Block 41) Inc., which is controlled by prominent developer Silvio De Gasperis and members of his family. The company borrowed \$100-million from Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce to cover the purchase, at an interest rate of 21 per cent annually, records show.