

Greenbelt, environmental issues at centre of Province's Housing Bill

Debate over the Province's plan to build more homes in Ontario continues after the passage of Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, at Queen's Park last Monday, November 28.

Despite its passage, concerns over the Bill's environmental impacts continue to rage, with advocacy groups raising alarm bells over the amount of farmland in the GTHA that will be lost to meet housing targets, as well as opening up portions of the Greenbelt for further development.

Issues surrounding the Greenbelt's future were voiced to Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy and prompted a statement from the Progressive Conservative member last week.

"We are taking further action to support our ambitious goal of building 1.5 million homes in the next decade by launching this consultation. These proposals will help build at least 50,000 new homes, while leading to an overall expansion of the Greenbelt of approximately 2,000 acres," said Ms. Gallagher Murphy.

"Ontario is expected to grow by more than two million people by 2031, with approximately 1.5 million people living in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region. To accommodate that growth and support the building of more homes, our government is proposing to remove 15 parcels of land totalling approximately 7,400 acres (approximately 2,995 hectares) from the edge of the Greenbelt area," she continued, noting that the proposed change affects 0.37 per cent of the Greenbelt.

The lands in question are close to existing settlements and transit and, she said, "it makes sense to remove these lands."

"We are also proposing to add an additional 9,400 acres to the Greenbelt, including a portion of the Paris Galt Moraine and 13 urban river valleys in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, for an overall Greenbelt expansion of approximately 2,000 acres. Should these lands be removed from the Greenbelt, it is the government's expectation that the landowners develop detailed plans to build housing quickly. Significant progress on approvals and implementation must be achieved by the end of 2023, with construction begun no later than 2025. If these conditions are not met, our government will return these properties to the Greenbelt. These proposals will support our municipal partners' plan for responsible growth and help build housing faster and in a targeted manner, while leading to an overall expansion of the Greenbelt."

Construction on the Greenbelt is nothing new, she said, adding that over 800,000 hectares there are homes and infrastructure on the parcels in question and existing legislation allows for "highways and gravel mines to be built through its heart" and existing settlements are allowed to be developed.

Bill 23 was at the centre of the first Council meeting of the 2022-2026 term.

While much of the discussion last month focused on the powers of municipalities to dictate growth as well as a decision from the Minister of Housing to amend the Region of York's Official Plan to prescribe construction of a minimum 12-storey building on the southwest corner of Leslie Street and Wellington, environmental issues were also touched upon.

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, said the Bill would result in significant ecological damage.

"Natural heritage systems [are] complex machines and if you take individual parcels you're not looking at how they fit together so that they can function effectively," she said. "It's really quite a serious problem to take environmental systems apart," she said, adding that the loss of farmland could result in food insecurity, an issue important to all residents.

Also looking at the matter through an environmental lens, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland questioned what Bill 23 might mean for Green Development Standards passed by the previous Council to steer local development in a way that minimizes environmental

impact.

“We are ahead of some municipalities across Ontario utilizing this tool to incur some incentives and from what I gather this completely eliminates the opportunity to give any comment or suggestions to developers,” she said.

MPP Gallagher Murphy said municipalities have used Site Plan Control processes to put through Green Development Standards, including energy efficiency measures, and the Bill was “not intended to prevent municipalities from addressing these types of matters” but to prevent municipalities from using site plan to implement unnecessary visual design requirements like certain exterior façade finishes.

“Through the legislative process, the government proposed changes to Bill 23 that would give municipalities the authority to apply green development standards through site plan control by referencing opt-in Building Code standards that we will be developing, if they pass by-laws to this effect,” she said. “We recognize the important work being done by municipalities by providing them with a solid foundation for requiring green building standards in both site plan control and the Building Code.

“While the Ontario Building Code already contains high standards for energy efficiency that apply across the province, the additional improvements for energy efficiency and other green measures to be developed for the next edition of Ontario's Building Code will make Ontario a national leader in green building standards and provide a consistent approach for municipalities that choose to apply these requirements.”

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