Making Room for More:

Gentle Density and the Future of Housing in Canadian Neighbourhoods

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Gentle Density Housing (GDH) includes typologies such as single-detached homes with a secondary suite(s), backyard homes, duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, and five to eightplex forms. GDH is gaining traction, being embedded into more planning regimes across the country. These forms respond to urban demographic shifts, support walkable neighbourhoods, and expand housing choice.

University of Manitoba

RESEARCH INTENT

To better understand:

1. The key barriers, constraints, and opportunities influencing GDH outcomes.

2. How GDH is shaping cities at a spatial level and what development patterns have emerged; and

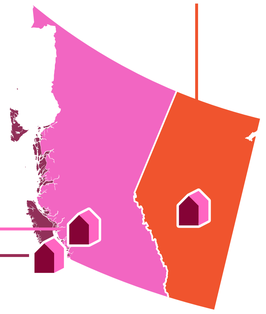
3. Policy and planning lessons for other cities considering implementing similar zoning reform.

THREE CITIES

Victoria;

Vancouver; and

Edmonton.



METHODS

1. Document Review

To highlight each city's approach to advance GDH.

2. Spatial Analysis

To map where GDH is occurring in each city.

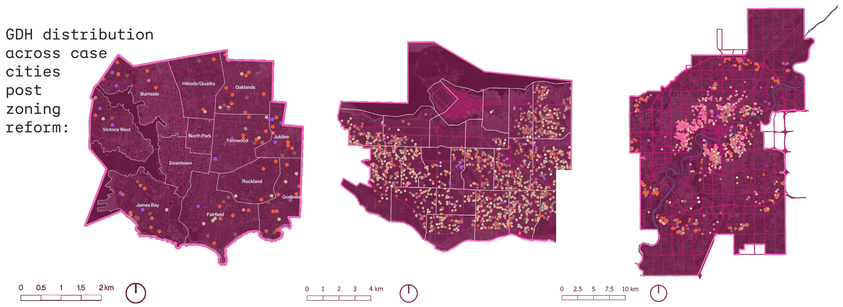
3. Interviews

- 4 Municipal Planners
- 2 Developers
- 2 Home-Builders
- 1 Architect

FINDINGS

GDH cannot be advanced through zoning reform alone. While as-of-right permissions expand what is possible, it does not determine what is built. Development outcomes are ultimately shaped by feasibility constraints such as land values, construction costs, and access to financing. Reviewing permitting processes, educating the public, aligning servicing upgrades, offering incentives, and policy refinement are crucial in supporting GDH delivery.

GDH distribution across case cities post zoning reform:



Victoria (2023-2025) Vancouver (2024-2025) Edmonton (2024-2025)

Legend

- Backyard House
- Single-Detached W/ Secondary Suite
- Duplex
- Triplex
- Fourplex
- Five to Eightplex

1. First Step, Zoning Reform

Zoning reform is a necessary first step, however, it is just the beginning. Zoning permissiveness expands what is possible, but it does not work alone to expand housing.

2. Market is the Influencer

GDH is opportunistic, influenced at the parcel level. Zoning reform opens the door to greater GDH opportunity, that said, the market ultimately determines GDH outcomes.

3. Prepare for Obstacles

The steps that follow zoning should include educating the public, ensuring adequate institutional capacity is sustained, reviewing planning processes, and offering incentives.

3.1. Community is Key

As-of-right zoning may reduce formal avenues for opposition, that said, community holds the power to either mobilize or halt GDH. It is critical to create strong community buy-in.

3.2. Teamwork is Dreamwork

Zoning reform is complex—success depends on well-supported staff. In early implementation, planners must review, monitor, and refine to ensure changes are applied as intended.

3.3. Friction By Process

Existing legacy by-laws, lagging permitting processes, and unaligned infrastructure realities all act as "hidden regulations". These can create tensions and complexities for as-of-right permissions.

3.4. Money Makes Moves

Financial incentive structures, like CMHC's MLI Select program, can help combat risk and help ensure a project remains viable. If a project does not pencil-out, it will not exist.

GDH CATALOGUE

SINGLE-DETACHED W/ SECONDARY SUITE | BACKYARD HOME | DUPLEX | TRIPLEX | FOURPLEX | EIGHTPLEX

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Ready, Set, Reform

Zoning reform is the first step. A successful rollout requires a thorough review and revamp of all-things revolving zoning, planning process, and approvals.

2 Keep 20/20 Vision

Layering policies can blur the original intent of zoning reform; remember the goal.

3 Zoning Says Yes, Servicing Says No

If housing is essential infrastructure, servicing support should be too. Align planning with engineering.

4 A Little Cash Always Helps

Create funding opportunities that reflect the typologies your municipality wants to see built.

5 You Can't Run a Marathon on Empty

Zoning reform requires sustained institutional capacity—make sure you have enough people to pull the heavy weight.

6 (Not) Written in Stone

In the early stages make sure you listen to industry, monitor, review, and amend accordingly.

7 Show, Don't Tell

Proactive public communication isn't a nice-to-have, it's a core part of reform.