

New bill means more expensive homes for everyone

Ontario introduced the More Homes for Everyone Act and somehow managed to make everyone more angry. The bill has four clear failures.

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When it comes to affordable home ownership, the status quo is broken. More of the same won't make it better — and a lot more of the same will make it worse.

Ontario has introduced a bill called the More Homes for Everyone Act. It has somehow managed to make everyone *more* angry, having proposed a set of reforms unlikely to produce more affordable housing.

Premier Doug Ford's housing bill is too clever by half, precisely because at best it's a half-step in the wrong direction. There are four clear failures: housing standards are weakened; the planning process might be a little faster, but certainly isn't smarter; and there is no action on the missing middle. As for affordability, the government at least here has been clear — they are not interested.

On housing standards the province announced it is surrendering its authority over the building code, adopting the National Building Code of Canada instead. Developers complain they could build cheaper housing if durability and safety standards were watered down. The trouble is that cheap housing is not affordable in the long run; operating and repair costs mount quickly.

Weakening environmental performance also carries a cost. The national code is slower and less ambitious than the Ontario version, having been designed to be a floor for standards, not a ceiling.

The changes to the municipal approval process have been described as more suited to delivering pizza — 30 days or it's free. If a city can't approve a complex subdivision or project under tight new provincial deadlines, the city loses permit fees. These fees are set on a cost-recovery basis; they literally

pay for the extra planning staff needed to process applications quickly. Every time a city falls short, it loses the funds that pay for more planners. Queen's Park is hardwiring the system to fail.

When coupled with cuts to development charges, cities will now have fewer resources to make intensification livable, let alone workable. Development charges also pay for parks and transit. The demand for family housing is driving prices up fast. Trying to build bigger units on less land means new homes won't have backyards for kids and pets, home offices are out and parking spots are disappearing. The money to locate replacement services in the community has been cut from budgets and dumped in a bin.

These charges also pay for emergency work. When capital budgets no longer exist to fix a broken water main, funds will flow from operating into maintenance and the dollars needed to hire more planners to avoid slow processing times will get washed away.

The biggest driver of cost in housing is the price of land. Making it easier and cheaper to rezone and intensify land will also intensify costs, as developers speculate on property they can pick up cheaply and then endlessly rezone at a profit. As bad as sprawl is, hyper-intensification is also not affordable or sustainable, and without new neighbourhood services, liveability is reduced. The bill also does nothing to address the impact of labour shortages and construction costs, which are also driving unaffordability.

The bill expands and increases taxes on offshore ownership from 15 to 20 per cent. It will now apply to all of Ontario beyond Toronto, but there is nothing to stop that 20 per cent from being passed on to new tenants who rent homes from absent foreign owners. All that has changed is the formula for speculation — not its impact.

As for the missing middle? Silence. The missing middle — clustered or multi-family residences like row houses that are increasingly scarce — is supposed to address choice and cost. This bill does not do either. In fact, affordability was ruled out of the plan at the start. How is it possible to address the affordability crisis if you're not going to address affordability?

The population of people looking for answers are understandably furious. The province's approach is not constructive. The new planning framework

needs to focus on liveability, affordability and sustainability. Instead, we got more of nothing much for anybody.