

Greenfield Development in Hamilton: Dissonance Between Council and the Public View



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Report prepared by:

Frank Clayton, Ph.D.
Senior Research Fellow

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*The opinions expressed in this research report are those of the author only and do not necessarily represent the opinions and views of either CUR or Toronto Metropolitan University.

Contact

Centre for Urban Research and Land Development
Toronto Metropolitan University
350 Victoria Street, Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3
E-mail: cur@torontomu.ca

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction.....	5
Many more Hamilton residents rank housing accessibility and affordability as a top issue compared to climate change and the environment.....	6
Most Hamiltonians now live in or have aspirations for ground-related housing.....	7
Council worsens future housing affordability by eliminating new ground-related housing on greenfields, causing Hamiltonians to move elsewhere to find affordable ground-related homes	7
References	9
Appendix: Adequacy of Hamilton’s Vacant Land Supply By Unit Type.....	10
Vacant residential land supply at the end of 2023	10
Adequacy of vacant land supply	11

Executive Summary

Hamilton's City Council is out of sync with its residents' wishes when it comes to curbing housing development on future greenfield land. While the Council cites environmental concerns as a primary reason for its opposition, no apparent attention is paid to the impact on housing affordability. By a wide margin, surveys show city residents rank housing accessibility and affordability as a top issue over climate change and the environment (Abacus Data), and many respondents express a strong desire to live in ground-related housing (Nanos Research).

The Council ignores that while it can control the type of housing built within its borders (its focus is on apartments) subject to financial viability, it cannot control where people live.

The Council also misconstrues the amount of future greenfield land required to produce single-detached houses and more affordable ground-related housing like townhouses and low-rise apartments (stacked townhouses). Greenfield development is no longer concentrated on just single-detached homes. Today, in most municipalities, there is a mix of housing types. North Oakville and Waterloo region provide case studies on the diversity of housing units built on greenfield land.

The bottom line: Instead of fighting the province about designating future greenfield lands for housing, Hamilton's Council should cooperate to build future ground-related housing and low-rise apartments on greenfield land while encouraging a broad range of apartments to be built in the city's denser urban area.

Environmental imperatives are essential, but so is the provision of a diverse range of affordable housing, including ground-related homes built on greenfield lands beyond the land inventory now within the city's urban boundary. Providing ground-related homes on yet-to-be-designated greenfield land will help improve housing affordability for Hamilton residents since these are the housing types the majority desire. Indirectly, it will also help with rental affordability.

The report's appendix contains interesting data on the adequacy of Hamilton's vacant residential land inventory (all inventory, not just short-term) by unit type at the end of 2023. The conclusion is that the supply of sites for single- and semi-detached houses will be gone in 5.0 years, townhouses in 8.0 years, and apartments in 17.8 years. The differing unit type profiles for

Hamilton Council's Fight Against Greenfield Expansion

The Council approved an Official Plan Amendment in June 2022 to implement a "no urban boundary expansion" growth scenario. Their decision was at odds with the findings of a 2021 study by Lorus & Associates, which indicated a need to designate an additional 1,340 to 3,440 hectares of greenfield land to accommodate growth until 2051. It also overrode a staff recommendation to adopt the Ambitious Density scenario with its required 1,340 hectares of additional land (the minimum land needs calculated in the Lorus study).

The Council established an intensification target of 80% in its Official Plan: 80% of the city's net increase in dwelling units was targeted to be built within the City's built boundary. What followed were skirmishes with the Province, which wanted Hamilton to expand its urban boundaries to accommodate future housing demand. The final word came when the Province legislated the Provincial Planning Statement and Bill 185, which allows private developers to propose urban boundary expansions outside the Greenbelt. While the Council is still against urban boundary expansion, the staff is preparing a framework for processing and evaluating urban boundary expansion applications.

housing built on sites in built-up areas vs greenfields found in many cities are evidenced from the data – mainly apartments in the built-up area and mainly ground-related homes in greenfield areas.

Introduction

Hamilton's City Council appears not to understand or consider economic or housing market matters. It sees no reason to respond to the kind of housing many residents and people moving to Hamilton desire to occupy over the longer term. In its view, 80% of all housing should be built by intensifying or redeveloping properties within the existing built-up boundary, with the remaining 20% built on existing greenfield lands within the city's urban boundary. This housing will mostly be what Statistics Canada and CMHC define as 'apartments' - secondary suites, duplexes, triplexes, quadruplexes, stacked townhouses and suites in apartment structures.¹

Most Hamiltonians can forget living in new homes with a ground-level entrance, garage and small yard, once the supply of existing greenfield sites within the city is exhausted. In the Council's view, most residents will no longer be able to buy a new ground-related home within the city's boundaries (ground-related homes include single-detached houses, semi-detached houses or townhouses). As of 2023 year-end, the vacant land supply for single-detached and semi-detached houses and townhouses is expected to be exhausted within 5.0 and 8.0 years, respectively. After that, almost all new housing will consist of apartments under the Council's current directive.

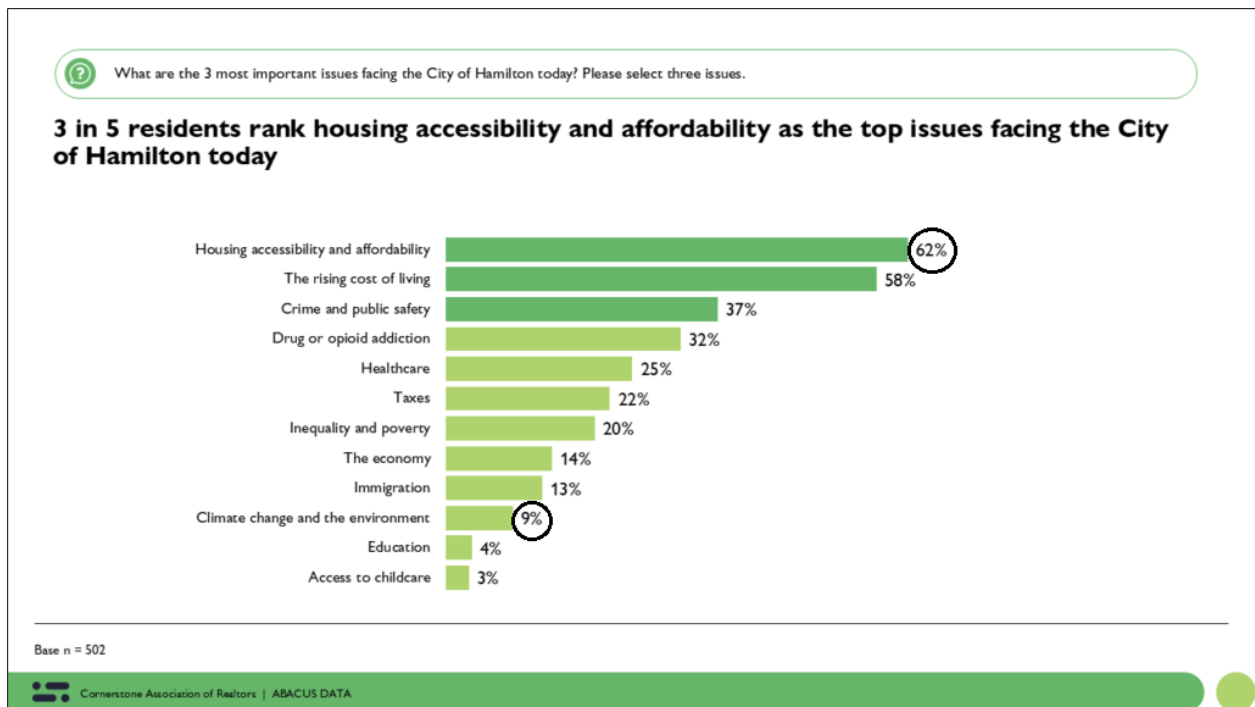
Why? Council is prioritizing environmental protection and preservation of farmland over building the kinds of housing most residents want. The Council implicitly tells its residents that in the future, they should live in an apartment or move out of the city to places like Niagara region.

Council seemingly ignores a fundamental law of economics: artificially restricting the supply of a product that people want results in higher prices. Thus, the Council's decision will contribute to higher home prices and rents, reducing housing affordability in Hamilton in the future. It also incentivizes residents to move from the city to other urban centres, often resulting in longer commutes and increased congestion. Subsequent local job losses will follow, with employment tailing the out-migration of the population.

¹. Apartments accounted for 89% of the housing expected to be built in the future on vacant land within the city's built boundary at the end of 2023 (see Appendix Figure A-1).

Many more Hamilton residents rank housing accessibility and affordability as a top issue compared to climate change and the environment

In a recent Hamilton survey by Abacus Data, 62% of respondents ranked housing accessibility and affordability as Hamilton's top issues, far ahead of climate change and the environment (at 9%).²



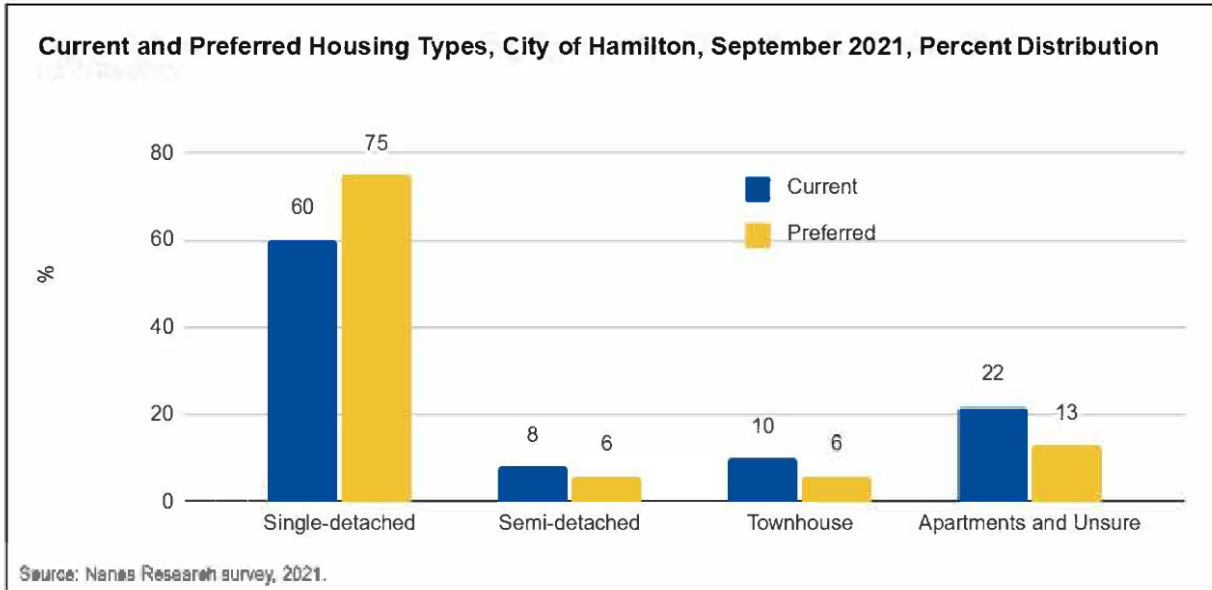
With this massive disparity between the two issues, one would expect the Council to want to respond to the housing issue by expediting greenfield development, as well as encouraging more development in the existing urban area.

It is ominous for the Council to continue on this path, undertaking planning decisions that work against the number one priority - affordable housing - which has been clearly identified in the survey. The Figure above clearly shows that housing accessibility and affordability (at over 60%) is viewed as a much higher priority than climate change and the environment.

² Eddie Sheppard and David Coletto. "Potential Municipal Land Transfer Tax Faces Backlash as Hamilton Struggles with Housing Affordability." Survey of 502 Hamiltonians was conducted in October 2024 by Abacus Data for the Cornerstone Association of Realtors. January 14, 2025.

Most Hamiltonians now live in or have aspirations for ground-related housing

A 2021 survey of Hamiltonians by Nanos Research found that 78% of respondents lived in ground-related homes, with most residing in single-detached houses and 22% living in apartments.³ The preference for ground-related housing was even higher – 87% of respondents said so. Just 13% expressed a preference for apartments.⁴



Renters comprise the largest number of potential first-time buyers and want to live in ground-related housing, especially single-detached homes (over 70% of all renters).

Council worsens future housing affordability by eliminating new ground-related housing on greenfields, causing Hamiltonians to move elsewhere to find affordable ground-related homes

Prudent urban housing policies are based on understanding how markets operate and utilizing the market to the greatest extent possible to achieve desired objectives. Hamilton's Council blatantly disregards market forces by requiring almost all future housing to be apartments when many residents and future residents want ground-related housing. The Council seemingly ignores that it can control the type of housing built within its borders, subject to the financial viability of new projects, but cannot control where people live.

The results of the Council's action: higher home prices in the future as more households bid for the stagnant supply of existing single-detached houses, semi-detached homes and townhouses, and higher rents as households priced out of the ownership market occupy rental apartments

³ Nanos Research (2021). "Survey Summary." [Online]. Available at: <https://nanos.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021-1942-OREA-Hamilton-Populated-Report-with-Tabs-1.pdf>. The graph is from Frank Clayton. "Most Hamiltonians Do Not Oppose an Expansion of the City's Urban Boundary," CUR. February 16, 2022.

instead. The city's population will also grow less rapidly as residents move to other municipalities, like in Niagara region and the Brantford area, to find more affordable ground-related homes.

The Council misconstrues the greenfield land required to produce single-detached houses and more affordable ground-related housing like townhouses and low-rise apartments (stacked townhouses). Development is no longer concentrated on just single-detached homes. Today, in most municipalities, there is a mix of housing types.

Development in the North Oakville area of the Town of Oakville illustrates the diversity of housing built on greenfield lands. Since the lands came on stream in 2011 and mid-2022, 8,445 housing units were started, with 42% single-detached houses, 37% townhouses, 19% apartments, and 2% semi-detached houses.⁵ In the Waterloo region, the mix of housing built on greenfield land was 48% apartments, 21% single- and semi-detached homes, and 31% townhouses in 2023.⁶

The bottom line: Instead of fighting the province, Hamilton's Council should cooperate to build ground-related housing and low-rise apartments on greenfield land while encouraging a broad range of apartments in the city's denser urban areas, from secondary suites in existing houses to high-rise apartments.

Environmental imperatives are essential, but so is the provision of a diverse range of affordable housing, including ground-related homes built on greenfield lands. Providing ground-related homes on greenfield land will help improve future housing affordability for Hamilton residents since this is the housing type the majority desire.

⁵ Frank Clayton and David Amborski. "School of Cities Critics Misconstrue Clayton/Amborski on Greenfield Development/Sprawl." CUR. September 12, 2022.

⁶ Region of Waterloo. "2023 Building Permit Activity and Growth Monitoring." Planning Information Bulletin. May 7, 2024.

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Appendix: Adequacy of Hamilton’s Vacant Land Supply By Unit Type

This appendix presents the city of Hamilton's vacant residential land supply by unit type and location at the end of 2023. It also examines the adequacy of the vacant land by calculating the years of supply by unit type.

Vacant residential land supply at the end of 2023

Figure A-1 shows that Hamilton's land supply at the end of 2023 could accommodate 39,174 new housing units, two-thirds of apartments, and one-third of ground-related homes. The future units on vacant land are divided equally between the built boundary area and designated greenfield areas.

The differing unit type profiles for housing built on sites in built-up areas vs greenfields found in many cities are evidenced from the data – mainly apartments in the built-up area and mainly ground-related homes in greenfield areas.

Figure A-1: Vacant Residential Land Supply by Area and Unit Type, City of Hamilton, December 31, 2023				
Area	Singles/Semis*	Townhouses**	Apartments***	All Unit Types
<i>Vacant Land Supply - Units</i>				
Designated Greenfield Areas	4,082	7,515	7,986	19,583
Built Boundary	711	1,449	17,431	19,591
Total City	4,793	8,964	25,417	39,174
<i>Vacant Land Supply - Percent Distribution By Unit Type</i>				
Designated Greenfield Areas	21	38	41	100
Built Boundary	4	7	89	100
Total City	12	23	65	100

* Single and semi-detached houses

** Townhouses and apartments in duplexes

*** Bachelor, 1-bedroom and 2+ bedroom apartment units

Source: City of Hamilton. "Market and Land Supply Monitoring Report 2023." November 5, 2024.

Adequacy of vacant land supply

Figure A-2 calculates the number of years of construction the 2023 vacant land supply can accommodate before becoming exhausted. The average annual number of homes built by type of units is derived from forecasts made in the city’s 2023 Development Charges Background Study.

The conclusion is that the supply of sites for single- and semi-detached houses will be gone in 5.0 years, townhouses in 8.0 years, and apartments in 17.8 years.

Figure A-2: Adequacy of Vacant Land Supply by Unit Type, City of Hamilton, December 31, 2023				
Vacant Land Supply	Singles/Semis*	Townhouses**	Apartments***	All Unit Types
City of Hamilton	4,793	8,964	25,417	39,174
Average Annual Housing Construction****	954	1,115	1,425	3,494
Years of Land Supply	5	8	17.8	11.2

* Single and semi-detached houses

** Townhouses and apartments in duplexes

*** Bachelor, 1-bedroom and 2+ bedroom apartment units

**** Average Annual construction 2023-2033. Excludes 28 units per year in rural area

Source: Figure A-1 and Watson & Associates Ltd. "Development Charges Background Study:City of Hamilton." December 21, 2023.