

# Tough words, weaker action from Ontario on housing

'Instead of a strong jolt to the Ontario housing market, the Ford government has come up with decidedly weak tea.'

By [Star Editorial Board](#)

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When it comes to housing and the runaway prices that are shutting an entire generation out of home ownership, the Ford government is pretty good at diagnosing the problem, not so good at treating it.

Just last month, a government task force set out the key issues that are keeping the supply of new homes from meeting the demand, especially in the Greater Toronto Area.

It identified one key problem — the fact that cities typically put most of their land off-limits for anything but single-family homes.

It said zoning regulations should be changed to allow the so-called “missing middle” of the housing market — such as duplexes and small apartment buildings — to be built in those areas. And it said Ontario should double the number of new homes, with a target of 1.5 million over the next decade.

Given the many entrenched interests involved, this was tough language and strong recommendations.

But just six weeks later, the government has produced a housing policy that contains none of the above. Instead of a strong jolt to the housing market, it's come up with decidedly weak tea.

The policy, introduced on Wednesday by Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark, does include a raft of welcome measures designed to speed up construction of new homes. Among them: municipalities will have to meet stricter deadlines for approving projects and site plans, and more

power will be given to staff rather than city councillors tempted to meddle with the details of developments.

This is all to the good. To the extent that the changes make it quicker and therefore cheaper to build new homes, they are likely to increase supply and therefore mitigate the precipitous rise in prices.

There is no mention, however, of the task force's goal of building 1.5 million new homes, or indeed of any other target. The government does note that Ontario built just over 100,000 housing units last year, the most in 30 years, but that still lags demand.

And the task force's key recommendation, making municipalities scrap exclusionary zoning rules that freeze many neighbourhoods in an outdated, single-family-only model? It's nowhere to be found.

Clark was clear on why: municipalities reject that idea. Their councils much prefer the status quo, by which they can pander to homeowners, a.k.a. municipal voters, by blocking new development in the name of preserving "neighbourhood character." The result is that new, denser housing can't be built in most areas. No wonder supply is lagging.

The minister said he can't, or won't, go ahead without support from towns and cities, and "they're just not there yet."

It's understandable that Clark would take this route. What government would want to force a fight with municipal councils across the province with an election just weeks away?

But remember, this is the same government that took a wrecking bar to Toronto council, slashing it in half during an election campaign, when that suited its purposes. What a difference three and a half years make.

The government did include one bright shiny object to distract us from all this in the form of an increase in the tax on foreign homebuyers, from 15 to 20 per cent, and broadened it to include the whole province.

This allows ministers to bash "foreign speculators," always a crowd-pleasing line. But the fact remains that the impact of overseas buyers is quite marginal in the face of double-digit annual increases in house prices.

The real problems are a lot tougher; they will involve changing the way we plan our cities, not just denouncing foreign villains. In that, the government has come up short.