

An Assessment of Ontario Public Opinion Regarding Bill 23 (the *More Homes Built Faster Act*) and Related Measures Affecting the Greenbelt and Affordable Housing

Toronto, April 2023

Highlights: On-line survey research was conducted in the period December 2022 to March 2023, to assess Ontario public opinion regarding the recent measures by the Government of Ontario related to Bill 23 and its potential impact on housing and the Greenbelt.

The on-line survey research was carried out independently by an expert survey research group and not funded by government or other sources. Dozens of NGOs and community organizations from across Ontario participated in the stakeholder portion of the survey.

The results show widespread opposition in Ontario to the Government's Bill 23 and measures affecting the Greenbelt and affordable housing. Based on over 6,400 responses, the survey showed, in summary:

- **In a random sample survey, four out of five Ontarians surveyed (81%) called for the repeal of Bill 23 and for an ethics review on the Government's handling of these measures.** People are calling for Government action to reconsider these measures.
- **As to housing, the government rationale for Bill 23 and the related measures, 79% of those surveyed believe the government's measures will have no impact on the affordable housing which is desperately needed in Ontario today.**
- **At 80%, opposition is much higher than a Mainstreet survey published in December 2022, and another published by Abacus Surveys in March 2023 which both reported that people were opposed to the Bill 23 measures 2 to 1.** In both of those surveys, Ontarians were vehemently opposed to the Bill 23-related measures adopted.
- **In additional targeted surveys: Opposition was shown to be widespread across many specific groups examined (such as farmers, planners, housing providers, ratepayers (homeowners), and others), not only among environmental groups.** Further, 80-90% of Ontarians pointed to numerous serious, negative impacts expected from these measures in areas as diverse as municipal finance, housing, farming, and environment.

In short, a strong majority of Ontarians urge the Government to reverse the Bill 23 measures.

More details are provided within.

Acknowledgements

The on-line survey reported on within, aimed at improving our understanding of public opinion as regards Bill 23 and the Greenbelt, was aided by the efforts of many NGOs and others to reach out to persons concerned about the Greenbelt. The Survey results show the seriousness of this issue to the people of Ontario.

Thanks are due to many types of organizations who invited participants to the stakeholder component of the survey, including: NGOs, such as: social planning organizations, environmental groups, citizens groups, student organizations and many others including: homeowners/residents associations; labour organizations; farming organizations; housing organizations & tenant associations; business associations; faith organizations; university faculties in planning, natural resources and tourism; cottage associations; and hiking & trails associations.

A. Introduction

This report provides information from on-line surveys of some 6,400 Ontarians, casting light on public opinion, in relation to debates on Bill 23, and its controversial removal of lands from the Ontario Greenbelt in 2022. This information could aid legislators and others, including those working to have these measures repealed.

To add new information to the debate on Bill 23 and the Greenbelt, this research on Ontario Public opinion was undertaken by *Research on the Greenbelt*.¹ The research included a large survey of views of key stakeholder groups such as planners, environmental groups, farmers, non-profit housing groups and residents' associations.

The researchers asked for Ontarians' views on three key issues: 1) whether an ethics investigation was required, 2) whether Bill 23 and related measures would be likely to increase the supply of affordable housing, and 3) whether Bill 23 should be repealed. To our knowledge, these questions had not been directly examined in previous studies of Ontario public opinion.

Results showed that most Ontarians want an ethics review of the Bill 23 process. Very few Ontarians expect affordable housing to result from Bill 23, and the vast majority of Ontarians favour repeal of Bill 23. Comparison to other surveys by Abacus Surveys and Mainstreet Surveys suggest that our survey results show Ontarians are increasingly opposed to Bill 23 and related measures and are calling for changes in these measures.

B. Background

In Fall, 2022, the Government of Ontario introduced Bill 23, Bill 39 and related measures removing 7,400 acres of land from the Ontario Greenbelt including the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve and changing processes for housing development. This was a shock to many in Ontario, as previously the government had promised that the Greenbelt lands would be protected "forever" from development.

During a very-short consultation period, hundreds of presentations were submitted to the Provincial Government opposing these measures. Despite this opposition, Bill 23 and related measures passed into law on November 28, 2022, vastly changing Ontario's environmental situation and modifying housing development processes.

Bill 23 made these lands available for development, ostensibly to help address Ontario's shortage of housing. Because media reports indicated that the lands to be developed, potentially with very substantial profits, are in great part owned by individuals or companies linked to the Progressive Conservative Party numerous complaints were raised about the ethics of these moves, and Ontario's Integrity Commissioner, the Auditor General, and Ontario Provincial Police were asked to investigate.

¹ In Winter, 2023, *Research on the Greenbelt and Ontario*, a project of SPR Associates of Toronto, conducted surveys to provide new information on public opinion to inform discussions of the Bill 23-greenbelt issues. Over 6,400 Ontarians completed these surveys. The on-line surveys were undertaken by SPR as a public interest effort. The research drew on a decades long track record in surveys SPR has conducted for the governments of Canada, Ontario, and NGOs. Key accomplishments of SPR include its \$1million research contributing to the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1990 and resulting certification training for over 400,000 Ontario workers and managers; and contributions through \$2million in research for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, to aid the establishment of Canada's system of family violence shelters.

During protests following the passage of these measures, critics of the changes predicted many harmful impacts to be expected. The Bill 23-related changes were widely criticized as destructive to the environment generally, harmful to farming, harmful to flood control, and harmful to municipalities from a financial perspective.

The changes were also criticized as being of uncertain value to housing and reflecting poor planning. Initial impacts would be to develop new housing in poorly serviced lands in Pickering and Markham, with the likely result, based on recent track records of developers, being the development of large and costly homes (likely with many 4–6-bedroom homes resulting, based on the performance of key developers in the past few years). No positive impacts were seen for areas where housing was deemed most needed -- in Ontario's cities.

Since the winter, Ontario has been in turmoil with widespread and ongoing opposition to these government actions. Demonstrations have been widespread, with hundreds of NGOs and community organizations mobilizing against Bill 23 and the related measures. Umbrella groups such as *Liveable Ontario* have grown rapidly, attracting hundreds of organizations and thousands of supporters. As well, recent research by Dr. Kevin Eby, former Waterloo Director of Community Planning has shown there is enough land now available in the Golden Horseshoe for building 2 million new homes, without touching the Greenbelt.

The current situation: Bill 23 is now law, but some obstacles may impede its full implementation. First, ongoing ethics investigations may present obstacles to the government. Second, a Federal Environmental Assessment related to the *Rouge National Urban Park* may impede parts of these measures. But overall, the “battle” against Bill 23 and related measures remains ongoing.

Considering a Role for Public Opinion. Although widespread opposition has been seen, little effort has been made to examine public opinion in developing these discussions. Some surveys have measured general Ontario opinion regarding these changes (see for example: *Toronto Star*, March 7, 2023, which reported on a study by Abacus Surveys indicating widespread opposition to Bill 23 (Ontarians were shown to be opposed two-to-one to the Bill 23 changes). These results were similar to those of an earlier report by Mainstreet Research. As well, no surveys have directly examined the need for an ethics review, or repeal of Bill 23.

Starting to Fill this Gap: This report starts to fill this gap. The research has two parts: a survey of a small random sample of the Ontario population, and a larger survey of specific stakeholders in these measures, such as environmentalists, farmers, housing providers, planners, and others. In the research, a focus is given to Ontarians' views on three main topics: 1) whether an ethics investigation was required, 2) whether Bill 23 and related measures would be likely to increase the supply of affordable housing, and 3) whether Bill 23 should be repealed.

To our knowledge, these questions have not before been directly examined in studies of Ontario public opinion. Altogether some 6,400+ Ontarians were surveyed in this effort to fill this gap.

It is hoped that this information will help those who wish to modify or reverse the Bill 23 measures.

C. Results of the Random Sample Population Survey

The research had two main components: a) a survey of a small random sample of the Ontario population (400 persons), and b) a larger survey of 6,000+ stakeholders in these issues -- including environment groups, planning bodies, housing organizations, farming bodies, residents' associations, and other areas. The research focused on Ontarians' views on three key issues: 1) whether an ethics investigation was required, 2) whether Bill 23 and related measures would be likely to increase the supply of affordable housing, and 3) whether Bill 23 should be repealed. Developers, financial bodies, and others who might benefit from the Bill 23 actions were not invited to the survey.

The population survey revealed that not all Ontarians are aware of the Bill 23-Greenbelt issue. Less than half of those invited to the survey were informed enough that they felt they could provide assessments of Bill 23. Those with assessments, however, provided very clear views.

On the Three Key Issues:

- 80% indicated that an ethics review was needed.
- Only 21% thought the Bill 23 measures would aid affordable housing.
- 81% indicated that Bill 23 and related measures should be repealed.

Negative Impacts of Bill 23 and related measures: Of those providing assessments, a range of concerns were noted, with the percentages having specific concerns noted below:

- 95% expressed concerns with impacts on the environment.
- 92% expect loss of green space, recreational areas.
- 88% see negative impacts on farming and protection of agricultural lands.
- 80% cite negative impacts on climate change.
- 59% cite negative impacts on planning.
- 58% expect negative impacts on housing, including the provision of affordable housing.
- 54% foresee negative impacts on funding for municipalities.

Overall, the survey indicated that severe problems existed in the Ontario Bill 23 measures, that an ethics review was greatly needed, and that the legislation should be repealed. These results, which were similar for all regions of Ontario, should caution the government and aid opponents of the Bill 23 measures.

Conclusions: A wide range of concerns were expressed regarding negative impacts of Bill 23 and related measures, with greatest concerns for impacts on the environment, loss of green space and recreational area, impacts on farming, and impacts on climate change. *These results show a clear consensus in public opinion – that Bill 23 and its related measures are unacceptable to Ontarians. These results are further explored below for key stakeholder groups.*

² *Sampling:* The population random sample (400 persons) was drawn from SPR databases. Stakeholder survey participants were recruited through invitations distributed to: *public agencies* such as municipalities and conservation authorities; *NGOs*, including environmental groups; *Farmers groups*, such as the National Union of Farmers, county branches of the Ontario Federation of agriculture; *University faculties* (e.g., in forestry, environment and planning), *Neighborhood associations*, including over 200 residents associations from cities across Ontario; *Housing bodies*, including non-profit housing agencies, and umbrella groups such as the Ontario YWCA Housing Network; *Business groups* such as local business improvement associations; *Faith Groups*, such as the Anglican diocese of Toronto; and *others* such as unions and social action groups. Many of the survey participants were persons whose main interests in the greenbelt were as users of green spaces (hikers, naturalists, birders). See below regarding sampling of stakeholder groups.

D. Results for Key Stakeholder Groups

Overview: The survey results for key stakeholder groups generally mirrored those for the overall Ontario population, but in most cases with a stronger negative reaction to the legislation. Key groups examined were mainly persons invited to the survey by NGOs, and included environmental groups, non-profit housing groups, municipal officials, planners, farmers, users of green spaces, (hikers, campers etc.), residents' associations, and provincial civil servants. All these groups showed strongly negative assessments of Bill 23 and its related measures.#

Basic Results: of those providing detailed assessments key stakeholder groups shared common concerns with Bill 23 and need for an ethics review, little confidence in the Bill 23 measures aiding affordable housing, and strong support for repeal of Bill 23. See details below.

Stakeholder views on an ethics review: *As to the need for an ethic review*, respondents in all stakeholder groups were strident in their views that this was needed. These views were most strongly held by residents' associations, non-profit housing groups, users of green spaces and environmental groups, all of which favoured an ethics review by 90% or more. Also favouring a review, but less strongly, were planners, municipal officials, and farmers, all favouring a review by 80% or more. (See Table 1). *Specific comments:* Hundreds of respondents provided comments, often with very strong language condemning the Ford government and raising questions about corruption. (See comments, next pages).

Table 1
Percentage of Key Stakeholder Groups
Favouring an Ethics Review

% favouring an ethics review	Stakeholder Group
94%	environmental groups
96%	non-profit housing groups
83%	municipal officials
84%	planners
80%	farmers
95%	users of green spaces
96%	residents' associations
91%	provincial civil servants

Comments: Typical of the hundreds of comments provided regarding the needs for an ethics review are those shown on the next page, most focused on the widely held view that the Bill 232 measures were introduced as a reward for developer supporters of the Ford government. Respondents' comments reflect both the desire for more information (since no results are available so far on the ethics review) and a widely held sense of betrayal. Comments also show the ethics issue to be closely interwoven with issues of negative impacts (on environment, farming etc.) in the minds of stakeholders. (Some extremely negative comments are redacted with ***** symbols).

3. These groups varied in size and included: 100+ respondents from key groups such as farmers, members of non-profit housing bodies, municipal officials, and provincial civil servants; over 200 planners; 600+ members of environmental organizations; 700+ business persons; 1,400+ members of neighborhood residents associations; and 1,500+ users of greenspaces (hikers and other recreationists).

In Their Own Words About the Need for an Ethics Review

"Bill 23 should be completely revoked. It is c*****,* led by Doug Ford & his development buddies. If this was a private venture it would never pass. Doug Ford ... Doug Ford should resign immediately. He is not representing the people of Ontario but rather his ... buddies He is increasing land sprawl. He is taking away the ability for farmers to feed the people of Ontario and putting farmers' jobs at risk. He is also adding to Climate Change that effects all wildlife, trees & fauna, rivers, & lakes. Bill 23 is a disaster. There is nothing good about it at all."

Member of a Toronto residents' Association.

"Bill 23 smells to high heaven of c*****. A handful of very wealthy people contributors to the PC party in Ontario stand to make many millions after buying up land in the Green Belt that Doug Ford swore would never be developed, and then suddenly declared open for development, on the false premise that it would alleviate the affordable housing crisis in Ontario, when it obviously won't. More suburban sprawl won't solve the housing crisis".

Member of a Northern Ontario Environmental Group.

"Bill 23 was tabled October 25th, 2022. Developers close to Doug Ford bought lands, for cheap, just before ..., in what were then protected areas. It is significant that the only people to benefit from this bill are those developers. Homeowners will see vast increases in taxes, to the point some may lose their home. The homes built by D***** and R*** et al., will be sprawling and into the 1.5-to-2-million-dollar range with nothing to help those struggling to find affordable housing. It is a degenerate bill and shows moral c*****."

Member of a Residents Association in Eastern Ontario

"This bill was written for developers as a charter to increase developer wealth at the cost of taxpayers; the poor and near poor; the environment, specifically flood protection, floral and fauna; efforts to reduce climate change. Mr. Ford should be brought to answer"

A farmer in Central Ontario

"I feel like Bill 23 and removing portions of the Greenbelt is a disastrous plan that will only benefit developers and those who can afford million-dollar homes. I'm extremely worried about the loss of farmland and green spaces for our citizens. This plan in no way will help provide more affordable housing or address climate change. Something is rotten about how the bill came about and with how lands were purchased. Doug Ford said the people have spoken and we will not touch the Greenbelt, then does a 180 and makes these changes... I have lost all trust in him, and he does not seem to remember that he works for us. We must fill in our blank urban spaces before we impact the environment."

An environmentalist in South West Ontario

It is a profound obscenity. The Greenbelt should be increased, not diminished. This government is way off base with its priorities which are transparently to line the pockets of developers and to build more unneeded highways So offensive!

Member of a Faith organization in Central Ontario

Stakeholder Views on Expected Impacts on Affordable Housing: Respondents in all stakeholder groups indicated they felt that Bill 23 and related measures would not aid affordable housing in Ontario. These views were strongest among members of residents' associations and users of green spaces, who might be seen as "typical voters".

They were closely followed by environmental groups, non-profit housing groups, provincial civil servants, municipal officials, farmers, and planners. No stakeholder groups indicated a view that the Bill-23 changes were likely to aid the goal of affordable housing. (See Table 2, below). These views were underlined by typical and strongly held comments as shown on the next page).

Table 2:
Percentage of Key Stakeholder Groups Indicating
Affordable Housing Could Result from Bill 23.

% in saying affordable housing could result	Stakeholder Group
3%	non-profit housing groups
6%	users of green spaces
6%	residents' associations
8%	environmental groups
10%	provincial civil servants
16%	municipal officials
17%	planners
16%	farmers

Comments: Typical comments provided regarding poor impacts of the Bill 23 related measures on housing were provided by respondents. Respondent comments suggested great scepticism that Bill 23 and related measures would aid Ontario's housing crisis. Hundreds of survey respondents commented in the ways shown on the next page, with many emphasizing the likely use of greenbelt lands for expensive homes, and the overall lack of affordable housing. (See next page).

In Their Own Words
Impacts of the Bill 23 measures on Ontario's Housing Crisis & Affordable Housing

"Bill 23 will not increase affordable housing in Ontario in the municipalities and locations that require it. Building on the Greenbelt will result in environmental issues (homeowners will need to commute), increased taxes for the infrastructure to support the build including hospitals, schools, roads, sewers, etc. The best strategy for affordable housing is to build "up", not "out" in existing communities. We need ... checks and balances in place to ensure developers actually build affordable housing not large and expensive homes for the elite."

A Municipal Planner, Eastern Ontario

"This is perhaps the worst piece of legislation to address housing I have ever seen. It is not about affordable housing where it is needed but meeting the housing desires of the wealthiest. It violates basic principles of planning, environmental protection, and what we know about affordable housing. There is clearly a conflict of interest between developers and this government."

A Member of a GTA Environmental Group

The Government has no intention of addressing Affordable Housing. The Gov't would repeal the legislation that introduced the removal of rent control. The theory was this would lead to fair competition of houses being built and affordable rent. Neither is true. Housing costs are virtually out of reach now for average Canadians and the rental market is less than 1% vacancies in most cities and unaffordable to many in the community. The decision of rent or food should not be an issue."

A Member of a Residents' Association in Southwest Ontario

Bill 23, along with Bills 3 and 39, will not result in affordable housing and are a transfer of wealth to developers and the construction industry. The bills will starve municipalities of funding and transfer the cost of growth to taxpayers, harm the environment, result in urban sprawl, and erode local democracy. All three bills should be repealed.

Manager of a Non-profit Housing Agency in Eastern Ontario

As it stands now, it seems that houses to be built in the Greenbelt would most probably be estate homes. Repeal the bill and replace it with affordable housing for people at risk, the evicted, the homeless. The Greenbelt must be protected against developing anything that would endanger already endangered species. Whatever is decided, it must meet Canada's GHG targets or better.

A GTA Business Person

I am incredibly disappointed that Bill 23 has been passed, especially for the profit of developers. Everything I've read – suggests that this has nothing to do with building affordable housing, nor do the plans for building even include affordable housing. We need to address the housing situation in Toronto, where no one can afford to buy a house or rent. This is disgusting.

A Member of a GTA Environmental Group.

Building subdivisions on farm and or wet land will not solve any housing problems, more multi million-dollar homes are not needed, what is needed is more affordable housing; this does not mean single family stand alone houses

A Businessperson, Eastern Ontario

"This move is completely unnecessary. We have so many empty residential spaces being used as investments. This isn't a lack of land; this is a matter of c***** policy issue. Politicians and the money made from development are the issue. They're not helping at all with affordable housing initiatives."

Member of a Non-profit Housing Group in Central Ontario

Stakeholder Views on the Desirability of Repealing of Bill 23 and Related Measures: As to repeal of Bill 23 and its related measures, all the stakeholder groups examined indicated that there is a need to repeal this legislation. This was particularly true for residents' associations, environmental groups, users of green spaces, non-profit housing groups and provincial civil servants (all 90% or more in favour of repeal). Less stringent, but still strongly in favour of repeal were municipal officials, farmers, and planners (79-83% in favour of repeal).

Table 3:
Percentage of Key Stakeholder Groups Favouring Repeal of Bill 23

% favouring repeal of Bill 23	Stakeholder Group
96%	residents' associations
94%	users of green spaces
93%	environmental groups
92%	non-profit housing groups
91%	provincial civil servants
83%	municipal officials
82%	farmers
79%	planners

Overall, these results showed a strong consensus among Ontarians regarding the repeal of Bill 23 and its related measures.

Comments: Typical of the hundreds of comments provided regarding the need for repeal of the Bill 23 measures are those shown on the next page, most clearly indicating the desirability of repeal, focused on the widely held views that the Bill 23 measures were introduced as a reward for developers, who are supporters of the Ford government, along with the related concerns mentioned above regarding negative impacts on the environment, farming, and municipalities.

**In Their Own Words
the Need for Repeal of the Bill 23 Measures**

"This Bill was Bulldozed through the Ontario Legislature with little thought other than lining certain developers' pockets. It was also passed on a Friday afternoon after Municipal Elections. None of the elected officials were officially sworn in to office at that time. No one could offer opposition at the time it was passed. There was a lack of democracy in this action. It should be repealed, and legislation created which deals with Homelessness and Geared to income housing for those in need."

A Greenspace User in Northern Ontario

The climate crisis is the most pressing and urgent issue of our time. All government decisions need to be made using a climate lens. Repealing land and green space from the green belt weakens the resilience of our environment and further fractures already fragile ecosystems. Development on these lands will only exacerbate climate change with more emissions, resource extraction, waste, and so forth. It is critical that the government repeal Bill 23. Repeal this legislation.

An Eastern Ontario Planner

Bill 23 should be completely revoked. It is c***** led by Doug Ford & his development buddies. If this was a private venture it would never pass. Doug Ford should be held accountable along with his developer friends. Doug Ford should resign immediately. He is not representing in a positive manner the people of Ontario He is increasing land sprawl in the Greenbelt rather than decreasing it. He also is taking away the ability for farmers to feed the people in Ontario and putting farmers jobs in jeopardy. He is also adding to Climate Change that effects all aspects of the Greenbelt such as wildlife, trees & fauna, rivers, lakes, etc. Bill 23 is a disaster. There is nothing good about it at all.

Member of a Toronto Residents 'association.

Repeal Bill 23. Impeach Ford for c***** and d***** Ontarians. Legislation needs to protect the greenbelt in perpetuity. An agreement of many is the only way that the greenbelt can be affected, not just by a one-party decision. Governance of Ontario mustn't include a right to sell off Ontario's assets. No single party should ever have that authority to destroy our natural greenspaces.

An Indigenous Planner in Southwest Ontario

Repeal the Act for MULTIPLE inherent harms including: environmental/climate damage to Greenbelt; sprawl causing public health harms through climate change & air pollution; unsustainable economically by cutting municipal revenue streams & lack of supporting infrastructure planning/funding for new builds; false representation as a "housing" Act as will produce a lesser number of more expensive/unaffordable housing than properly conceived plans already drawn by professional urban planners/municipalities which are being suppressed; destroys prime dwindling farmland; destroys the valuable Conservation Authorities removing public protections against flooding/poor land management; exposes Ontarians to uncontrolled tax high taxes. NO land should be removed from the Greenbelt. In fact, the Greenbelt should be expanded.

A Member of an Environmental Group in Central Ontario

Bill 23, the Greenbelt takeouts, and very troubling changes to Regional Planning are decreasing the supply of housing and new housing starts – not increasing it – while destroying the natural heritage and water sources our province needs for the future. The provincial government needs to repeal these Bills and restore Regional Planning.

A member of an Environmental Group in Eastern Ontario

The Ford Government Needs to Repeal Bill 23 and Restore the Greenbelt or Resign.

A member of a non-profit Housing Group in the GTA

C. Conclusions and Implications for the Greenbelt Debate

Conclusions: Overall, there can be little doubt that Ontarians widely reject the Bill 23 measures. This is clearly indicated by the broad demands for an ethics review, widespread skepticism as to the impacts on affordable housing, and a consensus that the Bill 23 measures should be repealed. These findings are particularly striking as seen in the widespread calls for repeal not just by specific interest groups (such as farmers and environmentalists), but rather groups as broad as Ontario's residents' associations (mostly homeowners), and Doug Ford's own employees – his own civil servants.

The results suggest that support for the Bill 23 measures is generally very limited, probably only to the Ford Government and selected developers who benefit from these controversial land deals.

Implications: There is a need to consider how these results can best inform the Bill 23 discussions. One way is to share these results more widely with Ontarians. As well, there is a need to continue to monitor movement in public opinion on these issues, especially if, as the above results suggest, Ontarians are becoming more opposed to the Bill 23 measures.

As compared to other recent surveys, our results suggest a shift in public opinion – towards increasing rejection of the Ford government measures. This should be monitored by additional surveys, to provide better information for the government to use in considering repeal of the measures, and to aid those advocating repeal. As well these results may caution further efforts to reduce the Greenbelt or urban planning in Ontario.