

Doug Ford's provincial government's "More Homes Built Faster plan" (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing) using the Ontario Greenbelt is not a good idea. Many in society today have become used to describing natural disasters, climate change and social upheaval as crises - big issues which can result in citizens feeling hopelessness. The housing shortage in Southern Ontario is a wide-reaching reality and since shelter is a basic human right, then housing options need to be created without delay. In 2023 the average 1 bedroom apartment in GTA rents for \$2513 (Fox) and the average detached home sells for \$1.4 million (WOWA). People living in urban centres, close to transit, or close to post-secondary institutions, who are often the demographic that can least afford a higher percentage of income spent on housing, will end up paying more, simply due to market demand.

There are risks to this precarious demographic when those on fixed incomes, new immigrants establishing roots, young families and students, have to choose between food, physical safety, textbooks and paying rent. Food, health care and shelter choices can impact both physical and mental health as well as become determinants for life expectancy outcomes. Home affordability matters.

The Ontario Greenbelt is 2 million acres of protected land - the world's largest - "meant to protect farmland and natural habitats while preventing environmental damage due to urban sprawl," (Manett). It covers an area where "50% of Ontario's food grows," (Manett). The Greenbelt covers many municipalities, and politics will therefore continue to play a role in decision-making. In fact, on March 21, 2023, the Federal government launched an inquiry into Premier Doug Ford's plans to build 1.5 million new homes in the Greenbelt, which seeks to slow or stop altogether these plans (Benzie and Rushowy).

Citizens want to have a voice in the solution, even if housing is at a crisis, because the next political steps that are taken could hold significant impacts for future generations. Dissent is growing in terms of mistrust in the politicians' promises to not touch the Greenbelt. In recent months residents across the GTA are stating their opinions with lawn signs, social media forums, and even going so far as an environmental activist who ran onstage topless at the Juno awards to draw attention to the issue (Swensrude).

Building more homes may be a solution to the housing crisis if there is careful consideration to the economics of affordability, the broad environmental impacts and pressure on social structures. New homes and communities require parallel growth in public transit, schools, commercial services and infrastructure. The burden for new builds cannot rest only on existing homeowners, through tax hikes, for example - government and developers must also give long lasting support. Another trade-off to building new homes is the increasing density of large cities. It is a given, at least theoretically, that most people would prefer walkable cities with green space and pleasing architecture, which encourages community gathering and natural networks to skyscrapers and underground cities that come with heavy energy and environmental demands.

Building homes in the Greenbelt is not the solution so we must look elsewhere, with the same protective lenses, to find ways to expand housing options without reducing farmland and damaging natural flora and fauna. Urban sprawl in Southern Ontario using the same template of more condos is not the only option to easing the housing crisis. Tiny homes are a solution for mobile seniors that would reduce land taxes and energy consumption. Shipping containers could be converted to create a culture of shelter and community in response to

urban homelessness. Instead of new urban builds, commercial properties could be converted to mixed use buildings with business on the main floor and residence on upper floors. Likewise, single use public properties such as schools, libraries, arenas and more can become mixed use, or commercial use buildings when not in use, to generate revenue and municipal tax relief for homeowners.

At the same time we can look to sustainable solutions outside of urban sprawl as a better location to the Greenbelt. There are benefits to rural living - investing in agricultural business, growing more of our food supply, and reintroducing food processing businesses to name a few. This rural-first development can be supported by the current and growing work-from-home model where the population is not concentrated in downtown offices. This will limit commutes, gasoline demands and highway accidents from moving goods far distances.

Better locations for Southern Ontario are along waterways, near Great Lakes, existing railway infrastructure and mining and agricultural areas. These cities can be encouraged to grow through immigration and focused investment, through fund-matching from all levels of government, or other international investors, or through other subsidies encouraging growth in these areas.

Society can also work to flip the mindset that home ownership is a milestone of adulthood. Instead, as in other countries, multi-generational families can be the expected norm. Government tax credit programs could be implemented to encourage the retrofitting of homes to allow seniors to age in place and care for elderly family members. Childcare programs could also help to lift burdens of these family expenses.

Building on the Greenbelt is clearly not the answer. Reserving a similar footprint of acreage does not respect the protected land, Indigenous land rights or fix urban sprawl. It is one answer, but there are negative impacts which will be felt for many generations into the future. However, doing nothing about the housing crisis is a decision that will have disastrous effects.

My recommendation is that the Greenbelt remains a protected area, and that a strategic set of solutions are put into place that will have a sustained positive impact on Ontario's future.

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