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?Ford government open for business, closed to public? says NDACT chair

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Representatives from at least seven different citizen organizations gathered outside the Hampton Inn in Bolton on March 29th to protest the exclusive nature of the Provincial Government's Summit on Aggregate Reform. Represented at the protest were the Caledon Village Association; Concerned Citizens of Ramara; Concerned Residents' Coalition (CRC) Rockwood; Food and Water First; Gravel Watch; Palgrave Residents Association; and Caledon's Pitsense.

Recent public requests to Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones for more inclusion at the summit were met with a form letter which included a statement from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. The statement read: ?Please be aware that the Summit is targeted at industry, municipal and Indigenous leaders to hear how the government can cut red tape to create jobs and support a sustainable aggregates industry. Space at the Summit is limited, to allow participants to provide effective input. We invite everyone to provide comment by emailing AggregateReform@ontario.ca or filling out our survey on Ontario's aggregate reform webpage. We will review all feedback before making any decisions on how we can open up the aggregate industry to jobs.?

However, Food and Water First Executive Director Donna Baylis, who attended the Summit protest, says it was originally ?billed to include industry partners, municipal and Indigenous leaders, but the event was revised to gather feedback from major industry stakeholders only.?

NDACT Chair Karren Wallace told the Free Press, ?It is disappointing that key stakeholders were not invited to the summit - only the aggregate industry? She says, ?The entire summit was shrouded in secrecy.? While Premier Ford's favourite sound bite continues to be ?Ontario is open for business,? KarrenWallace says, ?The Ford government is Open for Business...closed to the public.?

In a recent release, the Ontario Headwaters Institute (OHI) , a non-profit organization working to protect Ontario's headwaters, natural heritage, and watersheds, wrote they had hoped to attended, ?given the opportunity of the summit and our perception that we could have added value to the future of the aggregate industry as well as for the environment and local communities.? The OHI released various problems their organization encountered when seeking access to information on the Aggregate Summit, including un-attended autoresponders; lack of information; lack of phone numbers; and unreturned calls and emails. The OHI say they urge the provincial government ?to do better and honour its campaign pledges for increased transparency and accountability, and to provide a government ?for the people'.?

Ms. Baylis says MPP Sylvia Jones ?was inside according to Twitter, but she did not visit the activists? from her riding or otherwise. ?Neither did Caledon's Mayor nor any of the Ministers,? says Baylis. She told the Free Press that a journalist who went in to interview Summit participants, ?came out assuring us that they were aware of our presence, so activists were in good spirits.? She also added, ?One representative from Dufferin Aggregates stopped to say that industry reps had asked the provincial government to consult with concerned residents and environmental groups.?

Under Baylis' direction, Food and Water First continues to demand changes to the Aggregate Resources Act and the Provincial Policy Statement to ensure Prime Farmland and Source Water regions are protected in Ontario. Food and Water First is a legacy movement that emerged from NDACT's battle with the Mega Quarry.

?The Government of Ontario plans to reform Ontario's aggregate industry by cutting red tape, creating jobs and building a sustainable aggregates industry,? says Donna Baylis.

?The aggregates industry contributes almost $1.4 billion to Ontario's economy and supports almost 20,000 direct and indirect jobs. However, Ontario's family farm and food processing businesses contribute $39 billion to Ontario's economy and employ over 820,000 Ontarians. Agriculture and agri-food processors are the number one economic contributor to Ontario's overall economy.

(Source: Ontario Federation of Agriculture) So, what is more sustainable ? the one-time extraction of sand, stone and gravel? Or the harvesting of food in perpetuity??

At its current rate of depletion, Donna Baylis says Ontario will lose two million acres of farmland by the year 2050. ?Yet the world's population is expected to increase by another 1.5 billion people by that time,? she says. ?Without farmland, Ontario farmers will not be able to feed Ontario's population. Without farmland, Ontario cannot have food security. Ontarians must decide ? stay the course and watch food land disappear? Or value and protect our food land today for tomorrow??

NDACT's Chair, Karren Wallace puts out a call for the public to take action, urging anyone who is concerned about protecting Ontario's farmland and source water from aggregate extraction and other industrial development, to put their concerns in writing to the Ministry by the May 1st deadline - at Aggregate Reform Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry in a PDF via e-mail to: AggregateReform@ontario.ca