



**The Tories say they're thinking big when it comes to housing. But just how big?**

**ANALYSIS: The government's recent Bill 66 isn't a housing policy — but it signals how far the Progressive Conservatives are willing to go to relax regulations, writes John Michael McGrath**

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Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark has said that his office is looking for suggestions to increase the supply of new homes on the market. (Chris Young/CP)

The Progressive Conservative government will have to contend with a number of big policy files in 2019 — none bigger than housing, as the Tories are poised to make changes to land-use planning on a scale greater than anything the province has done since the Liberals created the Greenbelt more than a decade ago.

In a letter to newly elected municipal councils last month, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark said that his office is looking for suggestions that will increase the supply

of new homes on the market. “As minister,” he wrote, “I am interested in transformative change, not incremental shifts in policies.”

Making “transformative change” in the housing sector is a tall order: in Ontario, new housing projects often involve approvals from various municipal departments and provincial agencies, not to mention years spent waiting before a hammer actually meets a nail.

But the Tories are not being shy. Bill 66, introduced two weeks ago, [would let municipalities circumvent numerous environmental protection laws](#), including the Greenbelt Act. While the bill’s provisions don’t apply to housing, they suggest that the government is willing to make radical changes in the regulatory realm.

Some in the building industry welcome a more aggressive focus on housing supply.

“It’s like night and day, honestly,” says **Richard Lyall, president of RESCON**, an organization that represents Ontario housing developers. “It’s music to my ears ... Are we finally going to deal with these things?”

“I think they get the connection between business investment, jobs, and housing,” he adds. “I think this government actually gets the connection between housing supply and quality of life for people. And I think they have the wherewithal to make tough decisions.”

The government’s formal consultation period for the [Housing Supply Action Plan](#) will continue until the end of January, but industry observers who spoke with TVO.org on condition of anonymity (in order to freely discuss their interactions with the government) say that they expect the government to bring forward a major bill soon after the period ends — one they say will likely relate to a number of pieces of legislation and tackle regulations the industry views as barriers to new homebuilding.

The changes that Kathleen Wynne’s government made to the Ontario Municipal Board (now the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal) [were controversial before they even became law](#). This fall, many of the planning lawyers who criticized the Liberals’ changes restated their complaints in a letter to Clark and Attorney General Caroline Mulroney.

The Liberals hoped that the LPAT process, which takes certain procedural rights away from parties in the appeal process, would level the playing field for councils and community advocates facing off against high-priced lawyers and the developers they work for. The group Advocates for Effective OMB Reform, however, says that those changes break with decades of precedent on procedural rights and are already causing confusion and uncertainty. There’s a good chance that the government won’t simply [tinker with timelines](#) but will instead take a hard look at reversing some or all of the changes the Liberals made.

One big question the government will need to answer, even if only internally, is how to square the aims of their housing plan with municipalities’ traditional powers and privileges. Lyall says that “some sacred cows are going to need to be dealt with,” but it’s not yet clear how far the Tories will be prepared to go.

For example, homebuilders have been complaining for years about development charges, parkland requirements, zoning details, and negotiated charges under [Section 37 of the Planning Act](#) — but municipalities rely on such tools and the revenue streams they produce, and councils would miss such powers dearly if the province curtailed them.

Theoretically, the province could involve itself even more in municipal matters. Cities are required to maintain official plans, and those plans (as well as any amendments to them) must be formally approved by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. But the Tories could take a harder line with municipal councils to ensure that such plans don't unduly constrain new homebuilders.

One Toronto-based development advocate told TVO.org that the current government is scrutinizing two recent official-plan amendments from Toronto — which were passed by council in July, shortly after the provincial election, and deal with [the Yonge-Eglinton area](#) and [the city's downtown core](#) — because of the new restrictions they impose on development.

Clark's office did not confirm or deny any of these items when contacted by TVO.org, citing the ongoing consultation process. In an emailed statement, Clark reiterated the government's commitment to preserving the Greenbelt, notwithstanding the text of Bill 66. (This is significant, given that the minister would be required to sign off on any development that would otherwise contravene legislation such as the Greenbelt Act.)

But he also stated that the government remains focused on cutting regulations that it sees as impediments to new homebuilding: “We have heard loud and clear from municipalities and job creators — there is too much red tape and it can take years for businesses to navigate the development approvals process. Time and time again we have heard from communities who are seeing lost investment opportunities and the jobs that go with them.”