

Province overrules Toronto on plans for midtown, downtown to allow taller, denser towers



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Excerpts from article by Jennifer Pagliaro:

City leaders say the province is creating a “Wild West” for developers in Toronto while showing “outright contempt” for residents as Premier Doug Ford’s government significantly changed plans governing development in midtown and the downtown core.

The news that the province had substantially amended both the city’s [“Midtown in Focus”](#) and [“TOcore”](#) plans without consultation came as a blow to members of council, city planners and residents who spent years working on those plans which will shape those communities for decades to come.

The changes — which were dumped on the city late Wednesday afternoon with little explanation and which city planners hadn’t yet had time to assess — appear to strip both plans of strongly-worded language setting out the principle that development should not outpace available infrastructure like community centres, parks and sewer capacity while at the same time allowing vastly taller and denser development than previously considered or consulted on.

In the case of midtown — which includes the Yonge-Eglinton area, one of the most densely populated places in the country — the maximum building heights now anticipated under the provincial decision are in some areas more than double what was set out by the city.

“These changes reflect our government’s strong commitment to increase the supply and mix of homes, particularly near transit,” read a letter from Minister Steve Clark to Mayor John Tory, saying the plans for midtown and downtown “provide an opportunity to create much needed housing.”

The changes made by the province are final and not subject to appeal.

The city’s chief planner Gregg Lintern said Wednesday they were still reviewing the changes and would provide comment once that review was complete.

“The city remains committed to creating and sustaining liveable and complete communities; the principle that growth pays for growth and that infrastructure development and population growth must progress in sync; and the knowledge that good planning practices lead to good planning outcomes,” he said in an emailed statement.

On Wednesday, city councillors worried about what additional height and density would mean for neighbourhoods already stressed for services and accused the premier and his government of ripping up carefully-crafted plans.

Councillor Josh Matlow (Ward 12 Toronto—St. Paul’s), who represents the fastest-growing part of the Yonge-Eglinton area, said the plans were about far more than building heights.

“Our neighbourhoods shouldn’t just be a bunch of luxury buildings to make developers rich. They should be communities where people have a great quality of life,” Matlow said. “The city’s plans for midtown and downtown recognize that there will be growth but plan that growth to support the quality of life of those communities with affordable child care and schools and parks, recreation and necessary infrastructure.”

The changes to these plans, as well as sweeping reforms to planning rules under provincial legislation expected to pass this week, will “hurt generations of communities here in Toronto,” Matlow said. What that looks like, he predicted, is more people left on crowded transit platforms, more difficulty finding affordable child care and maybe even not enough water coming out of taps.

While the city’s midtown plan said “development will not be permitted to outpace the provision of infrastructure, and will not proceed until such a time as the necessary infrastructure to support development is provided,” the province’s version strips out that language, instead saying “planning for infrastructure will occur in an integrated manner” which the city will be expected to provide.

Both the core and midtown have undergone unprecedented development in the past decade.

City staff reported in May 2018 that Yonge-Eglinton centre, which is made up of the intersection and some areas immediately surrounding it, is the most densely populated urban growth centre in the entire Greater Golden Horseshoe. The population of 19,000 people and 18,000 employees is set to double, staff reported, based on already approved and proposed developments.

The current density amounts to 600 people and jobs per hectare, city staff say, making it one of the densest places in Canada. The Yonge-Eglinton centre exceeded the province's density target of 400 people and jobs per hectare by 2031 set out in the province's growth plan in 1991 — well before that plan came into force in 2006.

The downtown urban growth area is expected to meet its provincial growth target 10 years ahead of schedule as it too experiences a squeeze on available services like transit.

The TTC's Line 1 subway, the main transit route serving Toronto's midtown and downtown neighbourhoods, is already the busiest rapid transit line in the country, carrying more than 730,000 people every weekday. It has a capacity of about 28,000 passengers per hour, but regularly exceeds that with more than 31,000 travelling at the busiest times. Earlier this year, the TTC reported that ridership demand is forecast to increase by about 30 per cent over the next decade, fuelled by projected population and employment growth as well as new transit projects that will funnel more passengers onto the line.