

Navigating the Housing Crisis: Tuning the Provincial Government's Plan

by Ethan Berger

Stretching between Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and Lake Simcoe, the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is home to 9.2 million people and is the most densely populated and industrialized area of Canada. It is also currently experiencing the greatest housing shortage in Canada, with a deficit of over 80,000 housing units across the Greater Toronto and Greater Hamilton Areas alone. Further, this shortage is likely to only worsen, as the population of the GGH is projected to reach 14.8 million people by 2051, with a potential shortage of over 200,000 units. To address this, the province has developed several growth plans over the years to cope with the crisis. Although the province's efforts are a step in the right direction, the present crisis indicates that stronger action must be taken. To address this crisis, the province should ensure there is enough shovel-ready land available, separate housing by type in the provincial housing targets, encourage mid-level zoning across the GGH, and repurpose unutilized land.

Current Efforts

The most recent effort is the Ford Government's Building Faster Fund, which is a three-year, \$1.2 billion program to provide rewards to regions for accomplishing provincial housing targets. According to the Office of the Premier (2023), "the Building Faster Fund will provide \$400 million in funding for three years to municipalities that meet provincial housing targets to reach the overall goal of building 1.5 million new homes by 2031." The Government has also implemented the Housing Supply Action Plan to manage growth by making it easier and faster to build housing near transit stations to prevent sprawl and protect agricultural lands. This plan also proposes changes to relieve the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal which is severely backlogged with over 100,000 cases tied up in Toronto alone. The backlog will be relieved through hiring more adjudicators and making sure the tribunal has the powers and resources to make proper

decisions. In addition, the Housing Supply Action Plan also plans to simplify the land use planning system and proposes changing provincial policy to encourage the development of more varied types of housing, and reducing the cost of building second units to increase the number of rentals available.

Possible Solutions

Hopefully the government's implemented plans will soon achieve their goal of making housing more affordable and easier to access for all Ontarians, but as it currently stands these proposals aren't progressing as they should. For the Ford Government's plan of 1.5 million new homes by 2031 to be accomplished, it should be 20% done, but instead, it's sitting at just 11.7%. Further, since the GGH receives 30% of Canada's yearly immigrants and houses Canada's fastest-growing population, the housing crisis isn't going to resolve itself anytime soon. This brings us to the recommendations this essay proposes, starting with increasing housing density.

a. Shovel-Ready Land

The first reason why Ford's plan isn't being completed on time is because of the shortage of shovel-ready land. According to the Provincial Policy Statement of 2020, municipalities must maintain a minimum of a three-year supply of shovel-ready land at all times. However, a recent study conducted by the Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Urban Research and Land Development shows that there is a great shortage of approved sites for any housing directly connected to the ground (ground-related housing). The current supply consists of only 1.9 years' worth of land available, which equals a deficit of 4,817 net hectares. This shortage means that fewer single-detached and semi-detached houses and townhouses can be built.

This land deficit can be overcome by either increasing the amount of shovel-ready land available, or building more non-ground related housing such as stacked townhomes, garden apartments, and quadraplexes. However, one obstacle in the way is the current zoning laws and legislation in the GGH which don't allow alternative housing options to be built as readily as single-family homes. This is due to the development of the GGH whose growth originally occurred in a sparse and scattered urban sprawl of low-density development, which caused the majority of the neighbourhoods to consist of single-family homes. Thus, to address the housing shortage, I would better promote and prioritize the development of non-ground related housing and higher-density housing options. These are able to overcome the land shortage, in addition to better catering to the diverse housing needs of the GGH's citizens, and creating more affordable housing. The next recommendation this essay proposes is promoting mid-level housing.

b. Disaggregating housing types

In the Ford Government's Building Faster Fund, one of the most notable shortcomings is that the government made no distinction between different kinds of housing. By doing this it goes against the government's own plan, "to encourage the development of more and different types of housing" (Office of the Premier, 2023) since municipalities will be more likely to build the more traditional neighbourhoods composed of either just single-family homes or just high-rise developments without any mid-level housing options and still receive the monetary rewards for achieving the province's housing targets. Not providing intermediary dwellings can cause homeowners to buy beyond their means, for example, a young family who has outgrown their condo but can't yet afford a single-family home. Due to a lack of mid-level housing, they may be

forced to buy a house that they can't afford and be stretched beyond their means, or be pushed to rent due of a lack of housing options which would overwhelm the rental market which is already in short supply.

Instead, I suggest that the government differentiates between housing types in its targets to encourage the building of a wider range of housing. This could be done through setting a requirement for higher density and more mid-level housing, and creating or modifying neighbourhoods to contain a wider variety of housing types instead of just homogenous neighbourhoods to fulfill the provincial housing targets. Not encouraging a wider range of housing options is damaging to creating more affordable housing and relieving the housing shortage by not allowing sufficient options for homebuyers, which can overrun the rental market. Moreover, besides altering the province's housing targets to promote mid-level housing, my next point is an additional way to encourage construction of multi-family homes.

c. Altering zoning laws

Similarly to disaggregating housing types, an additional method for facilitating the construction of mid-level units and diverse neighbourhoods which I recommend, is that the government alter zoning laws to further encourage and facilitate municipalities' construction. There is a clear demand for mid-level housing but a serious shortage of it, yet contractors and builders can't fully cater to this demand due to the complicated, lengthy, and expensive process to change zoning laws and build multi-plex and mid-level housing. Again, a lack of choice for home buyers causes many to rent which puts pressure on the rental market and causes a further supply shortage of desired homes.

These issues can be rectified by encouraging and increasing the amount of diverse and mid-level housing or even eliminating single-family zoning altogether which would allow for quicker and more efficient building of mid-level homes to increase its supply. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has even considered mandating four-unit developments as a tool to boost housing by adding it to housing supply laws; however, it never made the final draft. Premier Ford made it very clear this week his disapproval of this plan saying, “[Fourplexes] are off the table for us” (Ford, 2023) despite its recommendations from the Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force and the federal government. I believe not implementing this mandate would be foolish because higher-density homes are badly needed to increase the supply of housing in the GGH, and multi-family homes such as quadraplexes would fill the “missing middle” (Sibley, 2023) of the current housing supply. Finally, I suggest building high density housing on unused real estate and around transit stations to the whole GGH.

d. Repurposing existing real estate

When looking at the future of the GGH, the population will continue to rise tremendously, which means that more homes will be needed to house all its citizens. Thus, in order to protect the natural and agricultural lands situated in this region, we will have to increase the density of already-existing housing along with using previously developed unoccupied land to its greatest capacity. An example of this would be repurposing unused offices, parking lots, or commercial buildings for housing, which Toronto has already begun by converting parking lots and vacant offices into affordable housing. This is a great way to reutilize land to create more housing; however, a hurdle in repurposing old offices is that current zoning laws require any office space removed from downtown Toronto to be replaced. Despite this, city counsellors are aiming to

change the zoning laws to make it easier to convert offices into homes. Mississauga and Toronto have also already made strides in this direction by altering the zoning laws to allow quadraplexes to be built anywhere in the city, as well as four-story homes near transit stations by default. This is not only a great idea because simplifying and making the building processes for multiplexes such as quadraplexes simpler and more straightforward allows more housing options to become available, but also because the government is already spending billions of dollars on public transit, and increasing density around transit stations makes them more likely to be used. I believe it would also be very beneficial to implement these projects across the entire GGH instead of just in Toronto and Mississauga to create more affordable housing and help alleviate the housing supply shortage through higher-density homes.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, even with the province's ambitious housing building goals and current rate of construction, by 2030 the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation predicts that Ontario will still be 1.48 million homes short of its minimum required supply. This means that despite the government's lofty housing goals being potentially achieved by 2031, currently, these efforts won't be enough to house the rapidly increasing population. The housing crisis is a complex issue, and even if my solutions were immediately implemented, there is no guarantee they would solve the present crisis within five years, it's more likely that these solutions would only allow the housing shortage to be on track to being resolved in five years. This is due to the fact that the current shortage is the culmination of many factors including over 20 years' worth of housing supply not keeping up with the demands; therefore, even with the most aggressive solutions and plans to fix the housing supply shortage, I believe the effects of everything done

now will only begin to be realized in the long run, closer to seven to ten years rather than in a shorter time frame.

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