

Comments on: Motion Exploring the potential for affordable housing units to be built above parking spaces in city-owned parking lots

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My name is Dr Brian Doucet and I am the Canada Research Chair in Urban Change and Social Inclusion in the School of Planning at the University of Waterloo. I am an internationally-recognized expert in housing and have written extensively about housing issues for academic, professional and public audiences for more than 15 years. I currently hold several major research grants about housing and homelessness in Canada and will be releasing a documentary film next year about solutions to the housing crisis.

The motion put forward by Councillor Hamilton to use a city owned parking lot as the site of genuinely affordable housing constitutes one of the most inspiring, innovative and potentially transformative housing solutions in Ontario today!

I wholeheartedly support this motion and strongly encourage you to pass it. Doing so would catapult Cambridge into one of the country's leaders in addressing the housing crisis, serving as a model for other cities to emulate.

Why is this motion so important? To put it bluntly, private developers are unwilling or unable to build the kinds of housing we actually need. Condo builders construct lots of small units overwhelmingly bought by investors. Their investor-owners rent them out at market rent which is simply too expensive for many households. Similarly, new purpose-built rentals are also out of reach for those on lower wages.

There is actually very little that governments can do to shape what kind of housing gets built on private land. Inclusionary zoning is extremely weak. Developers don't build housing that gets people out of homelessness. Provincial rent control rules are like Swiss cheese and a major contributor to renovations and the recent skyrocketing of rents. And while some cities have guidelines encouraging larger units for families, developers rarely build them. On public land, all of this is possible!

What makes building housing on public land so different? It is where we can think beyond what is currently done and build the kind of housing the market is unwilling or unable to develop. This includes not only subsidized housing, but a range of sizes, tenures and ownerships that the market can't deliver.

This is possible for several reasons. First, there are no land costs as sites are already in public ownership. This makes developing genuinely affordable housing much more feasible. It also enables non-market partners to play a major role; all too often, they have the expertise and capacity to build, but are crowded out by private developers who can pay more for the land.

This enables genuinely affordable housing to be built on a scale that simply isn't possible elsewhere.

Sadly, there are more examples of missed opportunities than successes. In Hamilton, the city passed on the opportunity to exercise its right under the Ontario Realty Directive to acquire the Delta Secondary School and the school board subsequently put the site up for sale. One bid came from the non-profit housing provider Indwell and the Hamilton Community Foundation for the appraised market value of the land. It would have led to the development of a mixed income, mixed-tenure community that addressed a variety of the city's actual housing needs. However, the winning bid came from a private developer who paid approximately three times Indwell's bid. As a result, the formerly public site will see no actual affordable housing within it.

The good news for Cambridge is that under the proposed motion, land does not actually need to be acquired. It costs the city nothing because it is already in municipal ownership. That leads to the second key element of public land: when cities own the land, they set the terms.

There is much more scope to be creative and many examples where cities across the country are using their own land to strategically build the kind of housing their communities need. This can include partnering with non-profits, as Kitchener recently did with a piece of land they own along Block Line Road. The city partnered with the YW, who got rapid housing financing from the federal government. Today, there are two buildings providing supportive housing for single women and families where there was only a field a few years ago.

Additional ways that cities can be creative is requiring a certain percentage of family-sized units, instituting their own rent control to keep units affordable (as Whistler does and Toronto has proposed) and even stipulating that units need to be the primary residences of their owners, as Whistler has done for years on public land.

Importantly, Councillor Hamilton's motion also keeps the land public, leasing it for \$1/year. This is much more advantageous than selling the land to non-profits. Once it's gone; it's gone and with it, the influence cities can yield to ensure that housing remains affordable. That is one of the reasons why the City of Kitchener entered into a lease with the YW, rather than sell or donate the land.

This kind of approach is necessary if cities are going to play meaningful roles in helping to create the right kind of supply, not just add to the overall numbers. If Cambridge can show how this can work on the site of one parking lot, it can easily be scaled up to become a model that will be looked to as a national leader for developing genuinely affordable housing. This is what is most exciting about Councillor Hamilton's motion.

But what about parking? There is ample parking in the downtowns of all three cities within the region, Cambridge included. In my experience, you very occasionally need to drive a few blocks away to find parking. But there's always a spot.

But while parking is abundant, there is an actual and acute shortage of genuinely affordable housing and no clearly established plan to address this. Again, this is where the motion before you is both timely and effective.

The priority needs to be on housing, not parking! However, there are plenty of examples of housing built on top of parking lots. One of the most inspiring is the Dairy Lofts in Hamilton, which was recently developed by Indwell. This site features good urban design, adaptive re-use of an adjacent building (a former dairy, hence the project's name) and a new structure built on top of a surface parking lot.

There is growing evidence that simply adding more market-driven supply is neither going to address the root causes of the housing crisis nor provide the kind of housing that lower- and moderate-income households actually need.

Cities need to be proactive and use their land to do things differently. One of the most important elements cities can bring to the affordable housing table is land. The most impactful use of this land is not building more market-rate housing with a few crumbs of nominally affordable units. It's when cities actively work with different levels of government and a range of non-profits, with the explicit goal of building what the market doesn't provide.

With more and more households dealing with the consequences of the housing crisis, this is not just about those on very low incomes anymore. Many essential workers, young people, older adults and those working minimum wage jobs struggle to find adequate and affordable housing now. Therefore the need for cities to be proactive will only grow larger.

The motion before you provides the opportunity to ensure that new housing supply meets the needs of your residents. The market will not do this on its own.

I highly encourage Cambridge City Council to pass this motion and look forward to working with councillors and staff to position the city as a leader in tackling Canada's housing crisis.