

Stable Neighbourhood data doesn't add up, say residents

By Brock Weir

Data used by consultants to come up with a series of bylaw recommendations designed to protect Aurora's so-called 'stable neighbourhoods' just don't add up, according to area residents.

Council, sitting at the committee level this week, is expected to take a first look at a new set of zoning standards for the Aurora Heights, Town Park, Regency Acres and Temperance Street communities.

The new proposed zoning standards include a maximum building height of nine metres and a maximum lot coverage of 2,530 square feet with an incorporated garage, and a maximum gross floor area of 370 square metres, or 2,314 square feet.

The proposed new standards are intended to address concerns from residents and neighbours alike over the influx of 'monster homes' into long-established communities, or, at the very least, new builds that are incompatible with surrounding homes.

The recommendations, however, hit a speed bump last week when Council voted in favour of a motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

In her motion, Councillor Gaertner said previous reports did not include the data that consultants used to calculate both the GFA and overall percentage lot coverage.

This was a view bolstered at the podium by Sandra Sangster, representing the Regency Acres, Aurora Heights and Town Park Area Ratepayers Associations.

Together, she and Councillor Gaertner, called on The Planning Partnership, the consultants retained by the Town, to prepare a new report outlining their methodology, ahead of this week's General Committee meeting.

They agreed, in short, that the numbers just didn't add up and suggested including data for Temperance Street, an area with far fewer homes than the other three study areas, skewed results.

'Resolution of these issues is vital as Council will soon make its final decision,' said Ms. Sangster. 'Aurorans have the right to expect transparency in the data used to create the bylaw recommendations for stable neighbourhoods. Council and staff have an obligation to ensure that the methods used are statistically sound. The mere fact that a consultant did the work provides no such guarantee based on my thirty years as a research officer.'

Ms. Sangster paid particular attention to the issue of the Gross Floor Area as she said it would have "the greatest impact on the evolving streetscape and is of the greatest concern to our members."

"The report did not identify the number of dwellings used in calculating the average for each study area, nor did it state how many new oversized homes were included," she said, noting consultants used an average rather than a median to come to their conclusions, whereas, she argued, the median would be more applicable. "Some may argue that a median may only make a difference of 100 or 200 square feet, but these increments add up, especially when you consider that minor variances can add more square footage beyond what the bylaws allow. It would be a simple exercise to calculate the median. We know the data file exists. We think that Council should have that information so that you're familiar with the impact of that type of measurement.

"The inclusion of Temperance Street has been an unclear process. However, if it is included then the calculations must weigh the GFA for each study area by the number of dwellings in the area. The consultants' figures show that the GFA is substantially larger for Temperance, whereas the number of dwellings is dramatically smaller. Weighting based on the number of dwellings will ensure that the recommended GFA properly reflects the characteristics of homes in all four areas. We ask planning staff to provide us with the number of dwellings."

But the issue of whether or not Council had that information, or could even pass it on, was the subject of conservable debate around the table.

Speaking to her motion, Councillor Gaertner said reviewing the data and the inclusion of Temperance Street just made "perfect sense."

"It is such a small area and is [being] given equal weight to the others," she said. "I would like to know how many homes were used and the largest home calculations because that does make a difference to the data. I think these are all reasonable asks."

She went on to reject staff claims that providing such information to staff or consultants for these purposes would require a Freedom of Information request because names and specific addresses are not required.

Staff, however, were of a different opinion, insisting that carrying out the job would require "some time" for consultants to prepare and a report would not likely be ready by this week's meeting.

"We certainly want to work with our planning department to figure out the format they provided the information to the consultant," said Town Clerk Mike de Rond. "It is not as simple as a spreadsheet, there could be personal information on there and things we need to black out. It could be a lot of work, it would involve our legal team analysing legal agreements we have

with MPAC to see what we're allowed to give out and things like that. It's not just a matter of, 'Here's a spreadsheet with redacted data.' It is a lot of hours from staff.'

Council did not give up on getting the answers. Through some wordsmithing around the table, they came up with a resolution they could agree upon, and called on staff and consultants to get the job done.

'We're not asking the consultant to give us any extra information,' said Councillor Gaertner. 'We're just asking them to really tell us how the calculations were done and what difference it would make if we had average, mean, and a different weighting for Temperance. I think all of those requests from the residents just make sense to me.'

Added Councillor John Gallo: 'We gathered [the information for the consultants] and gave it to them. I also understand there is possibly some information that is private in terms of names associated to addresses. The residents, I don't believe, are asking for that and there wouldn't be any value in that anyway. I am having a tough time understanding how we can't release the same information we gave the consultants.'

Mayor Tom Mrakas, along with Councillor Sandra Humfries, and Rachel Gilliland all agreed, as did Councillor Harold Kim, who said the residents made a 'very good claim' on why methodology needs to be consistent.

'There are some people out there in the community that whether you're for stable neighbourhoods or not, they may have had a

[preconceived]

number in mind, but if Council, and if Town Staff are going to, with some kind of methodology, come up with a number, we have to disclose what that methodology is,' he said. 'I think at the last meeting that methodology was revealed but there were certainly some gaps that [have been] uncovered.'

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: 'We all understand the intent behind the motion and I think we should encourage staff to do what they can in the time allotted to provide as much detail as possible without getting too hung up on some of the bigger issues. Then, if the report comes and it doesn't drill down far enough, we can address it at the time. Let's at least get something to try and remedy it.'

At the end of the day, Councillor Gaertner said the ongoing Stable Neighbourhoods study was 'one of the most important things that any Council has undertaken' as it has a direct impact on 'thousands of people in many neighbourhoods' and indeed the Town as a whole.