Articles and Questions

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1) a PDF file

*and*

2) a Word file

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**Ontario's Greenbelt Scandal**



In late September, Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced that the government was reversing its controversial decision to open up parts of the province's Greenbelt to development. The announcement was a huge victory for environmentalists, First Nations, opposition parties, and other critics of the plan who had strenuously objected to the government's proposal.

**The Ontario Greenbelt**

The Ontario Greenbelt is an 8100 square-kilometre region, larger than Prince Edward Island, that stretches from Bruce Peninsula in the north, where Lake Huron and Georgian Bay meet, to the Niagara **Escarpment** in the south. In the east it starts at Halton Region, home to Burlington and other municipalities, and extends west to Northumberland County on the northern shore of Lake Ontario.

The Greenbelt encompasses the Golden Horseshoe, one of the fastest growing urban areas in North America. Covering some 10,100 square kilometres, with Toronto at its centre, the Golden Horseshoe is home to nearly eight million Canadians, or about 20 percent of the nation’s population as a whole.

In 2005, the Greenbelt was established to permanently protect the region’s rich agriculture, fertile wetlands, and the natural habitat of resident species – at least 78 of which are at risk – from urban sprawl.

**A change of plans**

When he first ran for election in 2018, Mr. Ford promised that his government wouldn’t develop Greenbelt territory. But he also pledged to build 1.5 million homes before 2031 to address a housing emergency in the province, and the pressure to build new homes has only increased since that time due to rapid population growth.

Last year, Mr. Ford said that the government had no option but to change course and allow homes to be built in the Greenbelt. The new development would remove about 3000 **hectares** of land in 15 areas of the protected region. However, in exchange, nearly 4000 hectares would be added to the Greenbelt in other areas.

**Strong opposition**

Environmentalists were quick to oppose the plan. They argued that swapping acreage that is highly vulnerable for land that is less at risk runs counter to the Greenbelt's purpose.

“This idea that you can destroy part of the Greenbelt and then somehow make up for it – it’s just not the way the natural world works,” said Gideon Forman, an analyst with the Suzuki Foundation. “When you start to take chunks of the Greenbelt out of the Greenbelt, you compromise the **integrity** of an **ecosystem**. And that’s what’s so damaging.”

Opponents also argued that the land swap wasn't necessary, and a **task force** commissioned by Mr. Ford’s own government agreed. In 2022 it reported that there was enough land outside the Greenbelt to address the housing shortage despite the premier's claims.

**An $8.3 billion scandal!**

As questions about the plan mounted, and as public outcry grew, **Auditor General** Bonnie Lysyk and Ontario Integrity Commissioner David Wake launched separate inquiries into the government’s decision to **encroach** on Greenbelt land. Their conclusions, released in August, shocked many people.

Ms. Lysyk reported that before decisions were made in 2022 about which Greenbelt land to remove, Ryan Amato, a key figure in the Ontario housing ministry, received a package at an industry function. In it were recommendations on the topic from developers – some of whom had donated money to the Ontario Progressive Conservatives. With no input from unbiased experts, the government eventually accepted all but one of the builders’ 15 proposals, giving them access to buy 92 percent of the land taken from the Greenbelt.

Critics hint that Mr. Ford’s government might have alerted these donors that highly valuable land would soon become available to scoop up. Ms. Lysyk seemed to agree. She said that the government’s flawed decision-making was “biased” in favour of the builders. In fact, she said that those who had bought the newly freed-up lands could make as much as $8.3 billion once the sites are developed.

“We found that how the land sites were selected was not transparent, fair, objective, or fully informed,” Ms. Lysyk wrote. “What occurred here cannot be described as a standard or defensible process.”

For his part, the Integrity Commissioner said the government had violated ethics. He accused then-minister of housing Steven Clark of turning a blind eye when Mr. Amato broke **conflict-of-interest** rules and shared privileged information.

“It may seem incredible that Minister Clark would have chosen to stick his head in the sand on such an important initiative being undertaken by his ministry but I believe that was exactly what he did,” wrote Mr. Wake.

**The fallout**

Just weeks after both reports were issued, Mr. Amato resigned and on September 4, Mr. Clark left his post as housing minister, although he remains an MPP. Then on September 20, a second **cabinet** minister, Kaleed Rasheed, resigned in connection to the scandal.

Finally, following two days of **caucus** and cabinet meetings, on September 21, Premier Ford apologized and announced that his government was changing course.

"I made a promise to you that I wouldn't touch the Greenbelt. I broke that promise. And for that I'm very, very sorry," the premier said. "It was a mistake to open the Greenbelt. It was a mistake to establish a process that moved too fast. This process, it left too much room for some people to benefit over others. It caused people to question our motives. As a first step to earn back your trust, I'll be reversing the changes we made and won't make any changes to the Greenbelt in the future."

Land-swap opponents celebrated the announcement. However, all three opposition parties said many questions remain unanswered, and Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner called for a public inquiry.

"How can we trust that he won't try the same thing again?" he asked. "We can't let this reversal be a get-out-of-jail-free card for Premier Ford or his cabinet."

**Did You Know?**

In a recent 12-month period, Ontario’s population increased by over 500,000.

**Canada’s protected farmlands**

Ontario’s Greenbelt encompassing Toronto isn’t the only one in the province. A Greenbelt was established around Ottawa in 1956. It is a 203-square-kilometre horseshoe-shaped collection of farmland, forests, and wetlands that border the west, south, and east ends of the city.

In Quebec, the Regional Agricultural Conservation maintains an agricultural zone to protect farming that covers 63,000 square kilometres. And British Columbia’s Agricultural Land Reserve prioritizes 47,000 square kilometres for farming, restricting its use for non-agricultural purposes.

**Auditor General**: an independent officer of the government who examines government operations, finances, and records

**cabinet**: a group of government members who are chosen by the leader to give advice and be responsible for its policies

**caucus**: a group of people who meet to discuss a particular issue or to work together for a shared political goal

**conflict of interest**: a situation in which somebody has two jobs, aims, roles, etc. and cannot treat both of them equally and fairly at the same time

**ecosystem:** all the plants and animals in a particular area, considered as a system with parts that depend on one another

**encroach**: to slowly begin to cover more and more of an area

**escarpment:** a steep slope that separates an area of high ground from an area of lower ground

**hectare:** a unit of area equal to 10,000 square metres and approximately 2.471 acres

**integrity:** the state of being whole and not divided

**task force:** a group of people who are brought together to do a particular job, especially when there is a problem to solve

**Comprehension Questions**

1. Name the premier of Ontario. Which political party is in power in this province?

2. Who created the Ontario Greenbelt? When was this protected area set up and why? Explain.

3. Describe the area covered by the Greenbelt.

4. What is the Golden Horseshoe? Where it is located and how many people live in this region?

5. Describe the recent population growth in Ontario.

6. What did the provincial government announce late last year regrading Ontario's Greenbelt?

7. List the two main reasons why some people were opposed to this policy reversal.

8. What did the Ontario Auditor General find when she investigated?

9. What did the Ontario Integrity Commissioner find when he investigated?

10. What did Premier Ford announce on September 21?

**Questions for Further Thought**

1. The article quotes Gideon Forman, an analyst with the Suzuki Foundation: "***This idea that you can destroy part of the Greenbelt and then somehow make up for it – it’s just not the way the natural world works. When you start to take chunks of the Greenbelt out of the Greenbelt, you compromise the integrity of an ecosystem. And that’s what’s so damaging.***” What do you think Mr. Forman means by this? Explain.

2. Premier Doug Ford claims that with the recent population growth in Ontario, his government had no choice but to allow homes to be built in the Greenbelt. Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons to support your response.

3. Two separate inquiries into this controversy, one by the Auditor General and the other by the Ontario Integrity Commissioner, have described the actions of the Ford government as not defensible and unethical. For what reasons do you agree with this characterization? For what reasons do you disagree?.

**Questions For Online Exploration**

*Note*: The links below are listed at **www.lesplan.com/links** for easy access.

1. Learn more about this controversy in these general reports. What new information did you gather?  
**https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2254018115750** [11:34]  
**https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/greenbelt-questions-answered-1.6958853**

2. Learn the details of Auditor General Lysyk's report. Which piece of information did you find interesting?  
**https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-auditor-general-greenbelt-report-1.6930390** [0:49]  
**https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2253709891807** [1:37:49] full report

3. What did Integrity Commissioner Wake conclude in his report?  
**https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/integrity-commissioner-greenbelt-report-1.6952542**

4. Listen to Premier Ford address the Auditor General's findings in this situation and his surprising decision to reverse development of the Greenbelt.  
**https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ford-stag-and-doe-integrity-commissioner-1.6974058  
https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2261250627978** [1:47]

5. Two of Premier Ford's MPPs and a Ministry of Housing staffer have resigned from their positions in recent days:  
• Minister of Housing Steven Clark: **https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2260961347904** [2:16]  
• Conservative MPP Kaleed Rasheed: **https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2265498179776** [1:56]  
•Ministry of Housing Staffer Ryan Amato: **https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-housing-amato-resigns-1.6944225**

What questions do you have about these resignations?

6. Hear from Ontario farmers and First Nations about their perspectives on this issue.**https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-greenbelt-farmers-doug-ford-1.6971694   
https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/chiefs-of-ontario-greenbelt-vote-1.6949826**

7. Visit greenbelt.ca to learn more about this organization and its efforts to ensure that the Greenbelt remains "permanent, protected, and prosperous":**https://www.greenbelt.ca/about**

**Putting It All Together**

**A. Write the letter that corresponds to the best answer on the line beside each question:**

\_\_\_\_\_\_ 1. **How many people live in the Golden Horseshoe?** a) 710,000 b) 2 million  
 c) 3.5 million d) 8 million  
 e) 15 million

\_\_\_\_\_\_ 2. **Which political party is in power in Ontario?** a) Liberal b) NDP  
 c) Green d) Republican  
 e) Progressive Conservative

\_\_\_\_\_\_ 3. **What position does Bonnie Lysyk hold?** a) Integrity Commissioner b) Housing Minister  
 c) RCMP Inspector d) Auditor General  
 e) Special Rapporteur

**B.** Mark the statements **T (True)** or **F (False)**. If a statement is **True**, write one important fact to support it on the line below. If a statement is **False**, write the words that make it true on the line below.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ 4. **True** or **False?** Only Ontario has rules to protect agricultural and environmentally sensitive land.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ 5. **True** or **False?** The Ontario government announced last year that 3000 hectares would be removed from   
the Greenbelt and no new lands would be added.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ 6. **True** or **False?** Bonnie Lysyk led one of two investigations that looked into the Greenbelt controversy.

**C. Fill in the blanks to complete each sentence.**

7. Some developers who wanted to build in the Greenbelt donated funds to the Progressive \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .

8. David Wake is the Ontario \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Commissioner.

9. Two Ontario \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ ministers resigned over the Greenbelt controversy.

**D. Respond to the following question in paragraph form. *(Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.)***

10. *Premier Ford was right to reverse his government's decision to allow Greenbelt land to be developed.* Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons to support your response.

**Assessment Rubric**

This rubric may be helpful in providing students with formative, strength-based feedback and/or assessing students’ responses holistically. This easy-to-modify activity is included in the doc file which you can download from:   
**www.lesplan.com/subscribers**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Emerging** | **Developing** | **Proficient** | **Extending** |
| **Supports thinking** | Answers or reflections are brief and include obvious facts/details/ evidence. | Answers or reflections are general and supported with some relevant facts/details/evidence. | Answers or reflections are clearly supported with specific, relevant facts/details/evidence. | Answers or reflections are insightful and supported with specific, relevant facts/details/evidence. |
| **Shows understanding** | Responses show a basic understanding of the text, topic, issue or message. | Responses are thoughtful and show a general understanding of the text, topic, issue or message. | Responses are thoughtful and show a complete understanding of the text, topic, issue or message. | Responses are insightful and show a deep understanding the text, topic, issue or message. May synthesize ideas or explain the ‘so what’. |
| **Thinks  critically** | Makes straightforward connections or inferences. Focuses on retelling. | Makes logical connections to self (T:S) and/or background knowledge (T:S). Inferences are logical | Makes meaningful connections to self. Considers ideas between texts (T:T).  Inferences are plausible. | Makes powerful connections that go between texts and/or beyond the text (T:W).  Inferences are plausible and insightful. |

