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**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

Committee business

1st Session
43rd Parliament
Monday 21 October 2024

**Comité permanent des
comptes publics**

Travaux du comité

1^{re} session
43^e législature
Lundi 21 octobre 2024

Chair: Tom Rakocevic
Clerk: Tanzima Khan

Président : Tom Rakocevic
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Monday 21 October 2024

Lundi 21 octobre 2024

The committee met at 1232 in room 151.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Good afternoon, everyone. I would like to call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order.

The first item on the agenda is a motion filed by MPP Fife. I am opening the floor to MPP Fife to read the motion into the record and proceed.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much, Chair, and thanks for your indulgence, to my colleagues around the table.

I move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts request that the Auditor General conduct a special audit into the value for money of the Wilmot township industrial land assembly, including whether the provincial government's decisions have been consistent with provincial plans, policies, laws, and the statutory responsibility under section 2(b) of the Planning Act to protect the province's agricultural resources.

I'd be pleased to share a few comments with regard to why this motion should move forward.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Members of this public accounts committee will know that we actually have the power, as a committee, to ask the auditor to conduct a special report outside of the work that we've already asked her to do. This actually happened with regard to the greenbelt scandal, and the auditor was able to reveal what was happening behind the scenes with regard to the greenbelt carve-out.

What's happening in Wilmot has been very destabilizing for the farming and agricultural community. It is a huge departure from how this government has conducted planning in the past, and it does not bode well for progressive planning practices. That will, in effect, cause great harm to our environment and even to our economy down the road.

It is now clear, if you've been following the story, that the Ford government is directly involved in the Wilmot farmland grab, and it has now been going on for eight months. We still haven't had a single public meeting, a single report or study released. The freedom-of-information questions and requests have gone unanswered. There is complete silence from the regional government, which we now have learned has signed an NDA at the behest of the provincial government.

I want committee members to know that there are thousands of lawn signs up at homes across Wilmot township and even the surrounding counties. Even in my riding of Waterloo—I'm adjacent to Kitchener-Conestoga—I believe, now, it's 10,000 signs. You cannot go into the community as a whole without seeing a very visible protest, if you will, against the 770 acres which have been allocated for a future mega-industrial site. I mention this because I think it's important for the committee to understand that Wilmot is not a willing host. This is an important statement, because the Premier himself has said that in order for these projects to move ahead, the government—your government—is looking for willing hosts. That is not the case in Wilmot township.

To date, the concerns of the community, who have delegated both at Wilmot township and regional council, have gone unanswered and unaddressed. The silence is deafening. In fact, it is flat-out undemocratic. The communities say that although their concerns are unaddressed, the fact that—the Wilmot farmland grab is actually moving ahead, given that the provincial policy statement just became active yesterday, on October 20. So you have a provincial policy statement, which is supposed to guide planning moving forward, and then you have what's happening in Wilmot, which is in direct contravention of your own provincial policy statement.

I believe that the request to have the Auditor General conduct a value-for-money audit would really pull back the curtain on what's happening here and what has gone wrong—because it's definitely not going right. I believe that this falls well within the mandate of the Auditor General.

I also want to state that the location that has been identified, the 770 acres, has been described as an absurd location for a mega-industrial development. It's more than 50 kilometres, round trip, from urban cities. The costs have not been exposed, but I will tell you that the infrastructure costs to accommodate such a large project would fall to the local taxpayers. So you can see the problem here is that the taxpayers are going to have to foot the bill to accommodate this large industrial site, but they've never been consulted, and there has never been any sharing of information about what those costs will be.

I also want to point out that the proposed site meets only seven of the 44 of the province's own Job Site Challenge criteria, compared to the east-side lands and other sites in Waterloo region that meet 36 to 40 of the 44 criteria.

So, once again, this project makes no sense and is in contravention to the very policies that this government espouses as your values.

The community as a whole is very, very receptive and positive around possibly having the Auditor General review and do an investigation—in particular a value-for-money investigation—when it appears that there has been so little study done around this site, and especially, as I mentioned, around the cost to future infrastructure and watershed capacity.

Some of you may know this, but Waterloo region is one of the only municipalities in the province of Ontario that relies—we are reliant on 80% of groundwater. So there are genuine concerns about the aquifer, and these concerns are not to be dismissed in the name of economic development.

As I said in my question this morning, we believe strongly that economic development does not have to be up against agriculture. We're very receptive to a potential EV battery plant or advanced manufacturing. The community as a whole is very positive about this—but not on class 1 farmland.

Just regarding the provincial policy statement—the statement goes on to say, “Ontario’s vibrant agricultural sector and sensitive areas will continue to form part of the province’s economic prosperity and overall identity. Growth and development will be prioritized within urban and rural settlements that will, in turn, support and protect the long-term viability of rural areas, local food production, and the agri-food network. In addition, resources, including natural areas, water, aggregates and agricultural lands will be protected.”

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What you have here is 770 acres of prime agricultural land—active farming, right now. One of the farmers is a proud dairy farmer who produces Mountainoak Cheese. I want to tell you; their truffle cheese is some of the best in the world. This farmer, though, has said he will not sell. If he's not amenable to selling, that means he'll have to be forced off that land—seven generations of farmers. The Premier himself has said he does not support expropriation, and yet this project is moving ahead at the behest of the province.

The question remains: How does the Wilmot land assembly, for the purposes of a mega-industrial complex, protect the long-term viability of rural areas? I will contend that it does not, which is why the auditor needs to investigate.

Also, the provincial policy statement is really clear on rural lands located in municipalities: The management or use of resources and resource-based recreational uses should be guided by the best environmental policy that we know. “Development shall be appropriate to the infrastructure which is planned or available....” Remember that this mega-industrial site was never part of any regional official plan or the Wilmot official plan; it came out of nowhere.

I hope that you, my colleagues around the table, would want to know how this happened, because if it happens in Wilmot and destabilizes the farming community there, it

can happen anywhere in Ontario. This is something that the Auditor General would certainly investigate. The Auditor General has powers at her disposal to really shine a light on the Wilmot farmland grab.

We should learn from the mistakes that have happened with regard to this assembly, and we should ensure that it doesn't happen again, because it has had a cooling and negative impact on farming and the agricultural sector in the province of Ontario, which generates \$47 billion worth of economic productivity for the province.

Finally, I just would like to say that the community is not a willing host. Forty-four tractors showed up at a regional meeting in late August. The farmers feel disrespected. They do not want to be displaced from their land. They are not willing hosts.

The Auditor General, I think, could review how this decision was made, review the costs that the community as a whole will suffer without any consultation—which I hope we can all agree is fairly undemocratic—and then come back to the committee so we can review why this has gone so wrong in Wilmot township and why we should prevent it from happening again.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: As you all know, I have been on the committee for public accounts for over a decade, for a very long time. I have seen many requests to the different Auditors General—I'm on my third one—to do special requests, and I can tell you that every single time, it has been a learning experience, not only for the people who sit on public accounts, but for the entire Legislative Assembly.

The Auditor General has tools, has access to information and things that only her office can gain access to. They do this in confidentiality—in the over 125 years that we've had an Auditor General in Ontario, nothing has ever come out that was not supposed to, but he or she is able to gain access to people, to information, to documents that only they can. They bring forward some very well thought out recommendations that, most of the time, are welcomed by the public accounts committee and welcomed by the Legislative Assembly as something—often, it goes like, “How come we never thought about this before?” But sometimes it's really that things have changed—the way business used to be done is not the way business is being done. We now have AI. We now have all sorts of stuff. The Auditor General is able to look at all of this, do the work of the value-for-money audit, and bring back reports that I guarantee you will be useful to this committee and more than likely, if the past is any indication of the future, will also be helpful to all 124 of us who are here to represent the people of Ontario.

We have an opportunity, as a committee, to direct the Auditor General to do the work. The Auditor General is an independent officer of the Legislature. Right now, she gets to decide what audits she wants to do, but as a group, we can mandate her to do that value-for-money audit, and I guarantee you that we will learn from it.

I know we've worked together for a while now. You all care for farmers. You all care for people, for the land. We're all on the same page on this.

Let's see what we can learn through having an independent officer of the Legislature, who is not partisan but wields a lot of power, look into what has happened and report back to us.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, I just wanted to give the government members another good reason. The lack of transparency with regard to the Wilmot farmland grab should be concerning to all of us, and I just want to say that the regional government has said that the government has mandated the NDAs and is funding the program, and has also set the terms for how the land was to be assembled. So that's what the region is saying. Minister Flack today said that this is only being driven by the region. So you have two levels of government pointing fingers at each other. Don't you want to find out what's really going on? I do, and I know the people in Wilmot also want that.

With that, I will be asking for a recorded vote.

I really am hopeful the government—if you have nothing to hide on this, if you're proud of what's going on, then, please, let's put the Auditor General to work and get to the answers in Wilmot.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Any further debate? Seeing none, we will now move to a recorded vote.

Ayes

Fife.

Nays

Anand, Byers, Cuzzetto, Martin, Pang, Sabawy, Triantafilopoulos.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): It does not carry.

Thank you, everyone. I am now recessing so the committee can move into closed session for report-writing.

The committee recessed at 1249 and later continued in closed session.

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