

## **Environmental Defence Backgrounder:**

### **New legislation aims to wipe out the Golden Horseshoe's non-greenbelt farmland, and natural areas for the benefit of sprawl developers**

Phil Pothén, J.D., M.L.A.,  
Counsel, Land Use & Land Development Program Manager

April 19, 2024

Unless the people of Ontario speak up and force a change of course, the government will pass two new laws that could see much of Ontario's [contested countryside](#) and other farmland and natural areas quickly marked for destruction. For most young families, it would also mean the only housing options are a lifetime exiled to sprawl and stuck in traffic (for those who can afford it) or a one-way ticket out of Ontario.

While the Greenbelt is Ontario's "last line of defence" against destructive sprawl, only a small fraction of the vital agricultural land needed for food security and the wildlife habitats needed to save southern Ontario species at risk from extinction have so far been protected within its boundaries. Most of that farmland and habitat is "contested countryside" land that has not yet been added to the Greenbelt, and which instead are protected by "settlement areas boundaries" (a.k.a. town and city boundaries) that prevent developers from building beyond them.

Ontario's proposed [Provincial Planning Statement and changes to appeals rules under the new Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act](#) would effectively wipe out those protective "settlement boundaries".

The resulting unchecked, wasteful sprawl would kneecap efforts by regional and city governments to speed up the building of new housing supply through the direction of construction to denser, labour-efficient housing in existing neighbourhoods.

Unless stopped these moves will ensure that the Greenbelt scandal will spread and expand into a wave of sprawl developer led attacks in every community.

In particular, the proposed Provincial Planning Statement and the new Bill 185 together would try to effectively erase settlement boundaries by:

- **Cancelling the entire Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe**
- Directly reducing the number of homes that get built - and increase the amount of land destroyed by sprawl - by
  - **removing the requirement that at least 50 people be housed for each hectare of farmland or habitat destroyed.** The current government had previously reduced the number from 80 people to 50 people.

- removing the requirement that suburban municipalities ensure enough housing to accommodate half of their expected population growth gets built in existing neighborhoods and built up areas
- Removing any meaningful requirement that forests, wetlands, and rivers (natural heritage systems) be protected within municipal boundaries.
- Letting land **speculators demand suburban boundary expansions themselves**, just as easily as they can apply for Official Plan approval to build within the existing towns and cities' settlement boundary
- letting settlement **boundaries be expanded**, and farmland & habitat be condemned to destruction, **without any evidence that it is actually needed, or even helpful** to meet housing needs, despite vast supplies of existing "greenfield" land already included in settlement boundaries but sitting unused
- **transferring decisions about sprawl away from regional governments**, to rural councils that lack strong legal and land use planning teams and are vulnerable to inappropriate pressure and ill-equipped to defend against spurious sprawl developer appeals
- fostering corrupt pressure to approve dangerous sprawl and habitat destruction by **removing any Ontario Land Tribunal oversight of municipal decisions that say "yes" to sprawl**

Bill 185 does include at least one measure that *would* be positive if viewed in isolation - the removal of minimum parking requirements in Major Transit Station Areas (the small circles of land immediately surrounding major transit stations). Separate from Bill 185, but announced alongside it, the government says it will consult on removing existing Building Code prohibitions on single staircase ("single egress") construction up to 4 storeys and on "mass timber" construction up to 18 storeys, that have been obstructing denser, greener housing.

Unfortunately, Bill 185's and the PPS' reversion to low-density sprawl would likely wipe out any benefits from these changes to the rate of new home construction because:

- The Minister and Premier *removed* staff-recommended provisions from Bill 185 that would have legalized 4-storey 4-plexes so that it will remain illegal to actually *build* the family-friendly 4-storey single-egress apartments permitted by building code outside a few small slivers of the 905.
- Since Ontario has a serious construction labour and equipment shortage, any increase in sprawl development will come at the expense of a larger number of lower-cost homes that are ready to be built in existing neighborhoods.

All this means that it is time for all of us to get our "Save Our Farms, Forests and Wetlands" (the same as your "Hands off the Greenbelt" sign) out of storage. Let the government know these laws must be abandoned, and make opposition parties understand that they should commit to reverse any resulting sprawl if and when they eventually form government.