

Province's planning changes leave future of Toronto community building up in the air



By [Jennifer Pagliaro](#) City Hall Bureau
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The province has left the city in limbo over its ability to build livable communities in two of Toronto's fastest-growing areas, city officials say, after unprecedented changes to the development process and significant modifications to master plans for downtown and midtown.

As the legislature broke for the summer, city planners say they still lacked crucial information on the "More Homes, More Choice Act," which became law this week.

At the same time, the government finalized hundreds of changes to plans governing growth for the core and Yonge-Eglinton areas, allowing taller and denser towers than the city's planning experts had previously recommended.

Those decisions also stripped several strong links between new development and necessary infrastructure that city planners wrote into those plans, which were aimed at having community services like parks and child-care centres grow at the same pace as the number of new residents.

The province's changes leave a new "community benefits charge" as the only way for the city to get developers to pay for the scale of growth, but details about how that charge would work have yet to be released. They will largely be set out through provincial regulations.

The city's chief planner Gregg Lintern says he hopes to be sitting down with the province soon to discuss that piece of the puzzle, saying it's crucial for the city to strike a balance to ensure livability.

"If those tools are not calibrated accurately or appropriately, and set at a level that supports the growth that the province says we should have in these two areas, then that math equation doesn't work," he told the Star in an interview. "We cannot grow to the densities that these plans are suggesting without those tools being properly designed."

After rushing the act through the legislature over the past month, Municipal Affairs Minister Steve Clark promised to consult with the city on the regulations, and said it should not result in the city having to make up any cost shortfalls.

“That’s why it’s vitally important that we remain talking to the province about the tools and the community benefits charge, so that it’s revenue neutral and I would saying planning neutral for these livable communities we all want to build,” Lintern said. “I’m hopeful and looking forward to really good detailed discussions because we want the province to understand this predicament.”

The legislation marks the return of the controversial Ontario Municipal Board, which can overrule council on development decisions in court-like hearings. It also makes changes to the city’s official plans that will lead to a loss of protection for sunlight and employment growth, city planners say, and remove the requirement for developers to provide everything from more walkable sidewalks to windows on exterior walls in bedrooms.

Mayor John Tory told reporters on Friday he would enter negotiations on the regulations assuming “a degree of good faith” on the part of the province, saying he remains optimistic about the outcome.

But councillors and residents groups representing the affected midtown and downtown areas struck a significantly different tone, vowing to fight the province and developers who are unwilling to provide what they deem to be sufficient community benefits.

“You are going to make Toronto much more difficult for people to live in, to invest in, to study in, to play in, to work in. That’s what Premier Ford has done,” said Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam (Ward 13 Toronto Centre). “Toronto is worth standing up and fighting for and that’s what these communities will do and as the councillors who represent and work with these communities, we plan to do that with them.”

Ontario Home Builders’ Association, CEO Joe Vaccaro praised the province’s imposition of new rules, saying they will provide the

development industry with more certainty around what community benefits must be provided by setting out a formula and a cap on charges.

“They’ve been challenging for many, many years the transparency of how that number gets generated, and the real benefit it has to the broader community,” he said.

As for concerns the changes will lead to developers paying less towards communities they are profiting from, Vaccaro repeatedly said, “We will support the principle of growth pays for growth.”

Residents’ associations said they’re sick of how the province and others have been quick to label them as anti-development.

“We would like to take aim at the label of NIMBYism,” said the South Eglinton Ratepayers’ and Residents’ Association’s president Andy Gort, who says his group has welcomed the pending arrival of 21,000 new units and some 35,000 new residents. “We accommodate growth, we understand growth, but what we’re looking for is sound planning and this is not a plan that represents sound and good planning,” Gort said.

Lintern said talk of opening up stable neighbourhoods — often referred to as the “Yellowbelt” because of the colour those areas are on official maps — is a good and valid discussion to have, but is a “sidebar” to the current issues facing the city and areas like midtown.

“Wherever the growth is manifesting at Yonge and Eglinton and however it happens, without the tools to ensure that we provide the services to support that growth, we risk those new places being livable for people and families.”

With a file from David Rider