

Site plan control could help "stable neighbourhoods" fight

By Brock Weir

Tools already at the municipality's ready to control commercial developments might be the key in protecting Aurora's stable neighbourhoods, according to planners.

Council has tasked staff with looking into whether site plan controls already used for larger scale non-residential developments can be used to ensure Aurora's older neighbourhoods are protected from new builds that are incompatible with surroundings.

This was the direction given at the last Public Planning meeting, a heated affair which lasted just over four hours, involving input from over a dozen area residents ? both from within and outside designated ?stable neighbourhoods.?

Earlier this year, in response to complaints from residents, Council launched a study examining what should be done ? if anything ? to protect existing stable neighbourhoods from large-scale, incompatible development. Three areas were in the study ? Orchard Heights, Regency Acres, and the historic neighbourhood surrounding Town Park ? with Tyler and Temperance Streets most recently thrown into the mix.

Proposed recommendations from staff were greeted with mixed reviews from lawmakers and neighbours alike, reviews were which were aired once again at Public Planning, but Councillors said a Site Plan Control mechanism, which can give the municipality authority on architectural details ranging from the size of the building to, in its most extreme, building materials and colours, is worth investigating further.

This ?muscle? is given to municipalities under the Planning Act, and is routinely flexed with commercial developments and larger scale residential plans. There is nothing, however, to prevent it being flexed over the construction of detached and semi-detached homes.

?I would like to see a more in-depth exploration of how it might work,? said Councillor John Abel, pressing for more details on expanding site plan controls to detached and semi-detached residential builds. ?People aren't opposed to tearing down a home and they appreciate the value of selling their home without restrictions. There seems to be an alternative in our Official Plan that we could use that I was not aware of until this evening, until it was brought up, and [I would like to] see if that can't address all of the concerns that were brought up [like] height, massing, and some of the other issues that were unique.?

Other Council members agreed site plan controls are something worth exploring.

?It has been talked about in the past and I think it is something we can move forward with quickly and implement now to try and manage the process currently,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I think that our Official Plan is a blueprint; it does have some provisions within it to help manage the process, although there are some other aspects that need to be addressed. I would like to see us move forward with the site plan control sooner rather than later.?

There is a question mark over whether this will come back sooner or later.

While local lawmakers signalled their approval of reviewing the site plan mechanism, their final decision on the matter, along with a report compiling all comments received to date on the thorny issue of ?stable neighbourhoods? is pending another Public Planning meeting slated for either the end of this month or in September.

Along with this, Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, recommended it would be best if staff also prepared a report on architectural guidelines for each impacted neighbourhood ?to set those standards for the site plan control review.?

Councillor Jeff Thom's expressed views on the matter followed this theme.

?We don't have a definition of what a monster home is,? he contended. ?It's hard to address a problem, if you think there is one, when we don't know what the definition of that problem is. I do support site plan control. It's a tool we have right now. We can implement it without having to go through any appeal processes. It is something we can do?as fast as we possibly can. It will have an impact.?

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: ?Our Official Plan does have the tools we're looking for. We have the tools we can put in place, site plan controls, that would allow us to ensure that these areas are protected and get redeveloped in the way the property needs to be.? Mayor Geoff Dawe had a similar view, going a step further to note that the very definition of ?stable neighbourhood? and all that entails, should be set out as well.

?I think we can achieve what we need to in terms of looking at this a little bit differently with site plan control and perhaps an extension of the interim control bylaw,? he said. ?[With that] we can move to a state that would let us be a little bit more measured in our response to this.?

For Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who called for this review earlier this year through a motion, time was of the essence. The

incumbent Council has just over two months left in its mandate and she said to pass the issue onto the next Council ?is not acceptable.?

?We have been working on this for eight full months,? she said. ?As Councillor Abel said, the problem is monster homes. The problem is they are permitted under the existing bylaws. We see the results of that. It is not acceptable. It has to stop. Developers must not be allowed to come in and ignore our OP policies, even if they have not been transferred into the zoning bylaws in all these years. Developers must not be able to hurt communities.?