

## Look at the birdie



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By Nate Smelle

When reports of the COVID-19 pandemic's presence in Ontario first started dominating our daily newsfeed, I was pleasantly surprised when Premier Doug Ford advised Ontarians to take up birdwatching while staying home to prevent the spread of the virus.

Understanding that the "open for business," development-no-matter-the-cost philosophy which the Ford government usually practices would not fly during a global viral outbreak of epic proportions, I wondered at that time if he would heed his own advice; and, in turn if this potential new-found appreciation of nature would encourage his government to take meaningful action in terms of environmental protection.

Was I ever wrong.

Looking back on this government's track record, I think it would have been more sincere of the Premier to have said "Look at the birdie."

My delusion came to an end after recently seeing how the Ford government conveniently slipped changes to the Conservation Authorities Act - changes which significantly reduce the power of conservation authorities to protect people, property, and the environment - into omnibus Bill 229 (Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act, Budget Measures, 2020). While at first I believed the Premier was earnestly recommending the appreciation of nature as a safe way to entertain and educate ourselves during the crisis, it is clear now that his off the cuff remarks were instead meant to distract Ontarians from paying attention to their true agenda - handing over their power to developers and big business.

As a result of their changes to the Conservation Authorities Act, the Ford government has stripped away the ability of conservation authorities to assess the environmental impact of developments, and given this power to themselves.

In 1946, Ontario's 36 conservation authorities were created to protect and restore the land, water and natural habitat in their own jurisdictions after poor land-use planning caused widespread deforestation, drought, erosion, and severe flooding throughout the province. As we in North Hastings, and sadly but realistically people from all communities in Ontario know, the ongoing climate crisis has made so-called "100-year floods" commonplace each spring. Likewise, the heating planet has increased drought and erosion, and furthered deforestation across Ontario and around the world.

It is no secret Ford has a cuddly relationship with Toronto's biggest developers - a relationship exposed in a video of a backroom meeting with developers in Markham on Feb. 12, 2018 where Ford told them his plan to open a "big chunk" of the Greenbelt up to "start building.?"

Can we trust that this government will uphold the science-based approach to conservation and environmental protection previously utilized by conservation authorities?

Can we trust them to put the interests of all Ontarians and future generations ahead of the profits of their land-hungry developer friends?

I think we all know the answer to these questions.