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SHARING BENEFITS, MINIMIZING COSTS

DISTRIBUTING DENSITY

Andrew Reeves

A recent study by the **Ryerson City Building Institute** (CBI) contends that achieving greater population densities in the **City of Toronto** need not occur through either the construction of tall towers in hyper-growth areas nor by permitting limitless sprawl. To accommodate and house large numbers of new arrivals to the city, its report suggests, maybe it's best to think small.

Density Done Right argues that "distributed density", a term coined by the CBI team, presents cities throughout the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area with an opportunity to spread out the benefits of development and minimize its costs to municipal governments by smoothing out the 'bumps' in where growth is and is not permitted to occur in municipalities. Done right, density could entail the construction of more mid-rise buildings and stacked townhouses along transit corridors and main streets, making it easier to renovate large single-family homes into multi-family duplexes and triplexes. It could also entail getting creative in allowing laneway housing or back garden units on existing residential properties.

"The idea of distributed density is, rather than concentrating [development] in a number of urban growth centers, cities could distribute housing throughout already built-up areas so that density doesn't have to be extreme,"

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Graphic showing 'missing middle' housing, which refers to housing characterized neither by the high-rise tower form often seen in high-density, downtown neighbourhoods nor the semi- or single-detached homes that appear in long stretches of lower-density neighbourhoods.

SOURCE: RYERSON CITY BUILDING INSTITUTE

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CBI executive director **Cherise Burda** told *NRU*.

In Toronto, the downtown and central waterfront areas account for just 3.4 per cent of the city's total land mass – however, between 2014 and 2018, they contained almost 37 per cent of all residential units in the development pipeline. This kind of extreme density overburdens already oversubscribed local transit, greenspace, and public amenities like libraries, the report states; meanwhile, in low-density portions of Toronto's yellowbelt, similar amenities and public infrastructure like sewers are underutilized.

The report notes that condominium apartment units are also getting smaller, that fewer units are being built with more than two bedrooms, and that the rapid increase in land value in Toronto is leading developers to pass on ever-higher unit construction costs to new buyers. Sprawl, meanwhile, continues to roll over greenfields surrounding the city at a rate of 1,000 hectares each year to accommodate new housing, stretching municipal infrastructure dollars, weakening local food supply chains, and making nearby neighbourhoods more susceptible to extreme weather events like flooding brought on by the climate crisis by paving over permeable surfaces with impermeable asphalt.

In many respects, the recommendations coming out of Density Done Right are nothing new, Burda acknowledges. The question of how to house Toronto's growing population "is not rocket science. But if we're able to distribute density, it means we can create more livable communities and more opportunities for public spaces without putting as much pressure on our infrastructure," she said. All of which is capable of happening within Toronto's existing urban footprint.

Unlike previous reports from Ryerson CBI, Density Done Right is a "greatest hits" of gentle density, Burda noted, rather than a prescriptive list of actions municipal governments should consider taking. The report lays out what the team means by "distributed density," notes the ways it can benefit communities and local governments, and gives examples of how councils across the GTHA are already implementing such changes.

Yet gentle and mid-density housing doesn't have to be confined to existing low-density neighbourhoods in Toronto's yellowbelt. The redevelopment of post-war shopping plazas is one way of approaching mid-density housing while respecting a local neighbourhood aesthetic, the report notes. It points to Etobicoke's Humbertown, Port Credit West Village in the **City of Mississauga**, and current proposals for the Golden Mile in Scarborough. "Mall and plaza redevelopments can help to optimize existing infrastructure and support higher-order transit investment in already developed areas," the report argues – tapping into local services without gobbling up undeveloped greenfields.

"There's an untapped opportunity in many low-rise, low-density neighbourhoods to open them up and offer a greater diversity of housing technologies and housing choices," **SvN** business development director and senior planner **Blair Scorgie** told *NRU*. And while gentle density may translate into improved housing affordability, he said, it's largely about ensuring the vitality and resiliency of neighbourhoods throughout Toronto and the 905 whose populations are shrinking because of changing demographics. "We need more houses to house the same number of people than we did a generation ago," he said. "And people want different kinds of housing options."

Research on Density Done Right began over a year ago, though the team at CBI opted to shelve it until the dust kicked up by COVID-19 began settling. Notably, rather than drowning out talk of all non-COVID-19 urban issues, Burda noted, the pandemic amplified numerous discussions about density, overcrowding, and access to public space.

The tipping point in deciding to publish the report now, she said, came with the publication of an article in the *New York Times* suggesting urban density was the enemy in the fight against COVID-19. People seized on COVID-19 as an excuse for more sprawl, Burda said, suggesting that paving over greenfields to build houses physically distant from one another would somehow prevent the community transmission of the virus now spreading around the world. "That's not the way you build neighbourhoods," she added: "That's just going to create more problems." The time for Density Done Right, it seemed, had come sooner than she thought.

"We're still moving in the tall and sprawl direction," Burda said of housing planning throughout the GTHA. While the pendulum is swinging more towards acceptance of the need for gentle density, housing in Toronto's development pipeline is still predominantly one-bedroom condo units clustered in hyper-growth areas, she said.

When urban planning in Toronto began in earnest after the Second World War, and especially during the city's

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major population boom in the 1960s and 1970s, towers became the predominant way in which new residents were housed, said urban designer and consultant **Ken Greenberg**. "We jumped immediately" past the kind of mid-density housing seen across northern Europe and in American cities like New York, Boston, and Baltimore, he told *NRU*. "There's a reason why we've ended up here."

For Greenberg, simply removing obstructive regulations is a reliable way for municipal leaders to steer housing development and city building towards the kind of mid-density Toronto missed out on. "This idea of 'subtraction', of taking away unhelpful regulation, would release an enormous surge in many forms of housing," he said, including missing middle density, at both the right scale and an affordable price. "This would be nothing but beneficial for the region."

Greenberg pointed to work he's doing in the **City of Brampton** on a three-kilometre corridor along Queen Street near Highway 410 as one example of how a different approach to zoning could speed up and stabilize development. "We're looking at using a development system that will make all intensification as-of-right," he said. "Individual developers will not have to go through that process – they could go through a very shortened approval process to keep uncertainty out of the application."

Toronto Ward 6 York Centre councillor **James Pasternak** told *NRU* he believes his constituents are broadly supportive of adding more "reasonable" gentle density like stacked townhouses to the ward. As with larger development proposals, he added, it's a matter of finding a balance between the need for more (and more affordable) housing and protecting established neighbourhoods.

"We want to make sure that we cut red tape so that families can live in multi-generational households," he said, and that people can subdivide their houses into duplexes or triplexes more simply in order to rent out basement apartments. "We have to do what we can to incentivize that," Pasternak said. "We should maybe look at rebating some of the development charges, or look at more flexible planning requirements when city staff review design proposals." If a homeowner wants to build two houses where previously only one stood, he added, the city should do what it can to ensure that the new properties built include rental units.

Scorgie notes that the existing rules in Toronto make it difficult for interested homeowners or developers to actually build a triplex. "The policy and regulatory framework, generally speaking, is not in place to facilitate this type of development at the neighbourhood scale," he said.

In most parts of the city, any developer looking to build gentle or mid-density housing would typically need to apply for a series of variances or a "full-blown" zoning by-law amendment simply to build a triplex, Scorgie said, at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars. The proposal would then need to be approved at Committee of Adjustment without local residents speaking out against it, which would all but scuttle any hope that the project would receive a green light.

"The whole way that the policy and regulatory framework is structured is inherently problematic if [gentle density] is what we want to achieve," he said. "There is something to be said for the role of the municipality in taking a proactive approach to updating Official Plan language, as well as zoning by-laws, to actually allow for and encourage gentle density."

Cities could also help homeowners who wish to convert their properties to triplexes to access the wealth locked in their properties to make these conversions not just possible, Burda noted, but as simple as possible. To this end, she proposes that municipalities dedicate one person in each planning department to focus exclusively on making it easier for homeowners and developers to build the variety of housing types (in a variety of neighbourhoods) that people crave.

"There's all of these different problems that make it difficult and expensive to do anything beyond the status quo in any meaningful way," she said. "If we have somebody in our municipalities whose job it is to solve this problem, then that's a great starting point."