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# Vaughan blasted for ‘troubling’ environment record

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by Noor Javed • May 9, 2016 • 4 min read • [original](#)



*Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence, calls Vaughan “quite aggressive” in its attempts to redesignate protected lands for development. (Rick Madonik / Toronto Star file photo)*

The City of Vaughan is facing widespread criticism over its environmental record, following a recent pattern of council decisions that suggest a lack of commitment to protecting green space — and in particular land within the Greenbelt.

Since the new council was elected in fall 2014, councillors have pushed the province to open up protected lands for development. They also recently failed to pass a provincially mandated process to map all of the city's natural spaces in need of protection.

Worst of all, critics say, is that instead of taking a stand against developers trying to exploit protected lands, Vaughan council appears to be lobbying for them.

“Vaughan council is actively promoting the removal of land from the Greenbelt for some development proposals, instead of staying neutral and being fair,” said King-Vaughan MP Deb Schulte, a former municipal councillor. Schulte was regarded as an environmental champion when she sat on council last term. “Where is the consistency and vision for a more sustainable future?”

The Greenbelt contains almost 800,000 hectares of protected land, including the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine. According to estimates provided by the city, a quarter of Vaughan falls within the Greenbelt or Oak Ridges Moraine.

There is no real process to remove land from Greenbelt protection. But municipalities can request adjustments of certain lands during the 10-year provincial review of the plans, which is currently underway.

Last year, York Region included requests from more than 40 landowners to redesignate protected land for development, in submissions to the province as part of its review of the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt plans. Fifteen of those requests were in Vaughan.

At the time, the region and most municipalities said they were not taking a position on these requests, but seeking provincial direction to deal with them.

Vaughan council, however, approved a motion endorsing one parcel of land in particular, owned by the Milani Group.

Deputy mayor Michael Di Biase wrote the handwritten motion asking the province for “redesignation from countryside to settlement” for 29 hectares of land at the northeast corner of Teston Rd. and Dufferin St. The motion also asked for a process to permit further adjustments to the Greenbelt boundaries.

In an email, Di Biase said he advocated for change because “the site is completely surrounded by development with houses directly to the east, directly to the south and directly to the west and a cemetery directly to the north” and added that transit also run along the lands. “In terms of development of the area . . . this area allows us to efficiently utilize existing infrastructure that is currently in place immediately adjacent.”

Landowner Cam Milani did not respond to a request for comment about plans for the land.

Tim Gray, the executive director of Environmental Defence, said Vaughan’s efforts have not gone unnoticed.

“Vaughan is being quite aggressive and is using the review process to get as many parcels of land (as possible) taken out of protection and into urban development,” he said, adding that if the province creates a process for removing land from the Greenbelt, it will “signal the end of protected lands.”

Earlier this year the city received a stern warning from the province when it deferred for “several years” a motion to endorse the city’s natural heritage network. City staff had worked for years with the

province and landowners to map out the green space in Vaughan — a requirement of all municipalities to be compliant with the province’s growth plan.

“We are concerned that . . . failing to identify applicable natural heritage features introduces uncertainty into planning and development in the city of Vaughan,” the province wrote.

“We went contrary to the province’s direction,” said Ward 1 Councillor Marilyn Iafrate, adding there is now no clear plan of what needs to be protected. “We had a plan, we had a revised updated map of that was agreed to by all parties, and all we wanted to do was set that to a legal document. There was no communication from anyone that they opposed, so why wouldn’t we support it?”

Di Biase, who supported the deferral, said the report and proposed amendments “did not allow appropriate time for the residents and landowners in the City of Vaughan an opportunity for review.”

In an email, the city said “the natural environment is among Vaughan’s most important assets,” and “as a growing city, there is a commitment to responsible, sustainable land use that ensures protection of all natural heritage resources.”

Residents say they are concerned about how much of the Greenbelt lands will be left by the time the council term is over.

“This council has been very disappointing,” said Robert Kennedy, president of the Mackenzie Ridge Ratepayers Association. “To change a designation of land, even on principle, without any consultation or studies, is really troubling,” he said.

Council also passed a motion last month asking the province to resume plans for a new GTA West highway, even though it will cut right through Vaughan's portion of the Greenbelt in Kleinburg.

And early last year, the province quietly issued a rare ministerial order to change the designation of a 40-hectare parcel of "environmentally sensitive" lands in the Oak Ridge Moraine, east of Dufferin St. south of Kirby St., to "low density residential" after the city "requested the provincial development facilitator to assist in resolving long-standing development disputes."

The province was helping to settle a \$150-million lawsuit launched by landowner Lucia Milani and her company, Rizmi Holdings Ltd., against the city for closing down two development applications that would have rezoned the land from agricultural to residential. When the Oak Ridges Moraine legislation came into effect in 2002, the land could not be developed.

The developer was told it could now develop the site in exchange for withdrawing its application for an aggregate licence to allow extraction of sand, gravel, clay, earth and bedrock from the site, said a spokesman from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Maria Augimeri, a Toronto councillor and chair of the Toronto and Region Conservation Agency, said that while Vaughan's actions may seem local, they are having an impact beyond its borders.

"The Greater Toronto Area is a collective of towns, cities and neighbourhoods that ought to coexist with respect for one another," said Augimeri, who has called her tenure on TRCA "eye-opening."

“When a rogue municipality runs afoul of due consideration for the environment, we all suffer,” she said. “The province must to do all it can to bring municipalities in the 905 to account.”

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