

# Cutting into the Greenbelt won't solve the housing crisis

Major cities like Toronto can accommodate new homes if our leaders think outside the box

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OPINION



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Doug Ford wants to attack the Greenbelt. There's no excuse for it. Yet the province's housing shortage needs to be solved.

Begin with those three facts. Introduced last month, Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, takes aim at the swath of protected green space and agricultural land around Toronto. It does so with the pretext of creating more housing. The Ford government has pledged to see 1.5 million new homes built over the next decade, and claims that cutting into the Greenbelt is required.

The truth is that most of the urban area in Greater Toronto and in Ottawa is not very dense. These cities could certainly accommodate 1.5 million new homes within existing urban boundaries.

The three opposition parties and environmental groups now agree that intensification is the right answer for Ontario. But where, exactly? In whose backyard will those millions of people go?

The fact is that such a large number of those new homes will have to be largely in apartment buildings. Big buildings that will be protested by nearby homeowners and require changes to municipal planning rules. In the past election, the opposition parties dodged this issue.

This leaves the housing debate in disarray. When the PCs move to build suburban mansions and do favours for developer friends, those who oppose them need to have a real counter-argument. Right now, they do not.

There is much to dislike in this new legislation. It mixes positive reforms with regressive ones. On the plus side, the bill limits appeals of municipal planning decisions and makes infill development somewhat easier. On the negative side, it attacks the Greenbelt, removing 7,400 acres while adding 9,400 acres – but



Ontario's Ministry of Finance estimates that the province will grow by 37 per cent over the next quarter-century. The new growth figure 'is not aligned with Ottawa's housing need,' planning manager Don Herweyer wrote in a memo to council. SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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the devil is in the details, and the government has revealed no rationale for these specific changes. This is very likely a shell game that ends with a degraded environment.

There is more. The bill basically demolishes the Ontario Heritage Act, making it much harder for cities to protect heritage sites. While this aims to address overreach by Toronto heritage planners, it is a disastrous overreaction that will bring needless losses across the province.

Also, the province has altered Ottawa's Official Plan to remove tenant protections when a building gets demolished. It is considering changes to the same rules in Toronto. Such a move could displace hundreds of thousands of people in aging apartments, destroying existing low-rent housing to create new homes. It's unconscionable.

Those ideas must be fought back. But on the big picture, what is the right response?

First, to acknowledge that the housing shortage is real and

growing.

The province's Ministry of Finance estimates Ontario will grow by 37 per cent in the next quarter-century, adding 2.9 million people just in the GTA. This will be driven by immigration, and it is a needed shot in the arm to Canadian society.

Where will new people live? Ontario's official answer to this: in the suburbs. Provincial planning now calls for only 600,000 new arrivals to end up in the city of Toronto, the one place with the highest housing demand, the most robust transit, the best public amenities and the best economic opportunity.

That number must rise. Cities – above all Toronto, with its unique advantages – need to grow much more quickly. The group Environmental Defence calls for Toronto's growth targets to be more than doubled. They are right.

But in cities everywhere, local leaders have to acknowledge that less sprawl means more infill, specifically in their cities.

Planners need to plan for it, and recognize that their decisions affect the entire province.

Good luck with that. The province has now raised growth targets in Toronto and Ottawa, and the initial response from Ottawa is hostility. The province's new growth figure "is not aligned with Ottawa's housing need," planning manager Don Herweyer wrote in a memo to council. No kidding: Ottawa and Toronto now depend on new arrivals passing them by to go and live somewhere else. That's exactly the problem in our current system.

None of this is easy to fix. Sprawl in Ontario has continued for half a century under governments of all stripes. Standing up to it will require more than speeches and hand-waving. It will require cities embracing growth and actively building the transit-oriented, dense urban housing that is the opposite of sprawl, and its cure. Shouting at Doug Ford is appropriate. But it's not a solution.

## Ford to propose legislation for one-year extension to gas, fuel tax cut in Ontario

DUSTIN COOK  
QUEEN'S PARK REPORTER

Ontario is poised to extend the cut to its gas and fuel taxes for an additional year in response to cost-of-living challenges facing residents, Premier Doug Ford has announced – a day before the province's fall fiscal update.

At a gas station in Etobicoke Sunday morning, Mr. Ford said Monday's economic outlook will propose legislation that, if passed, would extend the tax cuts until Dec. 31, 2023. The temporary gas tax cut of 5.7 cents a litre and 5.3 cents a litre for diesel fuel taxes came into effect in July, initially planned for six months, in response to increasing prices at the pumps.

With the tax cut set to expire at the end of 2022, the Premier said the one-year extension is intended to provide "real relief," and support families struggling with the rising costs of gas and groceries amid high inflation.

"Everyone is concerned about the same thing, how expensive life is getting for them," Mr. Ford said. "We know every dollar helps."

Extending the tax cut is expected to reduce provincial revenues by \$1.2-billion, on top of the \$645-million cost of the first six months of the program. The government has said this reduction in revenues won't affect the two-cents-a-litre share of the gas tax that goes to municipalities to help fund transit projects.

Mr. Ford and his Finance Minister, Peter Bethlenfalvy, didn't provide any other details on what will be in Monday's economic statement, including if there will be additional spending to address critical challenges in the province's health care system. Children's hospitals have been overflowing with sick patients in recent weeks with ICUs operating above capacity.

Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, or SickKids, will be reducing surgical activity as of Monday to preserve critical care services, with the ICU operating above 127-per-cent capacity in the past several days.

Speaking to the challenges facing hospitals, the Premier said it goes beyond spending and called for changes at other levels, including more family health clinics, more in-person appointments by pediatric doctors and support from the federal government to address shortages in medications for children.

In its 2022-23 budget, the government has forecasted health care spending at \$75.2-billion. Ontario spent \$75.7-billion on the sector in 2021-22 – an 8.9-per-cent increase from the previous fiscal year.

Ontario most recently forecasted a deficit of \$18.8-billion in 2022-23.

The province's finances for 2021-22 took a significant turn after raking in 20 per cent more revenue than anticipated, leading to a \$2.1-billion surplus – the first since 2007-08. Ontario had initially projected a deficit of \$33.1-billion in 2021-2022, which the government said changed as economic growth increased more quickly than expected.



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