

Ontario to make it easier to build secondary suites, rental housing

Ontario is proposing to make it easier to build secondary suites and rental housing as part of efforts to increase supply, but parallel changes to a land tribunal are being decried by critics as favouring developers over communities.

Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark introduced legislation Thursday that includes a host of changes aimed at improving speed and costs in creating housing, as well as promoting a mix of housing types.

"We will address the 'missing middle' shortage by making it easier to build different types of housing – from single, detached homes, to townhouses, to mid-rise rental apartments, second units and family-size condos," he said.

"We need to encourage builders to build the types of housing people actually need."

The government is proposing to eliminate a charge for creating a second suite in new homes and allow homeowners to create units above garages or in laneways.

Charges for building rental and not-for-profit housing would be deferred, allowing the developer to pay in instalments over five years once the building is occupied. The municipality would be able to charge interest.

The Ontario Home Builders' Association said the changes announced Thursday would remove barriers to providing more housing.

"The province's Housing Supply Action Plan lays the groundwork for more homes to be built, which leads to more choice and affordability," CEO Joe Vaccaro said in a statement.

NDP housing critic Suze Morrison said, however, that the bill is "rolling out the red carpet" for developers instead of protecting tenants or helping prospective buyers.

"Since taking rent control away from more Ontarians last year, (Premier) Doug Ford has done nothing to make homes more affordable – and this bill doesn't do that, either," she said in a statement.

The government has exempted new housing units from rent controls as a way to spur construction.

The Local Planning and Appeal Tribunal, which replaced the Ontario Municipal Board, would also be given more powers to manage and decide cases in order to reduce delays.

The former Liberal government overhauled the independent tribunal that adjudicates planning and development disputes, giving it less power to overturn local government decisions.

Under the Progressive Conservative government's proposed changes, the LPAT would be able to hear appeals with fresh evidence for major planning decisions and make any decision that a municipality could have made.

Clark said the changes will reduce delays, along with adding more adjudicators. A backlog of cases has tied up about 100,000 units in Toronto alone, he said.

Green party Leader Mike Schreiner said Clark's proposed changes revive much-maligned OMB rules that "allowed deep-pocketed developers to run roughshod over communities."

"If there was any doubt that Ford was in the pocket of big developers, this removes all doubt," he said in a statement.

"It will once again force millions of dollars of legal costs upon municipalities, while transferring power from elected officials to a politically appointed board. Making matters worse, Ford is giving developers the right to appeal decisions, while depriving citizens from doing the same."

As well, the government said it will remove the requirement for new homes to include the infrastructure for electric vehicle charging stations, in order to reduce costs.

The legislation also contains changes to the Cannabis Control Act to close what the government called a loophole that currently prohibits police from shutting down illegal dispensaries if the premises are being used as a residence. Officials said government has heard of cases in which people put bunk beds in a dispensary to make it look like a residential unit.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario told its members it was still sifting through the large piece of legislation, but broadly supported its goals.

President Jamie McGarvey nonetheless sounded a note of caution.

"I know our members are trying to cope with the level and pace of change that a new government brings," McGarvey wrote. "When changes are made on this scale, there will be some that we like and others that will be major challenges, such as public health."

Toronto Mayor John Tory, whose relationship with the province has been strained lately because of provincial public health funding cuts, said he hopes Ontario "will demonstrate a willingness to actually work with cities" to increase rental housing supply.

Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark making a housing announcement on May 5, 2019. CITYNEWS/George Joseph