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CANADA

Ford government moves to override cities on green building standards

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Bill 17, the Protect Ontario by Building Faster and Smarter Act, was introduced last month by the Ford government in response to housing pressures and economic uncertainty.

By Abdul Matin Sarfraz / Canada's National Observer / Local Journalism Initiative Canada's National Observer

The Ford government is rushing to pass legislation that would strip cities of one of their most effective tools to confront climate threats: green building standards.

Experts say these standards, developed over years by municipalities, are designed to ensure new buildings are safer, cleaner, more resilient and more affordable to operate in the face of a growing climate crisis. Ontario cities have been dealing with heatwaves and floods in increasing numbers and severity, and building codes have been put in place to help new construction adapt.

Bill 17, the [Protect Ontario by Building Faster and Smarter Act](#), was introduced last month by the Ford government in response to housing pressures and economic uncertainty. The province says the legislation will “streamline development processes” and “reduce costs” by establishing consistent construction standards across all municipalities.

A key amendment in the bill makes it clear that municipalities are not allowed to pass bylaws related to the construction or demolition of buildings — a move widely seen by experts and advocates as targeting municipal green-building standards. The bill also requires municipal councils to get written approval from the provincial minister of municipal affairs and housing before making certain changes to their official plans, further restricting cities’ control over planning and development.

The bill also includes new regulations that would limit what municipalities can request from developers during the planning process. If passed, cities would no longer be allowed to require information on key design and environmental factors — such as shadow impact, wind conditions, urban design alignment, or exterior lighting — as part of a complete application for developments.

Currently, at least 14 municipalities in Ontario, including Toronto and Hamilton, have adopted policies requiring new buildings to meet higher environmental performance benchmarks.

In Toronto, the [green standard](#) outlines detailed criteria covering air quality, energy efficiency, water conservation and waste reduction. [Developers must meet requirements](#) related to tree planting, pedestrian access, bike parking and on-site stormwater management to reduce flood risk during heavy rainfall. They must also include sufficient tree cover to mitigate extreme heat.

The standard requires that new residential parking be EV-ready — a requirement the Ford government removed from the provincial building code — and sets annual greenhouse gas emission limits, encouraging developers to choose low-carbon heating systems like heat pumps instead of natural gas. None of these regulations would be permitted to remain under the new law.

The city is also [considering](#) a near-zero emissions target for all new buildings by 2030, since buildings account for 58 per cent of its total emissions.

[With more than 500 new condo towers expected](#) to be built in the next five years, Toronto's ability to align rapid housing growth with its climate goals depends heavily on the enforcement of these standards.

Hamilton is also ramping up its climate efforts with new [green building standards](#) set to take effect in 2025. The rules, adopted by council last year, will apply to future homes, businesses and public spaces, requiring higher performance in energy efficiency, water conservation, stormwater and waste management, and eco-friendly design.

To combat the urban heat island effect, reflective or green roofing materials will be required, and builders will be encouraged to plant trees and preserve green space.

Both Toronto and Hamilton are reviewing the implications of Bill 17. In Toronto, a city spokesperson said staff have been asked to prepare a report on the bill's potential impacts for the executive committee meeting later this month and are continuing to assess the proposed changes.

Bryan Purcell, vice president of policy and programs at The Atmospheric Fund, said Bill 17 would severely undermine cities' ability to regulate development, leading to higher emissions and less climate-resilient buildings.

The Ontario Building Code hasn't been updated since 2017 and according to The Atmospheric Fund, falls short of supporting cities' climate goals with emission limits or tiered standards (like [BC's Energy Step Code](#)) to guide low-carbon construction.

"Municipalities have a legislated responsibility to protect public health and environmental wellbeing," Purcell said. "Restricting their ability to exercise those duties will not protect Ontario or build housing faster. It will only reduce the quality of new housing and communities and expose Ontarian residents to greater environmental risks."

Lana Goldberg, a climate campaigner at Stand.earth, says Ontario's Bill 17 is "a giant gift to big developers and Enbridge Gas." She says green building standards adopted by cities are designed to cut emissions by reducing reliance on fossil fuels and encouraging builders to use clean energy technologies like electric heat pumps. But Bill 17 would override those efforts, allowing developers to keep constructing outdated, high-emission buildings and enabling Enbridge to keep connecting new homes to gas infrastructure.

Records show Enbridge has been lobbying Ontario on building codes, while one developer association, the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON), has actively opposed municipal green standards — [launching a legal challenge against Toronto's](#) rules last year.

“This bill looks like it was written by developers and fossil fuel executives. Our homes and communities shouldn’t be dictated by either,” Goldberg said. “If the province doesn’t want to take climate action, it should get out of the way of municipalities that do.”

While the Ford government claims the bill will make housing cheaper and faster to build, Ryan Zizzo, CEO of Mantle Developments, says green development standards are not a significant factor in slowing down housing projects and their impact on cost or timelines is less than one per cent. According to Zizzo, these standards help prevent expensive problems down the road, like flooded basements and rising energy bills.

“There are so many additional costs that arise if we don’t get the design right in the first place,” Zizzo said.

Zizzo also emphasized that modern standards are about future-proofing buildings, including preparing for growing demand for electric vehicle charging. “If we don’t build for that now, we’ll just have to retrofit everything in 10 or 20 years — and that will be 10 times more expensive,” he said. “Doing it right from the start is not only more efficient, it’s smarter for affordability and resilience.”

The cost of retrofitting older buildings and homes to meet climate goals will be significant. According to the Pembina Institute, the federal government, in partnership with provinces and utilities, will need to [invest \\$10 billion to \\$15 billion annually](#) over the next 20 years to achieve these targets.

Mike Collins-Williams, CEO of the West End Home Builders’ Association, sees things differently. In an email, he praised Bill 17 as “strong provincial leadership” by cutting down on local planning studies and creating a single, standardized Ontario Building Code. “We have one building code in Ontario — not 444,” he said, referring to the number of municipalities. “That is exactly why Bill 17 is so critical to ensure common, harmonized standards across Ontario.”

Collins-Williams acknowledged many builders are already voluntarily meeting high-efficiency standards but said these should be consistent across the province — not set by individual municipalities. “Individual municipal green standards are highly problematic from this perspective, as they are not informed by the same rigorous multi-year technical reviews that occur at the national and provincial level and create a balkanization of standards across the province.”

The West End Home Builders’ Association says Hamilton’s new green standards could add tens of thousands to per-unit costs and delay projects, with few real gains for sustainability.

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