
CBC OTTAWA MORNING INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BENZIE

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Speaker(s): Robert Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief, Toronto Star; [CLIP] Doug Ford, Leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party

CBCO: The Ontario Liberals released a cell phone video yesterday of Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader Doug Ford promising to develop parts of Toronto's Greenbelt.

[CLIP] DOUG FORD, ONTARIO PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE LEADER: We will up the Greenbelt. Not all of it, but we're going to open a big chunk of it up and we're going to start building and making it more affordable and putting more houses out there. The demand for single growing homes is huge but no one can afford them.

CBCO: The Liberals showed the video with media yesterday saying it shows that Doug Ford has 'made secret promises to big developers.' Rob Benzie is the Queen's Park Bureau Chief for The Toronto Star and he joins me now. Hi Rob.

ROB BENZIE, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF FOR THE TORONTO STAR: Good morning Robin.

CBCO: Give us a little bit more of the context around this video. Do we know when, where it was filmed or who he was addressing in that speech?

BENZIE: Yeah, it was filmed on February 12, so during the Conservative leadership race. And he was speaking with some developers and other folks in Markham, Ontario. And I gather that the Liberals found it on Chinese media website; a local Chinese-Canadian group had posted it. And for context for Ottawa listeners, the Greenbelt is a huge swath of land around the Greater Toronto Area. It's about 40 times the size of the Greenbelt around Ottawa. So the one around Ottawa's around 200 square kilometers, this one is 8,000 square kilometers of protected land and it was designed by-- it was designed by people who were concerned about urban sprawl and it was implemented into law by Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government in 2005. And it's been controversial because developers say, look we'd like to build more housing for folks. We would like to build more subdivisions and so on. But not all the land that is currently available for development is being used. There's land that's, up til the year 2031, that could still be developed so I'm not really-- it's not really clear what Mr. Ford was talking about. Like why this needed to happen right now.

CBCO: And as the Premier does he have-- I mean would he have the power to release big chunks of Toronto's Greenbelt?

BENZIE: Well they would have the power to change the parameters of the Greenbelt because it's a provincially-mandated thing. Now they work with municipalities for it. Last night at the City of Oakville this was discussed at a council. That's a suburb of Toronto. So it's something that's

of great concern. I spoke to some Tories about this yesterday after this emerged and Mr. Ford confirmed it. He had a media availability in Whitby and he said that yes he is looking at this, but then he promised any land that was used other land would be added to it. It's not clear how that would happen because this is a belt between sprawl-- to stop sprawl, right. So it's not like you can have-- there's extra swaths of land that can be easily turned into Greenbelt. So anyway I spoke to some Tories about this who are quite concerned just because they didn't know that this was coming. This is kind of a change for the party in direction. Patrick Brown the previous leader did not talk about this. So there's some concern.

CBCO: And I guess things would be different here in Ottawa because the NCC runs a lot of our Greenbelt.

BENZIE: Yeah.

CBCO: Now the Liberals clearly think that this is a gotcha moment or they wouldn't have released it, but do you think it is? How does this play out in the GTA?

BENZIE: It was the most read story on our website yesterday and Greenbelt was trending on Twitter all day, but I don't know. I don't know if that's-- I mean Mr. Ford said, look house prices are a big issue. He's right. House prices in Toronto are a big issue but I'm not sure that everybody wants to buy a single-dwelling home you know many, many kilometers from where they work without transit and face lots of gridlock to get to work. And you know other people say look sprawl doesn't necessarily mean-- Greenbelt isn't necessarily contributing to the fact that houses are expensive in Toronto because there's still land that could be developed and it's not being developed so there are other factors for sure. But I don't know, it might resonate with people who say he's got a plan to make housing more affordable for people. Other people, including some progressives and environmentalists that I was hearing from yesterday, are very concerned that this speaks to a sort of hidden agenda or something that's out there that they didn't know about until someone comes forward with a cellphone camera.

CBCO: Okay, I'm going to charge you do this next topic in one minute or less; the Tories plans for hydro rates. Just fill us in on this one.

BENZIE: The Tory plan for hydro rates is to build on the Fair Hydro Plan that the Liberals have that's 25 percent off. The Tories say they can add another 12 percent on top of that by putting the dividends from Hydro One back into your hydro bill. This is a plan that was actually originally developed by Patrick Brown the former PC Leader and has been revived by Mr. Ford. But it builds on the Liberal plan that the Tories oppose so it's very odd.

CBCO: Is it feasible though?

BENZIE: Everything is feasible. When it comes to hydro bills the Liberal plan borrows lots and lots of money from future generations to make your hydro bill cheaper now. This one will do the same thing and then some. So everything is possible. Whether it's smart policy is another question.

CBCO: All right, we'll have to leave it there for today. Thanks very much Rob.

BENZIE: Thanks Robyn.

CBCO: That's Rob Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star.