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Double talk masks developer-friendly moves

Ford's plan for sprawl

"When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer," noted George Orwell seventy-five years ago. "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."

These words have been repeatedly proven true since 1946, often in government attempts to throw a shroud over lies and measures promoting their political backers. So it is that the Ford government has tried to explain policies that encourage urban sprawl, eroding Ontario's greenbelt and destroying climate friendly wetlands, with the claim that it is "cutting red tape" to ease the building of new industries as well as facilitating "housing that people can afford."

The Ford government's "land needs assessment methodology"[1] for the Greater Golden Horseshoe region and beyond puts pressure on municipalities to increase urban sprawl for the next thirty years. To make matters worse, Ford's November 2022 Bill 23 (More Homes Built Faster Act) strips powers from any conservation authority or municipality that might stand in the way of the sprawl agenda.

Ford's developer-friendly Growth Plan calls for low population density plans that will eat up more rural land for workplaces and housing. In the Golden Horseshoe Region alone, the Plan will create more sprawl by demanding that four-fifths of population growth take place in suburban areas. It forced municipalities, by July 2022, to review official plans and lock in land use until 2051. The Plan offers little or no consultation with Indigenous

[1] "Proposed Land Needs Assessment Methodology for A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe", https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-1679

[2] https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/12/01/ontario-using-frequent-ministers-zoning-orders-to-fast-track-development-auditor.html

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peoples. As reported by the Ontario Auditor General (in late 2021), the Plan has been reinforced by provincial Ministerial Zoning Orders (MZOs) that this government uses to fast track development and sprawl. In just two years the Ford government handed down 18 orders that eliminated two thousand acres of farmland.[2] Moreover, Bill 23 allows the government to carve up the greenbelt, using previously protected land to enhance sprawl while "offsetting" the lost land with external properties that defeat the purpose of a greenbelt.

The costs

Ford's sprawl plan means the elimination of wetlands, green spaces and essential farmland. It will promote expensive highway construction while encouraging commuting by private vehicles. It will undermine public transit by moving people away from transit routes. It will degrade groundwater reserves and worsen flood threats just as climate breakdown generates more intense downpours and more flooding. It will weaken links between urban centres and nearby food production. All this to enrich land speculators and developers.

Urban sprawl, with its destruction of wetlands, forests and farmland, and its dependency on highways and single-user vehicles, is exactly the wrong way to go. It is not climate mitigation. It promotes climate breakdown.

It is already too late for some municipalities. In February 2021, Ottawa City Council voted for 40 percent more growth through sprawl. Later the same year, York Region approved a plan that will see almost all the Region's remaining land swallowed up for new housing.

Yet other municipalities and citizen groups are fighting back. In November 2021, with widespread support from climate activists and the broader community, Hamilton Council voted against plans by staff -- directed by the province -- to convert 3300 acres of agricultural land to urban uses. The council supported an alternative growth scenario that preserves farmland and chooses greater urban density within firm boundaries.[3] Bill 23 has sparked widespread public outrage and opposition from conservation authorities, municipalities, affordable housing advocates, public transit groups and, not least, environment and climate action organizations.

The People and Climate First alternative

Land use planning that is based on the needs of people – and the climate on which all species depend -- would accommodate housing and workplace growth within existing municipal boundaries. Such planning would include commitment to brownfield redevelopment, expanding and intensifying density around public transit lines. It would prioritize urban centres ('15-minute communities") in suburbs. It would be a land-use plan to address the climate breakdown emergency. It would not be planning aimed at lining the pockets of speculators and developers.

[3] "Hamilton stops urban sprawl - will Halton follow?", https://oakvillenews.org/opinion/hamilton-stops-urban-sprawl-will-halton-follow/