

Caledon pushes back against Province's fast-track agenda with Bills 5 and 17

By Riley Murphy

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

On May 13, The Town of Caledon Planning Committee passed a motion to ask the Ontario Government to stop Bill 5 based on the Town's analysis that it would significantly take away Caledon's and other Ontario municipalities' ability to meet the needs of its citizens.

Bill 5, Protect Ontario by Unleashing our Economy Act, 2025, is a comprehensive piece of legislation aimed at accelerating economic development by overhauling several environmental and regulatory frameworks.

While the government assures that the Bill will streamline processes and promote growth, many argue it significantly weakens environmental protections and undermines Indigenous rights.

The authority the Bill will hand to the provincial government worries a wide range of organizations and advocates rallying against an attack on civil liberties, Indigenous rights, environmental protections and local governance.

Bill 5 proposes repealing the Endangered Species Act and replacing it with the Species Conservation Act 2025. The new Act shifts the focus from mandatory species recovery to discretionary conservation efforts.

Notably, it grants the Provincial Cabinet the authority to decide which species receive protection, reducing the role of scientific committees like the Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO).

Another piece of this proposal regards the habitat for endangered species.

"The Species at Risk Act defined the amount of habitat that a particular creature needed to have protected, especially if they were at risk for whatever was happening," explained Debra Wilson, Forks of the Credit Conservation Group. "In the past, the area was larger than what the Conservation Act is suggesting."

Wilson said in comparison with frogs and humans, under the new Act, the animals' habitat is just their home.

"We still have to go out, we've got to go get groceries, we've got to go to work to earn the money for the groceries, we've got to get our kids to school, and it's the same in the case of the frog. They've got to stay in the wetland, that's their home for this period of time during mating, but then they have to move to the woodlands, they're going to get food there, they're going to be protected there, they're going to raise their children there," Wilson said.

"The old Act said we need to put protection for the wetland, the field he's got to jump through, and the woodlands. The new Act says we just need to protect where that frog is staying."

Betty de Groot from ecoCaledon expressed concerns similar to those of Wilson.

"A developer, for example, could plow down and mow down everything, dig up everything other than the actual nest," said de Groot.

de Groot says she fears it will result in things that will be built much quicker without accounting for things that could have been considered prior and not take much more time.

John MacRae from ecoCaledon spoke on one of the significant threats to the community that Bill 5 poses.

?It takes away a lot of the provisions that were already there to protect the environment, to include Indigenous people in decision making, and even it takes away some power from?local Councils to make local decisions or have input.?

MacRae touched on the fact that the Town of Caledon, along with other municipalities in Ontario, spent the last 10 years getting their Official Plan together. With this Bill, he contended, this plan could be thrown away.

?The Province has jumped in a number of times with the MZOs and has actually approved properties that are outside of the original Plan. So, we know what could happen if local towns and cities are not allowed to do their own planning,? shared MacRae.

MZOs, or Minister's Zoning Orders, are tools the Province may use to change the zoning (i.e., permitted uses and associated regulations such as setbacks) to allow land development.

A fear about the new Bill is regarding SEZs or Special Economic Zones.

The Bill introduces the Special Economic Zones Act 2025, allowing the government to designate specific areas where certain provincial laws and municipal by-laws can be overridden to expedite development projects.

?The idea of a SEZ is not clear yet; does that mean that they could come in and just say, that's it, we're going to make this spot a quarry?? questioned Wilson.

?SEZ is very, very vague in how they've described it, but it would be an area where certain proponents would get sort of carte blanche on going ahead with their projects. The danger of it is that it stipulates that these proponents or these possibly developers or miners would not have to follow any municipal laws or any provincial laws,? explained de Groot.

MacRae says he fears that it will create a vacuum without local and Indigenous input into planning.

?I know that our Town Council, the previous Town Council and the current one have put a lot of hours and time into developing stronger relationships with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

They've done a lot of work in having good collaborations with them, developing and strengthening the relationship. We have an obligation to support what those communities are saying,? said MacRae.

?There was no prior or informed consent sought from indigenous communities,? added de Groot.

In an amendment that has come forward to the Bill, they wrote that this avenue will be explored.

With Bill 5 on the table, Bill 17 looms in the distance for environmental groups.

Bill 17, Protect Ontario by Building Faster and Smarter Act, 2025, aims to expedite housing, infrastructure, and transit development across the Province by amending several key statutes.

MacRae and de Groot shared one of the devastating aspects of Bill 17 is a package they had put together through Green Development Standards last spring; ecoCaledon and many other individuals and groups participated in helping the Town pass the legislation.

de Groot shared that she fears with Bill 17, just the Building Code will be enough.

?Caledon, and most communities in Ontario now have these green development standards, but they'll all be thrown out the window

with this Bill 17,? said MacRae.

The cutoff for a comment regarding Bill 5 has passed its deadline, but those wishing to comment on Bill 17 have until June 12.

Councillor Doug Maskell said he brought forward the motion to oppose Bill 5 as he's seen the harm similar initiatives have caused in the past, and he is not looking to repeat history.

He shared that, as a community, we must be the voice for those who cannot speak for themselves.

?I am proud of this Council's legislative record over the past two-and-half years. We have shown our willingness to work collaboratively with the Province on issues that impact Caledon such as GO Transit, illegal land use, road safety and electrification. However, we have also demonstrated our resolve in opposing Provincial legislation that we believed was not in the best interests of the people of Caledon. In November 2024, Council voted unanimously to oppose the construction of Highway 413 as outlined in Bill 212 and in May 2025, Council voted unanimously to oppose Bill 5,? explained Councillor Maskell. ?These actions were in no manner performative. They were meaningful, as these motions were representative of the widespread concerns of Caledon residents, and it is our obligation to give voice to those concerns in the most public and powerful means at our disposal.?

Those wishing to submit a comment regarding Bill 17 can do so at ero.ontario.ca/notice/025-0504.