

Activists rally in front of MPP Gallagher Murphy's office to protest Greenbelt decision



Hundreds of ardent protesters lined Yonge Street in Newmarket on Saturday to raise public awareness about the Ford government giving prior notice to developers that Greenbelt lands were going to be rezoned.

They also voiced their displeasure with the Ford Government serving eviction notices to nine families who farm the tracts of Greenbelt grazing and arable land. These moves by the provincial government on both ecologically-sensitive areas and hard-working farmers were significant points of contention for the hundreds who participated in the noisy protest in south Newmarket.

There were two platoons of protesters at the sun-drenched rally: a veteran, media-savvy group which was encamped outside the closed office of Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy; and, dozens of vocal and animated protesters stretching in a long line from Savage Road to Mulock Avenue on the east side of Yonge Street.

Environmental activists carried signs emblazoned with "Ford is a Liar" and "Doug Ford? Hands off the Greenbelt." Many rang cowbells and blurted out choruses about some of Premier Ford's recent decisions regarding the Greenbelt—a stretch of land he promised he would protect during the last provincial election.

Gordon Prentice, a former British MP, environmentalist, and ten-year Newmarket resident, gathered protesters in an orderly group of 25 in front of Gallagher Murphy's office where he addressed local media.

"We're here to raise public consciousness about what is happening to the Greenbelt," he said. "We are also insisting that, based on the findings of the Auditor-General, a criminal investigation be initiated by the OPP into this suspicious land deal where developers had prior knowledge that the lands in question were about to be rezoned."

Prentice also expressed his displeasure regarding the role of MPP Gallagher Murphy.

"She will not meet with her constituents about this issue, despite the fact that her office has received hundreds of email and phone calls regarding the Greenbelt. At least she could have agreed to be here and listen to our concerns."

The protest rally in Newmarket caught the attention of Environmental Defence Canada's Executive Director Tim Grey who

organized a similar event in Pickering that was attended by several hundred angry protesters last week.

In a telephone interview, the veteran activist and environmental expert expressed his concerns about the process of Greenbelt rezoning and said he believes that an OPP investigation is warranted.

?Citizens need to reach out to their MPP and the OPP. People need to show up at municipal meetings and ensure that Councils vote down the rezoning in order to keep the lands agricultural. People need to make their concerns known to the OPP...?

Grey suggested the following strategies for residents who would like to express their concerns about the splintering of the Greenbelt by the Ford administration: ?The best methodology is a phone call to their local MPP to request a meeting regarding the protection of the Greenbelt. They can also call and leave a message about protecting these lands. Drafting a note that states one's opposition to the selling off of Greenbelt lands to developers is another effective strategy. Sending it via email or regular mail is a good way to express political opinion. In addition to local MPPs, it's very important to communicate your concerns about species and lands at risk to your local MP.?

Grey explained that the ?Federal Government is required to consider the number of calls and emails that are delivered by constituents and to measure their level of concern. There are a number of Federal Acts that can be invoked?all of which prohibit development of the Greenbelt and other protected lands that are adjacent, for example, to the Rouge River National Park.

?It's really important for the public to come out and support the findings of the Auditor-General. The government was biased towards developers and the land in question must be used for agriculture.?

By Jim Stewart