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Doug Ford's welcome environmental about-face

Opening Ontario for new business should never mean opening its protected farmlands, forests and green fields to developers' bulldozers.

How wonderful that Premier Doug Ford has arrived at this way of thinking and killed parts of new legislation that could have opened the province's vast Greenbelt to developers while allowing them to sidestep laws protecting drinking water.

Politicians are frequently criticized for their flip-flops, but in this case Ford deserves praise for listening to the public, environmentalists and municipal leaders, and then making a 180-degree turn.

The Progressive Conservative government's plan to allow municipalities to pass so-called "open-for-business" by-laws to fast-track new factories and subdivisions was always a messy jumble of reasonable intentions and very dangerous ideas.

The goal was expediting economic growth; fair enough. But to achieve this, Schedule 10 of Bill 66, the Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act, would have allowed municipalities to circumvent not only parts of Ontario's Planning Act but the Greenbelt Act, Clean Water Act, Great Lakes Protection Act, Places to Grow Act and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act.

Along with others, critics at Ecojustice, Canada's largest environmental law charity, argued convincingly that Schedule 10 threatened the environment and public health while drastically limiting public input when local governments wooed new developers.

In the view of Ecojustice, passing Schedule 10 into law would have made it harder to protect Ontario's drinking water supply as well as its farmland and vulnerable environments. To make things worse, it would have created a chaotic system of planning future growth in the province.

Indeed, what the proposed legislation actually said was often at odds with what the government insisted it was trying to do. Both Premier Ford and Ontario Municipal Affairs Minister Steve Clark insisted they would have never allowed new development to encroach upon the Greenbelt, a 7,200-square kilometre protected zone of farmland, wetlands and woodlands stretching around the Toronto area from Niagara Region to Peterborough.

Considering that any new municipal by-laws passed under Schedule 10 needed the municipal affairs minister's approval, that might have been the case for a time. But the proposed legislation specifically allowed municipalities to bypass the Greenbelt Act. And future municipal affairs ministers might not have been as protective of the Greenbelt as Clark says he is.

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The yawning gap between what the government insisted Schedule 10 meant and what it really said suggests this government had not properly thought through this legislation. Municipal politicians were left scratching their heads over the government's intentions. Like the environmentalists, the farm community was outraged by what was being proposed. And the general public, increasingly aware of how it would be shut out of future planning, was becoming aroused.

Perhaps the PCs were overtaken by irrational exuberance and simply trying to rev up Ontario's economy too quickly. Maybe they were listening too much to developers. But this particular plan for opening the door wider for new businesses was a mistake. Moreover, an initiative that could have such diverse, far-reaching and devastating consequences should never have been tossed into the omnibus legislation that is Bill 66.

Thank goodness Ford listened to Ontarians and changed course. To be sure, his government still needs to review how the province will accommodate the pressing housing and business needs in southern Ontario's rapidly growing communities. Somehow, the PCs must find a better way of balancing the interests of the economy with those of the environment. Give us a place to grow, yes. But give us a place where the water is clean, the forests still stand and the farmland survives.

Lead