

Council seeks more answers as stable neighbourhood protections move to next level

By Brock Weir

The future of further protections on the size and scale of infill developments in Aurora's stable neighbourhoods is headed to the next level after a special Council meeting held Tuesday night.

Ways and means to protect established communities from what some residents describe as 'monster homes' will be fleshed out at a public planning meeting later this spring or early this summer, but the move prompted questions from Council on just exactly what will be fleshed out, and whether they are under the gun to make a decision before this term runs out.

Nearly 200 residents packed Council chambers last week for the nearly three-and-a-half hour meeting to hear what local lawmakers had to say on the subject. It has been a hot topic for years, but picked up significant heat in the second half of the current Council term after Council initiated a study last fall.

The study earmarked specific stable neighbourhoods to be considered including large swaths of the Aurora Heights, Regency Acres and Town Park neighbourhoods for review.

A future public planning meeting will consider specific changes to Aurora's zoning bylaws, including modifying the municipality's site plan process and urban design guidelines to ensure that the massing, setbacks and lot coverage of future builds are in keeping with surrounding areas.

The public planning meeting, however, will cast a wider net, its scope expanded to include Temperance Street, as well as Tyler Street lying west of Temperance at the request of Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

For many Council members, with regards to whatever goes forward to planning, the devil is in the details and some thought the details going around the table last week were relatively slim.

'Which specific changes to the zoning bylaw are going to be proposed at the public planning meeting?' asked Councillor Jeff Thom. 'I don't think it is helpful to go to a public planning meeting without a proposal for specific changes. It's hard to know how to frame our remarks when I don't know what specific changes are to the zoning bylaw and where they will apply.'

'We haven't talked about the changes we're looking for. If we're looking to make amendments through the course of discussion tonight, that is fine, but I just think we have to be clear what specific changes we are looking for and where.'

The 'what?', according to Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, could include notice to the public on 'general changes to the zoning bylaw' based on any discussions that were had last Tuesday pertaining to 'reduction in height, primarily, reduction in lot coverage' and the comments taken from nearly a dozen delegations to Council earlier in the meeting.

The 'where' was the only thing clarified after Councillor Gaertner's motion, but for other Councillors the widened net didn't go far enough.

'There are many other areas in our Town that are designated stable neighbourhoods that, in our Official Plan, have no less protection from incompatible development and yet they are not being included as part of this discussion,' Councillor Thom continued. 'I know the challenge there is if you start restricting provisions in terms of height and lot coverages, etc., there might be a different perspective from someone who lives in the Kemanno Drive area west of Crawford Rose than east of Crawford Rose. I think we should be as specific as possible and know that further on down the road we might run into problems as well.'

Concerns over the specifics 'or lack thereof' were also voiced by Councillor Michael Thompson, but specifics, he said, would need to be ready to go ahead of the public planning meeting itself.

'At any public planning meeting we have, there's always at least a drawing or some sort of baseline at which to begin the discussion,' said Councillor Thompson. 'I think what would help this process is if staff would utilize their expertise and put forward a Made in Aurora solution to at least start the discussion.'

Councillor Tom Mrakas was of a similar view, adding he believed the nitty-gritty of the changes necessary to protect Aurora's stable neighbourhoods would be fleshed out at the next session.

'What we're looking to do is for us to go to Public Planning and have those options presented to us and then, at that point, hear from the public and make those final decisions,' said Councillor Mrakas. 'If we include certain parts of the stable neighbourhoods, we'll never know if people within those areas would like to be included or not and we'd be missing the boat. [We're supposed to be] exploring all those options. I would like to see all those options when we move to public planning [so we] can make an informed decision.'

'I think everyone around this table agrees: it is not the fact we don't want to see development? A lot of developers come into our

Town and say they are helping to build a community. There is a big difference between building a community and building our community. I am always looking forward to putting forward things that help build our community and make it the best it could possibly be. At the end of the day, what we need to do is change our zoning so it meets the intent of our OP (Official Plan). At minimum, that is what we need to do.?

While Councillors might agree that it is their responsibility to make Aurora the best community it can be, not all were on board with the speed with which Council is moving to get to that point.

There are just a few Council cycles left before the current 2014-2018 Council breaks for the summer and then for the municipal election campaign.

This, argued some lawmakers, has placed Council under pressure to make a decision.

?We started [this study] on October 24, now we don't have a choice: if we want to do this in this Council, we have to go to the planning meeting on June 27 and then we have to agree to have a GC (General Committee) and a Council meeting in July because, after that, we could be a lame duck Council. We're really under the gun and so the motion on the table is the only possible motion if we're going to try and complete this process and not go through it all over again in the next Council,? said Councillor Gaertner.

Added Councillor Thom: ?This is an immensely complicated issue and something that has immense impacts on the lives of everyone who owns a house in these neighbourhoods. In many cases, it is their retirement and it is massive. While I agree this could have been brought forward faster, as I sit here in this chair tonight, [I'm thinking] something of this magnitude, although we are coming up to the end of a term and who knows what will happen next term, we're still trying to agree on the area that we will be including going forward for public planning. That is not even clear based on our discussions tonight, let alone the changes.

?Just to move quickly because our term is ending would be a mistake.?