

?'Bold?' action by Province to build more homes receives strong reaction

By Mark PavilonsEditor

The Province is tackling the housing shortage with 'bold' action to build more homes. But opponents say it will impede local land use planning, and adversely affect our green spaces. The Ontario government, last week, introduced the More Homes Built Faster Act, which addresses the housing crisis by building 1.5 million homes over the next 10 years. The proposals in the More Homes Built Faster Act would, if passed, ensure that cities, towns and rural communities grow with a mix of ownership and rental housing types that meet the needs of all Ontarians, from single family homes to townhomes and mid-rise apartments. 'Our government is taking action to ensure that the Canadian dream of home ownership once again becomes affordable to hard-working families in King, Vaughan, and across our province' said Stephen Lecce, MPP for King-Vaughan. 'For young people who have lost hope in this economy, I want you to know that our government has not given up on the importance of affordable mixed housing options; including in the communities you were raised.' 'For too many Ontarians, including young people, newcomers, and seniors, finding the right home is still too challenging. This is not just a big-city crisis: the housing supply shortage affects all Ontarians, including rural, urban and suburban, north and south, young and old.' said Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. 'Our Housing Supply Action Plan is creating a strong foundation on which 1.5 million homes can be built over the next 10 years. Our government is following through on our commitment to Ontarians by cutting delays and red tape to get more homes built faster.' The plan puts in place actions to support the development of 'gentle density' housing like triplexes or garden suites that bridge the gap between single family homes and high-rise apartments. For example, it would remove exclusionary zoning, which allows for only one single detached home per lot. Instead, it would allow property owners to build three units without lengthy approvals and development charges. The plan, which contains around 50 actions, addresses the housing crisis by reducing government fees and fixing developmental approval delays that slow down housing construction and increase costs. Actions in the plan include: Creating a new attainable housing program to drive the development of housing. Sites across all regions of Ontario will be considered, including those in the north, central, east and southwest regions. Freezing and reducing government charges to spur new home construction and reduce the costs of housing. Building more density near transit, unlocking innovative approaches to design and construction, and removing red tape to get shovels in the ground faster. Increasing consumer protection measures for home buyers and consulting on ways to help more renters become homeowners. The government will also consult with the public, stakeholders and municipalities while engaging with Indigenous communities to review provincial housing and land use planning policies to find ways to remove more barriers to getting homes built. 'Ontario's housing supply crisis is a problem which has been decades in the making. It will take both short-term strategies and long-term commitment from all levels of government, the private sector and not-for-profits to drive change,' said Michael Parsa, Associate Minister of Housing. Ontario is expected to grow by more than two million people over the next 10 years, with approximately 70 per cent of this growth taking place in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region. Ontario's first housing plan, More Homes, More Choice was released in 2019. It was followed by More Homes for Everyone in spring 2022. Ontario is seeing strong progress resulting from these plans, with annual housing starts well above average for the past 30 years. A Housing Supply Action Plan Implementation Team, made up of municipal leaders and industry experts, will provide advice on market housing initiatives. This past spring, Ontario committed to provide comments on any applications for housing developments within 45 days. For more complex applications, the province is providing upfront guidance to help ensure that commitment is met. This includes Ontario's planned highway corridor management system, which will provide a seamless and integrated online platform for approvals and permits along provincial highways. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), finds some of the moves 'troubling.' 'Municipalities will welcome some of the proposed changes, and will be very concerned about others, such as changes to the Development Charges Act,' said AMO President Colin Best. 'We will work with the government on the ideas that have the potential to make housing more affordable, and we will oppose changes that undermine good economic and environmental policy.' Proposed changes include discounting and, in some cases, eliminating development charges and related developer obligations. When communities grow, infrastructure and public services must be scaled up to meet new demands. The new legislation would shift some of those costs from developers to current property taxpayers. The Ontario government has signaled it may offset some of the financial impacts for municipalities. However, shifting growth costs from developers to taxpayers represents a fundamental change from the principle that growth should pay for growth, and that current

homeowners and renters should not be required to subsidize new development. There are no mechanisms to ensure that developers will pass on cost savings to consumers in need of more affordable housing options. For years, municipalities have been sounding the alarm about housing affordability and homelessness. Municipal governments deliver many of the front-line services that respond to these complicated and difficult challenges. Municipalities are committed to doing what they can to make housing more affordable, and to support economic growth. Ontario had 100,000 housing starts in 2021, the highest in 30 years. However, some municipalities have seen a sharp decline in permit applications in 2022, due to factors such as higher interest rates and labour shortages. The move to gut environmental protection, according to one interest group. According to Claire Malcolmson, executive director of The Rescue Lake Simcoe Coalition, said the legislation is disguised as an affordable housing strategy, but is shortsighted when it comes to the environment. The Bill requires Conservation Authority to identify Conservation Authority lands that can be developed. At a time when everyone agrees we need more parks and greenspace, this is extremely short sighted, and I hope, unpopular, she said. It also proposes to allow development in currently protected wetlands, woodlands and wildlife habitat under a yet-to-defined 'offsetting' program. The rules on how to identify provincially significant wetlands will be weakened so fewer of them will qualify for any protections that remain. There was no compelling reason to significantly weaken wetland protection in order to increase the supply of affordable housing, unless one accepts the idea that it is ok to build in wetlands. It's not a good idea from structural, health, environmental, or financial perspectives. We need wetlands to help protect us from the flooding impacts of climate change, right now. The evidence is clear. While the decision to send northern York Region waste water south to Lake Ontario, as planned decades ago, is positive for Lake Simcoe, it is overshadowed by the blanket removals of Conservation Authority oversight in development in this bill. It will potentially eliminate all environmental review of all planning proposals by removing Conservation Authorities roles in development approval, planning, and environmental protection. It is also unclear whether, and who, would protect Natural Heritage Systems, wetlands, and species at risk, Malcolmson added. Bill 23 would, if passed, presumably allow more lands to be developed, she pointed out. But that's not what we need. We need more 'middle or gentle density' in serviced parts of our towns. What we don't need is more expensive infrastructure to be built before we have fully utilized the infrastructure that taxpayers and developers have already paid for.