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GREATER TORONTO & HAMILTON AREA

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RYERSON REPORT CALLS FOR SEISMIC PLANNING REFORM TO TACKLE GTHA HOUSING CRISIS

GETTING OUR HOUSING IN ORDER

Marc Mitanis

With the GTHA housing crisis showing no signs of abating, a report prepared by Ryerson University's Centre for Urban Research and Land Development makes the case for coordinated regional action to reform the land use planning and development approvals systems in order to increase serviced and developable lands and to expedite development applications for all types of housing.

[Changing Direction: A Fresh Approach for Assessing Affordable Housing Options in the GTA](#) was prepared by Ryerson University senior research fellow **Frank Clayton** and research assistant **Daniel Bailey**. The report contends that government initiatives to address housing affordability in the Greater Toronto Area fail to appreciate the insufficient supply of the housing types demanded by the marketplace, and the inability of many low-income households to secure

suitable and adequate housing at a cost they can afford. Reforming land use and zoning regulations, expediting planning applications, and providing direct financial support to low-income renter households are some of the measures recommended by the report to tackle the housing crisis.

The report argues that a "seismic" reform to land use regulation across the region is needed to deliver enough approved and serviced sites for a range of housing types. Current

municipal approvals processes and zoning regimes lack the flexibility to "expeditiously produce the quantity and density of shovel-ready serviced sites needed to accommodate growing housing demand and allow for choice and competition in built-up and greenfield areas." Greenfield areas refer to undeveloped lands within settlement areas that have been designated for future development.

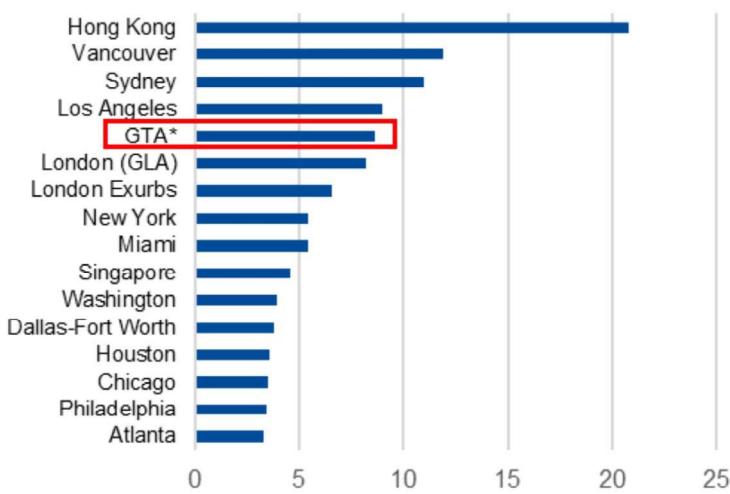
Clayton said the province needs to do a better job of

enforcing its Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), particularly policy 1.4.1, which states that planning authorities must maintain land with servicing capacity sufficient to provide at least a three-year supply of residential units.

"Municipalities have totally ignored that and the province—as far as I know—isn't pushing it," Clayton told NRU.

Recent provincial amendments to the *Planning*

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Graph showing the median house-to-household-income ratio in select global urban regions in 2019. The housing affordability measure demonstrates that the GTA is one of the most expensive regions in the world for housing, and its home-price-to-household-income ratio has been rising over the past 15 years. A report prepared by Ryerson University's Centre for Urban Research and Land Development says housing affordability can be improved if residential planning applications are expedited and the inventory of available serviced sites for residential development is increased.

SOURCE: RYERSON UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR URBAN RESEARCH AND LAND DEVELOPMENT

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Act in 2019 through Bill 108—More Homes, More Choice Act, 2019 which required municipalities to authorize the use of second units on ground-related properties, are being accompanied by municipal action to expand housing options in existing low-density neighbourhoods [See ‘Diversifying Housing Options’ May 5, 2021 NRU GTHA edition]. Clayton said that while these initiatives could have a meaningful impact on housing affordability, they alone aren’t enough to fundamentally improve affordability.

“I call what municipalities are doing here ‘tinkering,’” Clayton told NRU. “They are getting their feet wet with modest initiatives when bold, large-scale action is required.”

Former City of Toronto chief planner **Paul Bedford** said that when it comes to establishing planning and housing policy, “the province should help set the table, but the municipalities need to be left to cook the dinner.”

Bedford warns that “sound planning principles” must not be abandoned in the push to build the type of housing demanded by the market, which includes ground-related

development like single- and semi-detached dwellings. He wonders how much underutilized and serviced land already exists in the region—singling out dated shopping malls as potential mixed-use and residential properties that could be readily redeveloped to boost housing supply.

“I bet you it’s thousands of acres of land, and it’s so important to do that work and to have that number,” Bedford told NRU. “You have to build the single-family housing where the services are either available or extendable without creating massive sprawl.”

The Ryerson report says the current provincial government

has taken some action to increase the supply of approved and serviced sites ready for development across the region. A 2020 amendment to the PPS requires the housing mix in municipalities to meet projected market-based demand by unit type. Other tools, like Minister’s Zoning Orders (MZO), have the potential to significantly expedite housing developments.

Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) president **Richard Lyall** said that the province’s increasing deployment of MZO is reflective of a systemic problem in the planning approvals process.

“The system is horribly inefficient; it desperately needs modernizing and digitizing,” Lyall told NRU. “The entire development and building approvals process should be online, and we are lightyears away from that.”

Lyall pointed to the “plethora of government agencies and ministries that all

have their finger in the pie,” as a factor in bogging down the approvals process. Antiquated zoning rules that fail to reflect appropriate densities and an inefficient site plan approvals system further complicates the process, Lyall said.

“The government does not have the wherewithal or the ability to play in the development sandbox,” Lyall told NRU. “What they can do is increase the supply of land, streamline the approvals process, provide income subsidies to enable people to find housing, and that can all be managed efficiently through the tax system.”

To date, efforts to improve the land use planning regulatory environment and get land to market sooner have been inadequate given the magnitude of the overall affordability problem, says the report. Lyall said Canada is not producing nearly enough housing to meet its current

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Photo showing a high-rise condominium building at 3650 Kaneff Crescent in Mississauga. A report prepared by Ryerson University’s Centre for Urban Research and Land Development says the housing crisis should be addressed by a coordinated regional approach to increase and expedite planning applications for all housing types.

SOURCE: MARC MITANIS

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and forecasted demographic requirements.

"We're expecting another 400,000 people a year to come to Canada over the next three years," Lyall told *NRU*. "We don't have the people to build housing for them, and we don't have the housing for them."

According to 2019 data from the 16th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey, the GTHA was the fifth most expensive region for housing compared to other global regions of similar or larger size.

"Our housing costs relative to incomes, and relative to other developed countries, have gone up more than probably anywhere else except Hong Kong," Lyall told *NRU*. "We've got this surge that's being fueled by super-low interest rates, which has jacked up the cost of housing. And we have serious supply chain issues."

Carleton University
Centre for Urban Research and Education (CURE) senior research fellow **Steve Pomeroy** says other municipalities like **Ottawa** are facing similar affordability and housing supply issues.

"Can we streamline and

expedite the planning and approvals process, and can we make sure that we have enough capacity and enough contractors to absorb the increased housing starts?" asked Pomeroy. "There's a whole bunch of things you could do, but no one of them by itself is going to actually fix the problem."

Bedford echoed Pomeroy's sentiment. "It's not good enough to just do one or two or three of these different things that the report talks about—I think that you've got to be bold," Bedford told *NRU*. "What's needed is what I call an alphabet of policies and strategies that are integrated, that set the table for all municipalities, and the province can play that role."

Improving overall housing affordability will require the province and municipalities to work in concert at the regional level to expand and accelerate the supply of serviced sites. Lyall said a regional approach to addressing the housing crisis is absolutely necessary.

"We're underproducing housing in the GTA by about 12,000 units a year," Lyall told *NRU*. "We do have a housing crisis, and it's very real. And

a big part of it is fixable. The one thing you're not going to fix is the challenges associated with people not having the income for housing. The more affordable you make housing by making the system more efficient, the bigger the market you can reach because the

down payments are not going to have to be as high, and the carrying costs aren't going to be as high." 

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No telephone inquiries please