

OPINION

# B.C. policy advisors warn of unintended consequences of new housing measures

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B.C. Premier David Eby, centre, Minister of Housing Ravi Kahlon and Victoria Mayor Marianne Alto, left, announce legislation that will return short-term rentals to long-term homes for people, in Victoria, on Oct. 16.

CHAD HIPOLITO/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The B.C. provincial government has introduced a host of new [housing](#) measures this month that would give it the authority of municipal planning departments. That

move alone has raised eyebrows among housing experts who wonder if the province has the expertise to pull it off.

One bill in particular, which calls for significant new height and density around transit areas, will require more collaboration with local governments if it is going to protect citizens against displacement, say those who are involved in housing policy.

One out of every three renters in Metro Vancouver lives within the transit-oriented development areas, according to a new analysis from Andy Yan, director of Simon Fraser University's City Program.

Those numbers concern the Union of B.C. Municipalities (UBCM), and others.

"We are certainly supportive of the need to increase housing in British Columbia but we are concerned that some of this legislation is being enacted very quickly and that we haven't had time to review it all and provide input, and most importantly, to make sure there aren't unintended consequences," says Craig Hodge, chair of the Union of B.C. Municipalities community safety committee, which represents local governments in regard to federal and provincial policies. Mr. Hodge also represents the UBCM on the board at Metro Vancouver and is a Coquitlam city councillor.

"There are four or five pieces of legislation that affect housing that are all coming down within a one-month period," he says. "Some are being passed; some are still waiting to be passed; and some of them are waiting to see what the regulations are that are going to follow as part of it.

"I think what the provincial government is doing is something we support, which is trying to increase the supply of housing and trying to make sure it's affordable. But these changes are very wide-sweeping."

The UBCM is pushing for tools such as inclusionary zoning, which is the inclusion of rental and below-market-rate housing within new development, says Mr. Hodge. It is typically negotiated in exchange for more density.

"That's what we are asking for," said Mr. Hodge. "Certainly the legislation, the concept is very good, having density around rapid transit stations.

“One of the ways to ensure that new construction is affordable is inclusionary zoning. But we need the province to make the legislative changes to make sure that tool is available to us, and one of the options that we have.

“As of yet, the province has not introduced necessary legislation to support that. So what we need now is the province to engage with local governments to develop this tool together.”

Prof. Yan has concerns that the province’s new legislation to massively increase density around transit hubs – which is a sound planning principle recognized around the world – could have detrimental implications for existing rental housing if not thoughtfully implemented.

Prof. Yan released a report this week that showed that Bill 47 – which proposes mid-to high-rise towers in an 800-metre radius around rapid transit and 400 metres around bus exchanges – has more potential to impact existing rental than Vancouver’s Broadway Plan which is already being implemented.

The legislation, if enacted next month, would set minimum allowable heights for proposed transit areas throughout the province.

In Vancouver, 43 per cent of purpose-built rental stock falls within proposed transit-oriented development areas that the province has identified for upzoning, he says. That’s a much higher percentage than the 500-block Broadway Plan, which contains 25 per cent of the city’s purpose-built rental stock.

Because the buildings within the transit areas are older, they are poised for redevelopment. Eighty-nine per cent of the buildings within the transit areas are more than 50 years old.

The bill works in conjunction with a couple of other bills that would exert control over municipal authority.

Bill 44 would remove public hearings, parking requirements and heritage protections, and upzone single-family lots to six-unit multiplexes. Bill 46 would eliminate the use of community amenity contributions (CACs) and introduce a new amenity cost charge, among other changes for development fees.

Craig E. Jones has studied transportation, land use and redevelopment pressures on purpose-built rentals for several years, as part of his PhD in geography. Mr. Jones, who is the research co-ordinator for University of B.C.'s Housing Research Collaborative, is not surprised that there is such a large concentration of rental stock around existing and proposed transit zones. He supports densification around transit areas, but he notes that it will impact mostly east-side neighbourhoods instead of the wealthier west-side areas.

“Where does the responsibility lie to ensure that there aren't a bunch of renters that are displaced by this? That's what is a bit unclear,” he says.

“I think part of the angle here that gets overlooked from time to time is that the location of transit infrastructure is political – where rapid transit stations get placed is not a politically neutral process.

“So now, the infrastructure is in place, and now it becomes politically, ‘we have to densify now around that location.’ We don't have rapid transit stations west of Arbutus right? There is a bit of a class element to where the infrastructure is put.”

Consultant and SFU instructor Christina DeMarco is the former lead planner for Metro Vancouver's 2011 Regional Growth Strategy and also worked on the city of Vancouver's City Plan and transportation plan. She's worked on plans in Ontario and Australia.

Ms. DeMarco applauds the province for directly addressing the affordability crisis. But she also has concerns that the province is “heavy-handed” in its approach.

The transit-oriented development policy is “a very blunt tool” that could backfire, she says.

“First, it's mostly an affordable housing crisis that we are dealing with and I don't think they are going to get affordable housing this way. If developers have a choice between condos and rentals, they will continue to choose condos because it's more profitable and it's very likely that lower-cost rental buildings could be replaced by condos. So we would actually be losing the lower-cost stock in favour of condo development.

“I don’t really understand if they want to give away density bonuses, why not just target the specific parts of the market where housing is needed – the private market rental, assisted housing, co-op housing, that type of housing that is not well provided at all right now?”

“The second thing is I see the policy is scheduled to be put in place for most Metro Vancouver municipalities in December, so that means no planning for the land uses they need to provide complete neighbourhoods.

“The way I understand it, a developer can say, ‘Okay, the province said I can build 20 storeys here, so here’s my rezoning application.’ What latitude do the municipalities have to evaluate that development, to make sure that it’s compatible with development around it?”

She’s also concerned by the blanket approach, assuming the same densities and heights for neighbourhoods as diverse as Kitsilano and Fleetwood, in Surrey. “I think they are trying to do too much too quickly and undervaluing the importance of community planning, and building complete communities,” says Ms. DeMarco.

Developer Michael Geller said there are still many questions around the sweeping initiatives, which, he agrees, are taking away some municipal planning functions.

“While I’ve been generally supportive of all these initiatives, I am beginning to think that some of these initiatives have not been thought through,” said Mr. Geller.

One concern he has is that landowners within the transit zones will expect their properties to be worth a lot more than what is financially viable in order for a developer to build.

“It’s about trying to get the right balance between what a property owner thinks their land is worth, what BC Assessment thinks it’s worth, and what a developer knows they can pay.”

The Ministry of Housing did not respond to questions by deadline.

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