



Resettling Cities: Canadian Residential Intensification Initiatives

Introduction

The purpose of this study, recently completed by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) was to: (i) review the literature on the pros and cons of residential intensification; (ii) conduct a national survey of Canadian municipal officials to identify local, regional and provincial policies and projects which affect intensification; and (iii) review noteworthy residential intensification initiatives in some Canadian cities.

Some Key Findings

The literature review on the pros and cons of residential intensification indicates that the debate continues; neither the consequences of sprawl nor the benefits of intensification are universally agreed upon. For every argument in favour of intensification, there is a counter— argument to repudiate it. Thematically, the debate focuses on social issues, economic considerations and environmental concerns. In general, anti—intensification arguments rely more on deflating the positive claims of pro—intensification research and less on the benefits of low—density development. Overall, positions in this debate appear to be more ideological than empirical. Many proponents and opponents of intensification use the available evidence to support a preconceived notion of an ideal city form and an ideal lifestyle.

The national survey of planning officials in Canadian municipalities reveals that at least one municipality in each of the 25 census metropolitan areas covered by the survey reported

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intensification to be an issue. All of the municipalities in the CMAs of Halifax, Hamilton, London, Oshawa, St. John's, Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria declared intensification to be an issue.

According to the respondents, municipal staff (57%) and councils (55.1%) have been most important in raising intensification issues, followed by outside professionals (29.4%), public consultations (25%), and community groups (22.4%) (Figure 1).

The most cited advantages of intensification were that existing infrastructure (92%) and land (92%) would be used more efficiently. These were followed by the potential for creating more affordable housing (81.5%), the more efficient use of existing human services (78.8%) and the preservation of farmland (73.2%) (Figure 2). Crowding of residential areas (69.5%), traffic congestion (68.1%), increased stress on infrastructure (60.3%) and the disappearance of green space (58%) were cited as the main disadvantages of intensification (Figure 3).

Canadians' preference for larger lots and the resistance of residents in existing neighbourhoods were identified as the most significant barriers to intensification by 87.8% and 79.5% of the respondents respectively. Figure 4 lists other significant barriers to intensification identified by respondents.

About 31% of the respondents claimed that policies affecting their jurisdictions discourage intensification: almost half of these (49.4%) were identified as municipal policies. 29% were provincial and 10.1% were regional. Among the various levels of government, provincial governments were perceived as the most supportive of intensification initiatives.

Finally, among the 523 municipalities surveyed, 42.4% have adopted, or are in the process of adopting, policies that encourage intensification: 28.5% have undertaken projects that encourage intensification, over half of which (50.7%) have already been implemented. Over 57% of the respondents said that they supported intensification as a policy goal: 12.2% did not.

Figure 1: Did Any of the Following Raise the Issue of Intensification

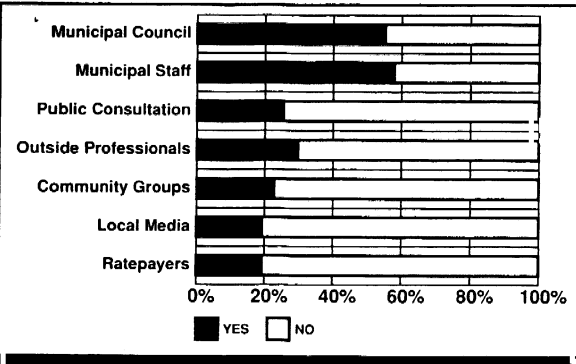


Figure 2: Advantages of Intensification

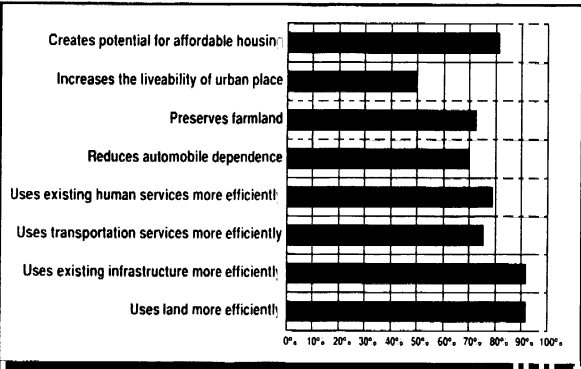
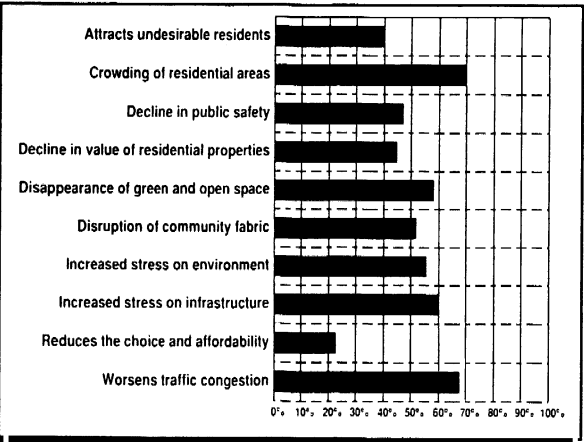
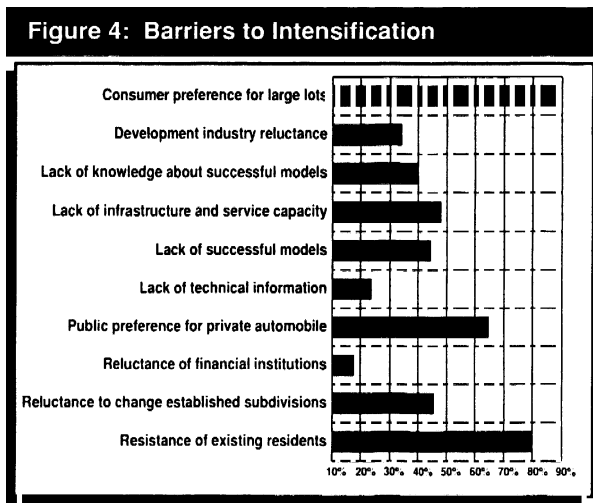


Figure 3: Disadvantages of Intensification



In the last section of this report, the intensification projects listed below were chosen for review. The projects were chosen for regional representation, and with a view to including examples of the following types of intensification: infill of vacant or underused sites, conversion of single-unit to multi-unit housing, redevelopment of non-residential sites, adaptive reuse of non-residential sites, and suburban densification.



1. HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA

Alexander School: The City has issued a call for proposals to develop a former inner-city school site into medium- to high-density housing.

Piercy Lands: The construction of two apartment towers on an abandoned industrial site.

2. KITCHENER, ONTARIO

The City of Kitchener has built 14 infill housing projects, three of which are described below.

The Victoria School Village: This project converted an elementary school to 40 apartments, an apartment complex, quadruplexes and a municipal community centre.

The Charles: Infill townhouses on a previous office site.

George Vanier Place: All eight-unit infill on a lot previously occupied by one house.

3. REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN

Over the last ten years, 25 schools have closed in Regina. The City has developed a unique programme to redevelop these sites into residential and other uses. To date, four former school sites have been redeveloped for residential uses.

4. RICHMOND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

702 Process: A process for suburban intensification that sets out a procedure for negotiating acceptable sizes of single family lots.

5. SUMMIT-HV WINTHE, QUEBEC

Various intensification projects are reviewed in the report, including:

Projet le Riverain: Construction of 40 housing units on a former park-like lot in the downtown area.

Les Jardins du Grand Séminaire: Created medium density multi-family units in a low density neighbourhood by putting two, three or four separate units in estate-like homes.

6. ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND

66 Bannerman Street: An infill development by the St. John's Non-Profit Housing Corporation on a formerly vacant downtown lot.

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In the full report, the case studies reveal the various motivations for undertaking the above intensification projects, including environmental concerns, fiscal concerns about sprawl, and declining inner-city populations. They also reveal that the definition of what constitutes an intensification project depends on the local context. The barriers to intensification that were identified in the case studies reflect the barriers reported in the survey responses. Consumer preference for large lots, the negative attitudes of existing residents towards intensification projects, and the restrictive nature of municipal bylaws were frequently cited as significant constraints.

This issue of Research and Development Highlights has been produced as a result of work carried out in the Research Division of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). For more information, contact Mr. David D'Amour, Researcher, Urban and Environmental Relations, at (613) 748-2325.

CMHC carries out and finances a broad range of research on the social, economic and technical aspects of housing. This CMHC Research and Development Highlights issue is one of a series intended to illustrate briefly of the nature and scope of these activities.

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