

Giving developers free rein won't fix the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area housing crisis

Task force doubles down on a broken model, writes Mark Winfield.

By Mark Winfield
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In response to growing concerns over skyrocketing housing prices, a lack of affordable housing and intensive development pressures in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) the province established a Housing Task Force at the end of last year. The Task Force delivered its report earlier this month.

In many ways, the Task Force's proposals would effectively double down on the province's current approach to planning matters, a model which is already failing to produce communities that are affordable, livable or sustainable.

The current situation in the region is the result of many factors, including continuing employment growth particularly in the service and knowledge-based sectors, and an extended period of historically low interest rates.

Population growth has continued in part due to the federal government's historically high immigration targets and the concentration of new arrivals in relatively few places, including the GTA..

These factors have combined to fuel runaway housing prices reinforced by speculation and the activities domestic and offshore "investors," and produce a development boom that is doing little to actually provide affordable housing for families.

Premier Doug Ford's government, for its part, weakened planning rules specifically designed to contain sprawl, promote higher density and support affordable communities. In addition, the province has repeatedly overridden specific local community development plans in favour of development interests.

High profile cases of such behaviour have included the re-writing of two community development plans in Toronto: Midtown in Focus and CoreTO, to specifically remove limitations on building heights and other elements related to the liveability of the resulting communities. Elements of the Housing Task Force report would extend the province's 'no rules' approach to midtown and downtown Toronto to other transit hubs and stations across the region.

The results in the Yonge-Eglinton area should serve as a cautionary tale around the consequences of such a model. In response to the province's intervention, the area has experienced massive high-rise residential development, completely outstripping the capacity virtually all forms of infrastructure to support. Substantial amounts of affordable rental housing have been lost in the process, and the new condominiums that are being constructed tend to be of little use to growing families.

If nothing else, the experience makes it clear that giving the development industry whatever it asks for — the essence of the many of the Task Force's recommendations — and the Ford government's overall approach to planning matters — will fail to produce communities that are affordable and liveable.

The province, instead, needs to return to a consistent and constructive role in the planning process.

In the short term, aggressive steps include additional tax measures and, potentially, a ban on non-resident buyers of homes and condominiums.

More broadly, the province needs to give cities back the power to make their own decisions about the form, shape and pace of developments through a transparent, rules- and evidence-based planning process.

Policy reform needs to emphasize the need for compact, affordable and complete communities. It also needs to require the establishment of the necessary infrastructures (transportation, sewer and water, educational, cultural and community) before development proceeds.

The failure of the private sector to build affordable rental housing in response to the loosening of rent controls means that controls need to be strengthened, and support provided for non-profit and cooperative housing development.

And finally, there needs to be a wider discussion about the pace of growth and development in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton region, and its desirability from the viewpoint of the region's residents. So far, the province has offered no vision for the region's future, other than perpetually accelerating growth outwards and upwards. Given the apparent problems with that path, a better vision is needed.

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