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York Region feeling pressure from developers on Greenbelt

As 40 developers seek 51 changes across the region, environmentalists warn that municipal endorsement for builders could undermine hard-won protection.

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Highway 400 cuts through the Happy Valley Forest on the Oak Ridges Moraine north of Toronto. Environmental advocates and some politicians are warning about strong pressure to redesignate some land in protected areas to allow development.

By: [Noor Javed](#) News reporter, Published on Wed May 27 2015

Landowners across [York Region](#) are asking the province to change the designation of 50 tracts on the protected Greenbelt to allow development, ahead of a provincial review of the legislation.

Environmentalists say that pressure threatens the hard-won protections meant to rein in urban sprawl and preserve the GTA's green spaces for future generations.

York has included requests from 40 landowners as part of its [submissions](#) on the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Greenbelt Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, which will be discussed at a special regional council meeting on Thursday.

Many of the landowners, most of them in Vaughan, King Township and Whitchurch-Stouffville, want their lands removed from the Greenbelt Plan area and redesignated as settlement areas for future development.

The region and municipalities say they are not taking a position on these requests, but seeking provincial direction to deal with them.

But environmentalists and local politicians say supporting the developers' wishes is a slippery slope that will lead to depleting the Greenbelt.

"We read it as the regions are actually advocating for the development interest, they are showing a map where these things are, they talk about wanting a process to consider properties from removal," said Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence. "Removing these from the Greenbelt actually violates the law," he said.

"I see this as municipalities using the review period to advocate for fundamental dismantling of the rules around the Greenbelt," he said.

Building into the Greenbelt is also unnecessary. York Region's 2015 draft growth scenario, which looked at three scenarios for growth until 2041, found that most of the projected population increase could be accommodated within lands already deemed "whitebelt" — land outside the urban boundary but not in the Greenbelt.

Last week, the City of Vaughan, which is fielding 15 developer requests for redesignation, also passed a motion in council asking the province for direction and to ask them to consider the merits of the requests.

"Ultimately, the city doesn't make the final decision. It's the province, and the process is not very clear," said Vaughan Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua. "So we are just asking for clarity," he said.

But at the last moment, deputy mayor [Michael Di Biase](#) amended the motion to endorse the redesignation of one particular tract owned by the Milani Group that is within the Greenbelt and the Oak Ridges Moraine.

"The region and province be notified that Vaughan council supports and requests the re-designation from countryside to settlement for the approximately 29 hectares of land located on the property at the northeast corner of Teston Rd. and Dufferin St.," says his handwritten motion, which was seconded by Councillor Tony Carella and passed in council.

"And that Vaughan council supports and requests that the region and province establish a defined process to permit adjustments to the Greenbelt Plan boundaries ..." he writes.

Councillor Marilyn Iafrate, who voted against the motion, said an endorsement of one developer's proposal, without any public consultation, adequate studies or analysis, sets a dangerous precedent.

"We shouldn't be advocating for one developer over the other," she said. "All we have done now is set precedents for everyone to come and ask us for the same consideration. We shouldn't be doing this."