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GTA

Doug Ford's provincial government putting environment at risk, says Greenbelt Council

By **Noor Javed** Staff Reporter

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The chair of the province's Greenbelt Council is demanding the Ontario government abandon its changes to the Conservation Authorities Act and halt its use of ministerial zoning orders, saying that together they put the province's environment "at risk."

In a letter sent to Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark on Thursday, former Toronto mayor David Crombie said the government-appointed advisory body was writing to Clark out of "concern over two recent government actions that serve to undermine watershed planning, and put at risk key natural heritage and hydrologic features in this province."

Crombie calls on the province to put a "pause" on the use of minister's zoning orders, or MZOs, which allow the minister to override local planning rules, and dismiss the changes to the Conservation Authorities Act altogether.

In its latest omnibus budget, the government slipped in drastic changes that limit the role of conservation authorities in the development approval process by allowing government ministers to issue permits for development on environmentally sensitive lands, or override decisions made by authorities to restrict development.

The government is also facing criticism for its overzealous use of MZOs. It has issued more than 30 this year.

In an interview with the Star, Crombie said the Greenbelt Council, mandated to offer guidance on the protected environmental lands, felt it was time to make its position clear.

"Watershed planning is absolutely core to the future of the Greenbelt, and conservation authorities are core to the success of the Greenbelt," said Crombie. "The way they are moving on MZOs, and the changes to the conservation authorities ... hobbling, undermining them and diminishing the ability of them to do their work will have an impact on the future of the Greenbelt."

In the letter, Crombie said that "any reasonable reading of the proposed legislation would see it as severely limiting the ability of conservation authorities to carry out their historic roles and undermining decades of environmental stewardship in Ontario."

The letter also says that "MZOs need to be accompanied by a public process that is fair and transparent" and "these measures are especially important when combined with the current intent to hobble the regulatory role of conservation authorities."

The letter says that government's actions are "contributing to a growing public concern that the end result will be a widening of the path of political influence on behalf of special interests."

Adam Wilson, director of communication for the housing minister, said he could only speak to the concerns around the MZOs.

"Every MZO made by the minister on non-provincially owned land has been at the request of the local municipality," he said. "The government does not consider municipalities to be special interests, and we will continue to work with local governments to accelerate priority provincial and municipal projects."

Gary Wheeler, a spokesman for the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks, said that conservation authorities will "continue to have a core role in preparing and protecting against the impacts of natural hazards, maintaining and managing

conservation lands, and roles in drinking water source protection.”

Earlier this month, a member of the Greenbelt Council resigned in [protest](#) over the province's decision to issue an MZO for a development that will destroy a provincially significant wetland in [Pickering](#).

The government's actions in Pickering have also raised the ire of two provincial First Nation groups. Chief Kelly LaRocca, on behalf of Chiefs of the Williams Treaties First Nation, sent the mayor of Pickering a letter this month, urging “council to stop its development plan, and reach out to the rights holders who have stewardship over the lands (and waters) you propose to develop.”

Ontario Regional Chief RoseAnne Archibald, on behalf of Chiefs of Ontario, sent a letter to the Premier saying they had concerns regarding the protection of the environment. “We are seeking the immediate refusal for a minister's zoning order within the protected wetlands, and resources to host meetings to ensure that Aboriginal and Treaty Rights are accommodated,” the letter says.

The letter comes the same week the [auditor general's](#) annual environmental report concluded the Tories are not taking the action required to meet climate-change goals.



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