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Canada's population is booming – and we aren't building nearly enough homes

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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A condo building is under construction in Toronto on July 13.

CARLOS OSORIO/REUTERS

Canada's population is about to boom. And Canada isn't ready.

Last month, Statistics Canada released a report showing this country's population has recently been growing at almost double the rate of the rest of the G7. The agency also expects that trend to accelerate, because of the Trudeau government's history of, and plans for, high and rising immigration. Statscan's medium-growth outlook sees today's population of 38 million rising by 10 million by 2043. Its high-growth forecast is a population of more than 52 million. Both of those mean growth well above even the swift pace of recent years.

Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia are going to become home to most of these new Canadians. Statscan's high-growth forecast sees more than two million new people in B.C., nearly three million new Albertans and more than six million more Ontarians.

And it seems inevitable that most new Canadians will live in and around the biggest cities. Statscan has not released estimates at the city level, but using the agency's provincial high-growth forecasts, and extrapolating from recent history, suggests huge growth in metro regions. Calgary, with 1.6 million people today, could add around a million people by 2043. Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley suburbs, with three million people today, could grow to north of four million. And the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area, with 7.8 million people now, could grow to around 11 million.

Immigration is the driver. In the quarter century from 1990 through 2014, immigration averaged about 240,000 people a year. In 2014, the final full year of the Harper government, it was 260,000. The Trudeau government stepped on the gas. Projections of 340,000 immigrants a year in 2018 have been expanded to a minimum target this year of 432,000, and as many as 475,000 in 2024.

Canada's municipalities and provinces are acting like they are blissfully unaware of any of this. Civic policies, notably around housing, are still stuck in the past, with most residential land restricted to low-density homes. Municipalities across Canada are, at best, reluctant to change these zoning rules. It's not easy to build new housing, and restrictive zoning makes it especially difficult to add new housing – and new people – to established neighbourhoods. To add several million new people using the old model, Greater Toronto will have to sprawl far beyond the borders of the GTA – as it already is.

Efforts to loosen zoning have advanced in slow motion, leaving planning ever farther behind reality. In Victoria last week, after years of work and consultation, city council postponed a decision on modest zoning changes until after an October election. The plan was to allow mild density such as – how radical! – townhouses on street corners.

In Toronto, the city for years has mulled over “expanding housing options in neighbourhoods,” but the scope of change has been limited, and decisions keep getting pushed into the future. In cities surrounding Toronto, with more than half the GTA's population, change is even slower.

Housing construction is behind demand; what about public transit? The news here is less bad. The Vancouver region is at work on two major projects: the Broadway subway and SkyTrain to the suburb of Langley. There are also solid plans for bus rapid transit. Montreal's REM rail projects look promising. In and around Toronto, multiple big transit projects are in the works; some are even the right projects. But this comes after decades of transit inaction. Toronto's

Eglinton Crosstown LRT – planned in the 1980s, cancelled in the 1990s, reimagined in the 2000s, re-reimagined and finally begun in the 2010s – is a classic example. It's still not finished.

The federal government is pushing ambitious population growth, so it needs to play a bigger role in housing, to make sure construction keeps up. Other jurisdictions like California and New Zealand have taken some control away from cities. B.C.'s NDP government is planning the same. In Ottawa, the Liberals have not yet acted on their \$4-billion housing “accelerator” to “tackle NIMBYism.” The Conservatives in the last election pitched using federal infrastructure dollars to force cities to allow more density; new Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre has a similar plan to take on “egregious cases of NIMBYism.”

Canada's infrastructure, above all housing, is not keeping pace with Canada's population growth. That has to change.