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# Liberals dismiss Tory farm plan challenge

BY MIKE ADLER  
 Staff Writer

Tory MPPs dared Liberal colleagues in Markham this week to produce a farm support plan before passing a provincial greenbelt bill.

An all-party committee examining the bill defeated the surprise motion, with Liberal MPPs dismissing it as a delaying tactic by a party that failed to help farmers while in office.

The greenbelt, which would restrict development on one million acres of Greater Toronto, including most of York Region's remaining rural areas, may become law next month. The government says it's necessary to curb urban sprawl and save natural areas and farms.



**FRANK KLEES:** Progressive Conservative MPP for Oak Ridges says Liberals are not allowing farmers to make a living.

Mr. Wong said he's on record as opposing compensation for greenbelt farmers based on speculative land values, "but I do believe we should consider other support mechanisms".

What these mechanisms should be was not suggested by the MPPs at the hearing or even York Federation of Agriculture president Terry O'Connor, who told the committee he would leave that to government experts.

But Mr. O'Connor did say a rural development commission is needed to direct private investment into farming.

The Ontario government could also learn from Quebec programs that encourage farming and from British Columbia and United States where "government has set aside land to remain in agriculture with a suitable compensation package to keep the land productive", he added.

Vaughan developer Silvio De Gasperis complained about greenbelt's inclusion of the former Duffin Rouge Agricultural Preserve in Pickering and of part of rural Vaughan known as Block 41.

Protecting the Vaughan parcel west of Hwy. 400 and between Kirby and Teston roads as countryside doesn't make sense because it is "a growth area" with \$300-million infrastructure in place or promised, he said. "This is not smart growth."

Similarly, developing the Pickering preserve, a farming area where Mr. De Gasperis and a partner control most land and where he financed a city study favouring development, is a logical extension of growth in Pickering, he argued.

Four days of committee hearings end today and may produce amendments to the greenbelt legislation, Bill 135.

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Tory MPP Tim Hudak (Erie-Lincoln) called on the Liberals to adopt an agricultural support strategy "acceptable to Ontario farmers" before passing the bill, reminding them the province has yet to respond to the recommendations of a panel it appointed last year on helping agriculture survive around urban areas.

"They should at least have an agricultural policy that allows farmers to make a living by farming," Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees said.

Mr. Hudak pointed repeatedly to Markham MPP Tony Wong's comments in this newspaper in November, indicating his government would have to make payments to farmers for the environmental services they provide or Quebec-style price subsidies.

Liberals responded the Tories had eight years to address viability of farming and did nothing. A Liberal caucus news release said the Tories "gutted the Agriculture Ministry", cutting 1,000 employees while they were in power.

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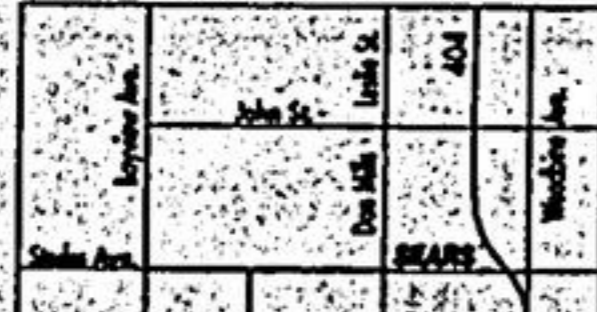
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