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Secret lobbyist texts raise questions about the origin of the Ford government's controversial Oakville highrise plan

The exchange involved a senior political staffer and the man given the moniker "Mr. X" for his involvement in the Greenbelt scandal.

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John Mutton, best known by the moniker "Mr. X" given to him for his involvement in the Greenbelt landswap scandal, with Ontario Premier Doug Ford in an undated photo.

John Mutton/Instragram

By Sheila Wang Investigative Reporter

Between invitations to a Toronto Raptors game and a round of golf at one of Canada's most exclusive courses, the lobbyist floated an idea to the Ford government staffer on a land development poised to reshape the Oakville skyline.

In a WhatsApp conversation in September 2022, John Mutton messaged the deputy chief of staff to Ontario's housing minister about the province assigning a special designation to facilitate the development.

The private exchange took place more than a year and a half before the town was blindsided by the Ontario government's decision to intervene on the project.

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In designating the area as a Transit-Oriented Community (TOC), the province overrode Oakville's vision for the land with a thicket of highrises that town staff have warned will provide "very little to no community benefit."

Now, the revelation of the back-channel conversation has ignited the anger of local opponents to the controversial project who say the text exchange signals that the plans were on the government's radar well before they were shared publicly.

"We lost almost two years of time where the residents could have been vocal about it, instead of being surprised when the TOC was announced," said Michael Reid, president of the Oakville Community Association.

It has also renewed questions about why the province decided to champion a developer's plan over the town's.

"It bothers me greatly," said Oakville Councillor Janet Haslett-Theall. "Respect for the individuals that the public elected was not there."

Mutton is most recognizable by the moniker "Mr. X," a pseudonym assigned to him in 2023 by the integrity commissioner for his role in the Greenbelt land swap scandal, in which Premier Doug Ford's government was found to have given preferential treatment to certain developers with close ties to the Progressive Conservatives.

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The Oakville TOC, which has not yet broken ground, calls for 11 condo towers with a daycare and YMCA stuffed into an area roughly the size of the Rogers Centre. The TOC designation allows for higher density near the Oakville GO train station, and the province deployed minister's zoning orders (MZOs) to fast-track the project. The MZOs cannot be appealed.

The project has faced intense pushback from resident groups who allege it will benefit the developer, Distrikt Developments, at the public's expense.

Emil Toma, president of Distrikt, said the company made public zoning applications on the sites to the town "well in advance of the province advising its interest in selecting the area" for a TOC.

"While we have not been privy to all discussions between the Province and the Town, we do know the process was lengthy and thorough," Toma said.

What was said in the private text exchange

Excerpts from the September 2022 WhatsApp conversation between John Mutton and Ford government staffer Kirstin Jensen.

John Mutton
Do you and your husband like the Raptors

Kirstin Jensen
Yes big fan of the raptors but I actually don't have a partner

I have seasons, my wife likes the Bulls games. Pick a game and you can come with me or take a friend

That's awesome! Okay cool that sounds great.

Their conversation soon turned to business and golf.

Nice, good golfer?

Forgot to tell you, I am PM ing the Distrikt file in Oakville on the CIL [cash-in-lieu] and TOC [transit-oriented communities]. I would like to have a brief convo with you about that about direction may be quickest

I am! I golf a lot. Golfed since I was a kid.

Ok thanks for letting me know

Oh no you are good

Want to go to Goodwood?

It's not going to be a quick solution unfortunately it has to be a province wide solution to deal with parkland issues happening everywhere but we are working on very quickly at our level

What's this?

Yes I know. I am looking at province wide v. TOC status for site specific location

Best course in the country

So private

SOURCE: OFFICE OF THE INTEGRITY COMMISSIONER OF ONTARIO TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Infrastructure Ontario (IO), the agency that manages the province's TOC program, had no role in the Oakville GO TOC development prior to June 2023, a spokesperson told the Star.

"IO conducts TOC-related development discussions in accordance with conflict-of-interest policies and established oversight and approval processes," said Brian Buchan, adding that the agency held public engagement sessions and solicited public feedback in its planning process.

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A transcript of the WhatsApp conversation between Mutton and Kirstin Jensen, then deputy chief of staff to the minister of municipal affairs and housing, is contained in a 2025 report by the integrity commissioner into Mutton's unregistered lobbying on behalf of developers.

This version of the report was not publicly released. The Star obtained a copy from Mutton, who said he wanted "truth to be told" about the Greenbelt land swap scandal, in which he says he was made a fall guy while major players weren't held responsible. The report was first reported by The Trillium.

The integrity commissioner banned Mutton from lobbying the provincial government until April 2027 for his repeated and "serious" violations of lobbying rules.

What the Mutton-Jensen texts reveal

In the 2022 WhatsApp exchange, Mutton invited Jensen to make use of his season's tickets to the Raptors, telling her to "pick a game and you can come with me or take a friend." Mutton then pivoted to business. He explained that he was "PM ing" [project managing] for Distrikt in Oakville on matters of the parkland cash-in-lieu and transit-oriented communities, and wanted a "brief convo" about which direction "may be quickest."

Jensen told Mutton that the Distrikt matter was "not going to be a quick solution" and "has to be a province wide solution."

Mutton told the Star that his conversation with Jensen about the Oakville land took place at the time when he was looking to project manage Distrikt's land in Midtown Oakville with the goal to eventually work as a lobbyist for the project.

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Jensen, who is currently working at the Ontario Home Builders' Association, did not respond to the Star's questions.

Mutton also provided copies of emails to the Star that showed Distrikt approached another client of Mutton's who owned land in the same neighbourhood, in an attempt to band together to "preserve development land value" and "intensification potential."

Emails in August 2022 show Distrikt invited Mutton's client to join them in lobbying the province to "immediately give attention to designating Midtown GO Node as a TOC" by way of an MZO. Distrikt was also planning to meet with Metrolinx to discuss the plan and "align on objectives supporting intensification."

A Metrolinx spokesperson said the agency's engagement with Distrikt "has been limited to standard adjacent development and safety related reviews and engagement as part of Town-led Midtown Oakville meetings." Metrolinx took part in no subsequent meetings with Distrikt related to the TOC.

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Mutton told the Star that shortly after he chatted with Jensen about the TOC status, he parted ways with Distrikt over "competing objectives" with his other client. He was never paid or formally retained by Distrikt, he added.

Toma told the Star that Distrikt was introduced to Mutton by another landowner in the area, and his company never had any relationship with him. "Any insinuation that a relationship exists here is factually incorrect," he said.

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When the Ford government picked Distrikt's land for the TOC development, Toma and his partners were struggling to pay back a loan for a Toronto apartment development that eventually fell into receivership.

By that time, Distrikt had hired the former chief of staff of Mayor Rob Ford, the premier's late brother, to advocate for its Oakville development, according to the lobbyist registry. The firm had assembled more land in the area and co-owned one parcel with developer Christopher Bratty, a personal friend of Doug Ford who attended the premier's daughter's wedding.

Oakville Councillor Janet Haslett-Theall was among those who say they were blindsided by the Ontario government's decision to intervene in the highrise development.

Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star

Who first proposed the Oakville TOC?

According to Mutton, Rob Burton, who was Oakville mayor at the time, first suggested pitching the TOC status for Distrikt's land.

"He initiated it," Mutton told the Star. "He wanted to have the first giant towers around the transit system in Oakville. I think he thought that that was going to be a legacy for the future."

For years, Burton faced criticism for what residents allege were mixed signals about his position on the TOC.

Burton strenuously denied he ever initiated the TOC idea for Distrikt's land. He said that he voted against the TOC, and for Oakville's own plan, "every time it came before council."

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The former mayor called Mutton's characterization "bull- - - -" and questioned why the Star was spreading "the lies of a liar." He recalled meeting Mutton once but said he never spoke with him.

Mutton fired back: "The former mayor definitely has a credibility gap... Perhaps that's why the residents of Oakville sent him packing."

After five consecutive terms in office, Burton was unseated in October by Jeff Knoll, whose campaign included a promise to stand up to the province's midtown development.

Sheila Wang is an investigative reporter for the Star. Reach her via email: sheilawang@thestar.ca.

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