

## On Infill, Densification, and Affordability



What would you think of a city planner who said this:

“You start from one basic principle as a planner: Citizens are as smart or smarter than you are, and they have a lot more information at the local level than you can ever have.”

Or this:

“The idea that we’ll simplify all the regulatory processes, and just allow willy-nilly to develop, not only is it not really giving us much affordability, in many cases it’s putting the existing affordable housing in jeopardy.”

Or this:

“There are many, many ways to densify. Do we have to plop down 10-story towers? There are many ways that are more subtle, more interesting.”

These are a handful of insights offered by perhaps Canada’s most esteemed urban planner, Larry Beasley, in his September 11, 2024, online interview with Better Infill’s Marie Gordon.

If you’re uneasy about how zoning, priority growth areas, and district plans are being laid on your neighborhood, Larry’s comments will help you understand why you feel that way and how it could be different.

The excerpts below, edited with Larry’s permission, cover infill, densification, and affordability. Others in the series cover the importance of neighborhoods; good public consultation; the pitfalls of one-size-fits-all planning, and more. All are available at <https://www.betterinfill.ca/>, as is the actual interview.

Put this information to use:

- ✔ Use it is a tool for you to use
- ✔ Send it around
- ✔ Quote from it in emails and letters
- ✔ Adapt it
- ✔ Use it to make Edmonton better.

*--From the team at Better Infill.*

## ON AFFORDABILITY AND DENSIFICATION.

“Housing affordability is undeniably an issue for a growing portion of Canadians. Unfortunately, the simple answer, which is just to provide more opportunity for development, is not a good enough answer. The idea that we’ll simplify all the regulatory processes, and just allow willy-nilly to develop, not only is it not really giving us much affordability, in many cases it’s putting the existing affordable housing in jeopardy, because that often tends to be the areas which get redeveloped.”

*“We have to find new ways of delivering housing.”*

“To secure affordability, we have to find new ways of delivering housing. We have to find ways to secure low-income housing, middle-income housing, special-needs housing, which will take very different regulations than we’ve had in the past, and also a different relationship between government and the private sector.”

“What we can’t do is say, “Just put everything aside just to deliver housing for me that I can afford.” What we know from the old urban renewal days, when that’s exactly what happened, is that we destroy community, and we destroy all the other factors that make cities livable, and even survivable. So, as we are dealing with issues such as infill and densification, we have to also be dealing with how, when a unit gets built, it’s going to be affordable. We have to protect quality and livability because we’re going to be living at different ways than those luscious single family homes we had half a century ago.”

“We can’t let affordability be an angle that trumps all angles. Recently, I was in a city working where they were getting rid of some regulations, saying, “Well this will allow more affordable housing in an area,” and actually the housing that was going to be built was going to be very expensive housing, not affordable housing.”

“New housing is not going to people up and down the spectrum. It’s going to the people who can compete in the marketplace the best, the people who have most wealth, and the few people who can secure a government assisted housing unit at the lower end. And others are getting into more and more of a struggle every day. It’s not just build more and they will come.”

## ON INFILL AND DENSIFICATION.

“In principle, we need to diversify our existing communities, they're very, very low density. So adding opportunity for infill is not a bad idea. On the other hand, when you're dealing with a sitting community, there are more edges to implementing than there would be if it's a new community, because people are there, people are being hit one way or another. So you're obliged as a government, but also as citizens, to then say, "All right, let's now talk about what's not working, what was excluded, what was not talked about during the policy formation?", and you can evolve the policy constantly. That is the organic way that cities find the agenda and programs they need. They don't just all come out of thin air. They come out of trial and error and talk and review.”

## ON SENSITIVE DENSIFICATION.

“There are many, many ways to densify. Do we have to plop down 10 story towers? There are many ways that are more subtle, more interesting. With laneway houses you can double the density without anyone even noticing. Legalizing secondary suites helps. There are so many ways. You go into a neighborhood and you say, well, this neighborhood has a personality that could take three story buildings or four story buildings, or maybe a back lane house, or maybe allowing a large house to be turned into three units.”