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Brisbane Favors Sprawl, Rejects Medium-Density Housing

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Brisbane's push for urban expansion over medium-density housing like townhouses and apartments signals a return to sprawling suburbs, frustrating planners.

Queensland's capital is doubling down on urban sprawl, sidelining medium-density housing options like townhouses and apartments, much to the dismay of urban planning experts. The Liberal National Party (LNP), now leading the state government, has shifted away from the previous Labor government's density targets, which mandated 60% of new homes in South East Queensland (SEQ) be apartments or townhouses, according to the 2006 South East Queensland Regional Plan. Planning Minister Jarrod Bleijie announced on July 30, 2025, a review of the regional plan, prioritizing new housing estates over high-rise developments, citing affordability challenges for developers building vertical towers.

This policy pivot reverses efforts to curb Brisbane's expansion, which historian Peter Spearritt warned could create a "200-kilometre city" from Noosa to the New South Wales border, straining infrastructure and livability. "The state's focus on greenfield estates ignores the housing crisis," said Dorina Pojani, associate professor of urban planning at the University of Queensland, in an interview with The Guardian. She advocates for "missing middle" housing, row houses, and low-rise apartments, to balance affordability and density. The Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) echoed concerns, noting the government's \$2 billion subsidy for council infrastructure in new estates risks expanding the urban footprint unsustainably.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows SEQ's dwelling density rose from 13.6 dwellings per hectare in 2011 to 16.2 in 2016, with median lot sizes shrinking from 450m² to 423m² by 2019. Yet, Bleijie argues that high-density mandates have failed, as developers struggle to finance towers amid high costs. "The regional plan's focus on going up isn't delivering homes," he told ABC News. Critics, including YIMBY (Yes In My Back Yard) Brisbane organizer Travis Jordan, argue that restrictive zoning codes stifle diverse housing options, forcing reliance on single-family homes.

The state's return to suburban expansion has sparked debate about long-term sustainability. With SEQ's population projected to hit 6 million by 2046, unchecked sprawl could worsen traffic and affordability issues. For now, Brisbane's planners face an uphill battle to promote density in a city leaning toward sprawling estates.