

Building Futures



The development approval process takes longer than it should, says Leona Savoie, of Hullmark Developments. "It's an uphill battle to educate the public on the growth plan," she says. When the province introduced its growth plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe back in 2006, it triggered a fundamental shift in how development is planned for in urban centres, particularly the GTA.

Building great cities

Stakeholders involved in development process urged to work together to avoid delays, friction

Walking around the city of Toronto today, one can't help but notice how much our streets have changed in the past 10 years. A lot of this change can be attributed to a shift in where people are choosing to live.

The building and development industry has turned the city into the high-rise capital of North America, but according to industry experts, the intensification of urban Toronto was not without its challenges.

Gary Switzer, chair of the Toronto chapter at the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD), says he often gets frustrated with the development approval process in Toronto.

"It appears at times that no one's looking at the bigger picture," says Switzer, who is also president of MOD Developments. One of the projects currently on the company's roster is Massey Tower, a striking 60-storey condo planned for the east side of Yonge Street, just north of Queen Street.

Despite adding density along a transit corridor — in keeping with

builders having shifted from low-rise development to high-rise condo construction.

The problem is, Switzer notes, municipalities like Toronto continue to operate with outdated zoning bylaws that don't align with the goals of the province's growth plan. While Ontario municipalities must update their official plans every five years, there's no such requirement when it comes to zoning bylaws (North York's zoning bylaws, for example, date back to 1952).

This disconnect can lead to costly delays with development applications, which must go through a rezoning process — a situation where developers are often pitted against community members outraged over the introduction of tall, dense developments into their neighbourhoods but are unaware of their conformity with growth plan objectives. In turn, local councillors may reject otherwise sound development proposals to appease constituents.

At this point, things typically proceed to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), the independent tri-

bunal that adjudicates municipal development planning. The OMB evaluates and decides on projects based on sound planning principles, ensuring new development is carried out in compliance with the province's growth plan — the "bigger picture" Switzer talks about.

Despite calls by councillors for the abolishment of the OMB, Switzer reckons they might actually prefer to have the board there. "They can willy-nilly reject development proposals — turning down the advice of their own planning department — because on planning merits the project will ultimately get approved (at the OMB), and they can say to their constituents, 'I voted against it, but that awful OMB keeps overturning our local decisions.'"

Ultimately the development approval process takes far longer than it should, delaying project deliveries and adding unnecessary expenses for new-home purchasers who are already challenged to find homes that they can afford to purchase.

Leona Savoie, VP of development with Hullmark Developments, has seen the disconnect in parts of To-



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ronto such as The Beach and Queen Street East, as well as areas along the future Eglinton Crosstown LRT corridor where proposals for mid-rise projects along transit lines — the growth plan ideal — face fierce local opposition. "It's an uphill battle to educate the public on the growth plan, and what it means to plan the appropriate urban form of housing to make efficient use of evolving infrastructure," she says.

Savoie thinks politicians could do more to help constituents understand the new realities of urban development instead of leaving builders to fend for themselves. "Oftentimes it's only the developer and their consultant team educating the public, fighting for a propos-

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Not all municipalities lag on having their zoning in conformity with the province's growth plan, Savoie notes. Some places, like Mississauga, Pickering and Aurora, have pre-

zoned certain areas for intensification. "Their official plans and zoning bylaws are up-to-date, and there are areas where you know you can intensify, where you want the growth to occur."

But in Toronto, outdated zoning leads to unpredictability, which can discourage developers from pursuing projects that could make great additions to transit-oriented neighbourhoods. "It gets quite scary when you're in a world where you don't know where the cards may fall," says Savoie. "From a development and risk standpoint, it's quite unnerving."

One potential solution to the problem is the development permit system (DPS), a land use planning tool that combines zoning, site plan

while building a level of development to ensure the success of transit. It can also secure streetscape improvements, such as landscaping, street furniture and bicycle parking, as well allow the public to present visions for the community and how it might be developed most appropriately.

"We're cautiously interested in looking at how that would work," says Switzer. "Vancouver has been using it for years and at least it offers predictability."

As a critical municipal election looms, BILD is urging all stakeholders involved in the development process — politicians and senior civil servants at both the municipal and provincial level, the building industry, new-home buyers and the public — to work together, in alignment toward reaching a common goal: building great cities.

The first step is to ensure that municipalities update their zoning bylaws to reflect the objectives of the province's growth plan, explains BILD president and CEO Bryan Tuckey.

"The GTA has changed dramatically in the last few decades," he says. "We're currently at a crossroads. With as many as 100,000 people coming each year, it's imperative we align our visions and work collaboratively to take this great region to the next level."

"There's no time for small plans — it's time for big ideas."

This is the first in a 4-part series sponsored by BILD. Look for the next one on Saturday, October 11.

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WORKING TOGETHER TOWARD A GREATER GTA

Building healthy, complete communities is a team effort. That's why BILD works closely with our partners in government to establish fair and effective policies that affect the land development, home building and professional renovation industry in the GTA. We are always at the table on behalf of the industry and new home buyers. So why is advocating on your behalf so vital to us?



BECAUSE THE GTA IS OUR HOME TOO

