

Council moves for regular updates on new builds in Stable Neighbourhoods

Councillors have requested regular updates on new builds within Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods, pending the final approval of new design guidelines for Regency Acres, Aurora Heights, Temperance Street and the Town Park area this week.

Council is set to approve the new design guidelines for new builds and changes to existing buildings in these four communities, which have come to be known as Aurora's 'stable neighbourhoods' after lengthy debate around the table.

The extensive guidelines, which are intended to make sure new builds are complementary and fit in with the existing neighbourhoods, got tentative approval at last Tuesday's General Committee meeting.

The proposals have seen significant push-back from residents in the neighbourhoods who say the guidelines don't go far enough.

Last week was no exception as the Regency Acres Ratepayers Association, represented by resident Rebecca Beaton, made a final push to lawmakers for something with more teeth.

'We strongly believe the guidelines are not adequate to provide the protections needed to fulfil the Official Plan and design guidelines' goal of 'respecting and enforcing' the characters of Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods, particularly for Regency Acres,' said Ms. Beaton, noting the decision to include Golf Glen, which comprises of newer, larger homes compared to the rest of Regency Acres, and proceeding with common zoning for all four neighbourhoods has flawed the process.

'These and other Council decisions over the near and long term will have the greatest negative impact on the character of the 1960s Regency Acres area,' she continued. 'This is because the original housing stock has the smallest GFA (Gross Floor Area) and the lowest roof height and lot coverage of the four stable neighbourhoods. We recognize that Aurora's revised zoning bylaws have somewhat limited height and GFA. We also recognize that these guidelines have addressed some of the other concerns raised by the ratepayers' groups and associations. However, at the end of the day, guidelines are not enforceable. We remain extremely concerned that infill home builders can continue to build homes that ignore all the design guideline recommendations, submit various applications asking for increase in GFA and height.'

Ms. Beaton's delegation came with requests to local lawmakers, particularly that all applications that do not comply with the specific guidelines set to be implemented be presented to Council in a staff report for review on a semi-annual rather than annual basis.

'We believe this will allow Council to make an important decision on whether the zoning bylaws need to be amended to address specific issues such as balcony and deck placement, exterior lighting, driveway placement, tree protection, etc.' she concluded. 'As infill development continues in Aurora's stable neighbourhoods, we fully expect that this semi-annual report will quickly make it obvious that additional zoning bylaws will be needed to protect Aurora's stable neighbourhoods.'

Whether or not that becomes 'obvious' remains to be seen, but Council saw the merit in a semi-annual report, signing off on the recommendation to do just that following a motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner. But, from the Councillor's perspective, a simple report twice a year on what was approved might not be enough. The ideal report, she said, should include which applications were rejected 'and why' in order to get a better idea of what guidelines are working and what builders might be trying to overcome.

'I think this would be very good and interesting [for Council] to know which of the design guidelines are being readily accepted and which aren't,' she said. 'It could be a great information tool. I would ask that staff be able to do that and perhaps, if they know what is being asked of them, they can make, just simple notes along the way of approving the application.'

This extra step received the initial support from Councillor Harold Kim who said the request is 'reasonable' depending on the level of detail. But Councillor Michael Thompson expressed reservations after David Waters, Director of Planning for the Town, said

doing so ?could be quite onerous? on staff as guidelines are just that ? not legislation.

?My concern is this is really going to get into the weeds,? said Councillor Thompson. ?It is going to be an onerous report and staff are going to have to talk about the variance?on what was in the guidelines. These are not definitive rules?. What does Council do with that report ? chastise staff for those kinds of guidelines??

Councillor Rachel Gilliland also had misgivings about this extra step.

?The only challenge I have with the secondary part is exactly the fact that it is very subjective and it can be something extremely, extremely minor to something that is major,? she said. ?I understand the intent of what the ratepayers are asking for in terms of understanding the scenario of who is [following] but I think [the motion] does need to be cleaned up.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter