

Doug Ford's office was involved in municipal land decisions, records reveal

JEFF GRAY > QUEEN'S PARK REPORTER

KAREN HOWLETT >

LAURA STONE > QUEEN'S PARK REPORTER

JILL MAHONEY >

TORONTO

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

UPDATED 1 HOUR AGO

FOR SUBSCRIBERS



Ontario Premier Doug Ford, left, looks over at Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Paul Calandra, at Queen's Park, in Toronto, on Oct. 30.

CHRIS YOUNG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

A cache of internal government records reveals for the first time the direct involvement of Ontario Premier Doug Ford's office in selecting specific properties that were earmarked for development when the province unilaterally added land to the urban boundaries of several municipalities.

The documents, released Monday by the advocacy organization Environmental Defence, shed light on the directives from political staff that led to many of the sweeping changes the province imposed last November on the official plans of York, Peel, Niagara and Halton Regions, and the City of Hamilton – all of which the government retracted last week.

Opposition critics and environmentalists say the controversy over the boundary changes is no different than the continuing scandal over the government's now-rescinded move to allow housing construction on parts of its environmentally protected Greenbelt lands. That decision is now under investigation by the RCMP.

The Progressive Conservative government has been backpedaling in the midst of critical media coverage and high-profile resignations since this summer, when its Greenbelt move was condemned in reports by the province's Integrity Commissioner and its Auditor-General. The legislative watchdogs concluded that political staff had driven a process that discarded environmental and infrastructure criteria and favoured certain developers, who stood to gain \$8.3-billion in increased land values.

Eighteen zoning orders given to developers who were guests at Premier Ford's family wedding, NDP says

The documents include thousands pages of e-mails, notes from meetings and detailed planning files, all obtained through freedom of information legislation by Environmental Defence, a group that opposes urban sprawl. They show direct involvement by political staff in official plan changes that would have benefitted particular development companies.

Official plans are public documents that guide development in municipalities. They are typically drafted by local officials and approved by the provincial government. The government's top-down changes added rural land to urban areas and cleared the way for future construction.

The documents show the Premier's Office requested a copy of a map, to ensure that two specific properties in Nobleton, Ont., in York Region north of Toronto, were included in the province's boundary changes. The properties in question were partly owned by Flato Developments, a company founded by Shakir Rehmatullah. Mr. Rehmatullah is a friend of the Premier's, who attended his daughter's wedding last year.

Asked about the cache of documents, Caitlin Clark, a spokesperson for the Premier, noted that the staff members involved are no longer in their jobs.

"Staff members who were involved in these decisions, both in the premier's office and minister's office, are no longer employed by the government," she said in an e-mailed statement. "As already announced, the decisions are now being reversed."

Two senior aides to the Premier, former principal secretary Amin Massoudi and housing adviser Jae Truesdell, have left in recent months. So have two senior aides to then-housing minister Steve Clark, who himself resigned after the Integrity Commissioner concluded he broke ethics rules for failing to supervise the Greenbelt process. At the centre of both the Greenbelt and official-plan rewrites was Ryan Amato, Mr. Clark's then-chief of staff, who has also since resigned.

According to Monday's documents, Mr. Amato sent a flurry of 11th-hour e-mails about requests from Flato Development Inc. and its business partner Wyview Group. The developers were asking for two parcels of land totalling 80 hectares to be added to the urban area of Nobleton, in King Township. One of Mr. Amato's e-mails indicates that the Premier's Office wanted to ensure those properties were added.

Halton Hills had plans for a walkable town. Ontario's Ford government had other ideas

At 10:01 a.m. on Nov. 4 – the same day Ontario posted its unilateral changes to municipalities' official plans online – Mr. Amato said in an e-mail that a ministry official “was supposed to show me a map of the settlement area capturing these properties in the settlement area so they could be developed.” The e-mail adds that “po has asked me for a picture to make sure it's captured.” PO is short for the Premier's Office.

In another e-mail among planning bureaucrats on Nov. 3, the day before the changes went out, Mr. Amato is quoted as saying that the “PO wants this done.”

The Premier's Office was also involved in last-minute changes made to Peel Region's official plan, according to the documents.

Kirsten Jensen, who was then Mr. Amato's deputy, sent an e-mail marked urgent to ministry bureaucrats on Nov. 3, asking them to look at specific changes to Peel Region's plan, just a day before the plans were to be released, and saying the request came “from someone at PO.”

The documents also suggest that the Premier agreed to pursue the removal of a parcel of land from the Greenbelt in a meeting with a Hamilton-area developer and PC fundraiser, Sergio Manchia, in September, 2021. That was more than a year before Mr. Ford's government would announce it was breaking previous promises and opening up 3,000 hectares in the protected area for housing.

In an e-mail to a provincial official from Scott Beedie, a planner with development consultants Urban Solutions, Mr. Beedie says Mr. Ford met with then-Hamilton mayor Fred Eisenberger, local PC MPP Donna Skelly, Labourers' International Union of North America international vice-president Joseph Mancinelli and Mr. Manchia. The group agreed to “pursue the request,” the e-mail says. The developer, the local council and Mr. Eisenberger had previously said publicly that the Hamilton land had been protected in error.

Victoria Mancinelli, a spokesperson for LiUNA, said Mr. Mancinelli was not at this meeting, and that the union had no involvement in Greenbelt decisions.

Two Ontario municipalities ask province to compensate them for Greenbelt work

Asked about the meeting, Ms. Clark, speaking for the Premier, said in an e-mail that changes to the Greenbelt “were only contemplated after” the June, 2022 provincial election, and that “as noted by both the Auditor General and the Integrity Commissioner, neither the premier nor the premier’s office was part of any specific site selection.”

Ontario NDP Leader Marit Stiles said the documents show that Mr. Ford “absolutely knew” about the forced urban boundary expansions and that he was “completely looped in.”

According to handwritten notes taken at a Nov. 17, 2022 meeting between bureaucrats and the housing minister’s office staff, Sean Fraser, an assistant deputy minister, warned that the government was in for a “rough ride” on the announced changes. But he encouraged staff to “hold the line” and “stick to limited message about housing etc.”

Mr. Amato then said, “everybody keep your mouth shut and stick to it.”

Sign up for the Great Reads Newsletter

A selection of provocative, inspiring, and delightful stories worth your time this weekend.

SIGN UP

Follow Jeff Gray on Twitter: [@jeffreybgray](https://twitter.com/jeffreybgray)

Follow Karen Howlett on Twitter: [@kahowlett](https://twitter.com/kahowlett)

Follow Laura Stone on Twitter: [@l_stone](https://twitter.com/l_stone)

Follow Jill Mahoney on Twitter: [@jillsmahoney](https://twitter.com/jillsmahoney)

[Report an error](#)

[Editorial code of conduct](#)