

City Comments on the Province’s Proposal to Return 15 Parcels of Land to the Greenbelt and Update Greenbelt Act

Date: November 14, 2023

To: Planning and Housing Committee

From: Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning

Wards: All

SUMMARY

As the region continues to experience high population growth and a growing housing affordability crisis, effective regional planning must prioritize infill development and intensification within settlement boundaries. Protection of the Greenbelt, coupled with land use planning that prioritizes compact form, complete communities, and better use of existing and planned infrastructure is a key strategy to address the dual crisis of biodiversity loss and climate change.

The Province is consulting on a proposal, posted on the Environmental Registry and presented to the Legislature in Bill 136 that includes two key elements:

- to restore 15 parcels of land, which were removed from the Greenbelt in December 2022 (City Council had previously adopted a Staff Report in October 2023 that supported the return of these 15 parcels of land to the Greenbelt in addition to the Province's proposal at that time to return of one parcel in Ajax); and
- to define the Greenbelt Plan Area boundaries directly into the *Greenbelt Act*.

A permanent Greenbelt supports the foundation for the long-term ecological integrity of the region's natural systems. A robust regional natural system supports Toronto's biodiversity and increases our resilience to the impacts of climate change. Consistent Greenbelt policies and land use certainty enables the agri-food sector to make long term agricultural investments and reduce speculation across a land base that includes the most productive agricultural land in the country. The City of Toronto has long supported the permanent protection of the Greenbelt, and regional planning policies that reduce the impacts of urban sprawl.

This report discusses the Province’s reversal on their previous decision to amend the Greenbelt Plan Area boundary to remove or redesignate 15 parcels of land totaling 2,995 hectares (7,400 acres) and outlines staff comments and recommendations related to the Province’s current consultation on their [“Proposal to return lands to the](#)

[Greenbelt – Greenbelt Statute Law Amendment Act, 2023](#)” posted on the Environmental Registry of Ontario.

The comment period for this consultation is open from October 16 to November 30, 2023.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning recommends that:

1. City Council support the Province’s proposal to return 15 parcels, totalling 2,995 hectares (7,400 acres) into the Greenbelt Plan Area.
2. City Council support the Province’s proposal in Bill 136, to bring the boundaries of the Greenbelt Plan Area into the body of the Greenbelt Act (and remove the Regulation that had previously defined the boundary).
3. Planning and Housing Committee request that the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division forward this report to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing immediately following Planning and Housing Committees meeting of November 30th, 2023, as its submission to the Province on their Proposal to return land to the Greenbelt – Greenbelt Statute Law Amendment Act, 2023 and the ERO posting (019-7739).
4. City Council request that the City Clerk forward Council's decision on this item to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing following City Council's consideration of this report, as its supplementary submission to the Province on their Proposal to return land to the Greenbelt – Greenbelt Statute Law Amendment Act, 2023 and the ERO posting (019-7739).

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts arising from adoption of the recommendations in this report.

The interim Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications as identified in the Financial Impact section.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This report provides preliminary comments on the Province’s proposal to return land previously removed/redesignated from the Greenbelt. The report makes recommendations that are intended to improve the livability of the Greater Golden Horseshoe region for all current and future residents.

DECISION HISTORY

In October, 2023, City Council adopted the report PH6.5 City Comments on the Province's Proposal to Return Lands to the Greenbelt, including recommendations to the Province on their proposal to return lands in Ajax to the Greenbelt. These comments were made in relation to an Environmental Registry ([ERO 019-7561](#)) posting that is now closed. The lands considered in the Ajax proposal have now been included in an updated Environmental Registry posting that is addressed in this Staff Report. A copy of the report was submitted to the Province.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.PH6.5>

In May 2023, City Council adopted the report PH4.8 City Comments on the Proposed Provincial Planning Statement, including recommendations to the Province on the direction of regional planning in Ontario. In these comments City Council requested the Province maintain the Growth Plan's prioritization of intensification and redevelopment to accommodate growth, over expanding urban boundaries. A copy of this report was sent to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2023/ph/bgrd/backgroundfile-236614.pdf>

The Province previously amended the Greenbelt Plan Area boundary to remove or redesignate 15 parcels of land totaling 2,995 hectares (7,400 acres). In December 2022, City Planning prepared and submitted comments to the Province opposing this decision (Attachment 1). The comments submitted by City Planning followed a City Council motion made on November 24, 2022 ([Item CC1.2](#)). More recently, the Province had explored returning only one of these parcels in Ajax to the Greenbelt, which City Council supported at its meeting on October 11, 2023 ([Item PH6.5](#)). The Ajax consultation has been closed and is now included in the Province's current proposal to return all 15 parcels to the Greenbelt.

In November 2022, Council considered report CC1.2 Update on Bill 23, More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022, and Supplementary Report – City Staff Comments on Proposed Bill 23 – More Homes, Built Faster Act, 2022, which highlighted major changes proposed in Bill 23, potential effects on the City of Toronto, and made recommendations for Council's adoption and submission to the Province. The Supplementary Report noted the proposed changes outlined in Bill 23 included changes to the boundaries of the Greenbelt Plan. Council adopted a request to the Province to rescind the proposed changes to the Greenbelt to protect environmental features that sustain all residents of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.CC1.2>

In March 2022, Executive Committee considered report EX31.11 on the City's review of the Provincial Housing Affordability Task Force Recommendations. On March 30, 2022, the Province introduced changes to various pieces of legislation to implement recommendations in the Task Force's report. As a result, Executive Committee referred the item to the City Manager and requested a report to Planning and Housing Committee. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EX31.11>

COMMENTS

The following comments are in response to the Province's proposal to restore 15 parcels of land to the Greenbelt, previously removed in December 2022. This proposal has been presented to the Legislature through Bill 136 and has been posted on the Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO) for comments from October 16 to November 30, 2023 ([ERO 019-7739](#)).

City Planning staff support the Province's proposal to return lands to the Greenbelt and to update: the Greenbelt Act, 2005; Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act, 2001; and the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preservation Act, 2023 as outlined in Bill 136 and the ERO posting.

City Council had twice noted their opposition to the removal of the land from the Greenbelt through Amendment 3, made in December 2022. City Council's position was made clear in a motion made on November 24, 2022 (quoted below), and re-stated in Comments submitted to the now closed ERO posting proposing the return of one parcel of land in Ajax to the Greenbelt ([Item PH6.5](#)):

"City Council request the Province of Ontario to rescind the proposed changes to the Greenbelt to protect environmental features that support biodiversity, natural spaces, recreation trails, agricultural land, and watersheds that sustain all residents of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area." ([Item CC1.2](#))

Scope of Proposed Changes in the Province's Current Proposal

The current Provincial proposal will: 1) reinstate 15 total parcels of land to the Greenbelt Plan Area; and 2) define the boundaries of the Greenbelt's boundary directly in the *Greenbelt Act*.

The re-introduction of 15 parcels to the Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine will restore the 2,995 hectares (7,400 acres) of land removed/re-designated in December 2022 through Amendment 3 to the *Greenbelt Act*, while maintaining the lands that were added at that time to the Greenbelt.

Defining the Greenbelt's boundaries directly within the *Greenbelt Act*, ensures any future removals or additions of Greenbelt Plan Area would require the approval of the Ontario Legislature. This is a change from the existing policy where the Greenbelt area boundaries are defined in regulation (O. Reg. 59/05). The existing regulation can be amended by a Cabinet decision, as was the case with Amendment 3 of the *Greenbelt Act*. This change to formalize the boundaries directly in the Act creates the opportunity for a more transparent process if any future Greenbelt area changes are considered.

The Province's proposal will include all boundary changes made to the Greenbelt, prior to the December 2022 removals. This includes the addition of Toronto's Urban River Valleys that were brought into the Greenbelt Plan Area in May 2017. There are no changes considered in the Province's proposal that would negatively impact the land use of the Urban River Valleys in Toronto or broader Greenbelt.

Toronto's Ongoing Support for a Permanent Greenbelt

For more than two decades, the City of Toronto has supported a regional planning approach that minimizes the environmental and social impacts related to urban sprawl. This support included advocacy related to the creation and maintenance of permanent protection for the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt. A permanent Greenbelt supports the foundation for the long-term ecological integrity of the region's natural systems. A robust regional natural system supports Toronto's biodiversity and increases our resilience to the impacts of climate change.

As outlined in the Official Plan, the City of Toronto is committed to work with neighbouring municipalities, conservation authorities and the Province to address mutual challenges and implement the Provincial framework for dealing with growth across the GTA which “protects, enhances and restores the region's system of green spaces, water resources, natural heritage features and functions, and the natural corridors that connect them” ([OP 2.1.1 k](#)).

Consistent Greenbelt policies and land use certainty enable the agri-food sector to make long term agricultural investments and reduce speculation across a land base that includes the most productive agricultural land in the country.

Potential Future Greenbelt Review

In his September 6, 2023 letter to the City Clerk, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing noted his Ministry is working to prepare a review of the Greenbelt, this was also alluded to in public comments following the release of Bill 136.

City Planning does not believe any future review of the Greenbelt should consider the Greenbelt Plan Area's ability to accommodate growth. This premise runs counter to the vision and goals of the Greenbelt, including to: “protect against the loss and fragmentation of the agricultural land base”; and give “permanent protection to the natural heritage and water resource systems that sustain ecological and human health”.

Staff are of the opinion that the Greenbelt Plan Area should remain protected and does not need to be examined at this time for its potential to accommodate anticipated growth. The Province's 2022 Housing Task Force reinforced the position that a “shortage of land isn't the cause of the [housing affordability] problem”, and that there is enough land within municipal boundaries to achieve the Province's goal of building 1.5 million homes in ten years ([Housing Affordability Task Force Report, 2022](#)). The Task Force supported the ongoing protection of the Greenbelt, environmentally sensitive areas and farmland, noting they “must be protected” ([Housing Affordability Task Force Report, 2022](#)).

As the region continues to experience high population growth and a growing housing affordability crisis, effective regional planning must prioritize infill development and intensification within settlement boundaries. A focus on efficient use of land and resources, achieved through infill and intensification, reduce the financial strain on municipalities related to outward expansion of infrastructure to support growth. Land use planning, infrastructure investment and community services need to be closely

aligned to ensure the needs of the region's growing population will be met, while reducing the financial and environmental costs related to urban sprawl.

Conclusion

The consultation period for this policy proposal, as posted on the Environmental Registry closes on November 30, 2023. For the City's comments to be included within that consolidation period an interim response will need to be submitted immediately following the November 30, 2023 meeting of Planning and Housing Committee. A supplementary report will be sent to the Province following the December City Council meeting, including any further comments following Council's consideration.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: City Planning Submitted Comments - re. Proposed Amendments to the Greenbelt Area Boundary Regulation (ERO 019- 6217)