

Affordable Housing plan up for public review following tentative Council approval

Members of the public will now have a chance to weigh in on the Aurora's Affordable Housing Action Plan after Council formally received the draft plan last week.

The Affordable Housing Plan, as drafted, will serve as a 'blueprint' to foster affordable housing options within the community through 2051 - a time that's expected to see significant population growth within Aurora.

The plan is guided by six key objectives: increase housing supply, promote housing affordability and stability, ensure complete community growth, streamline approvals, enhance partnerships, and 'continually monitor, assess and educate.'

Building on discussions when first presented to Council at the Committee level earlier this month, lawmakers welcomed the chance for public consultation while also stressing that concrete action is needed going forward.

'We're going to start this summer,' said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, on when outreach will begin, noting that consultation will begin with Regional Community Housing Service as well as Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee. 'As we move forward, we will certainly include as many housing groups and providers [as possible].

'Come September, after the summer break, we will hold open houses community-wide' for all residents to seek feedback and we will do a full public consultation with all groups prior to coming back to Council for final consideration on the draft and any suggested changes that come from that consultation.'

Reviewing the recommendations within the draft plan, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said that while it contains 'a lot of action items', at the end of the day 'Actions speak louder than words.'

'While I see this as a great plan, what we're actually going to do moving forward with that timeline really is key,' she said, noting she would like to see 'red tape' tackled and reduced. 'We've been talking about this forever and never really get anything done.'

One recommendation she questioned was an action item to include streetscape improvements in the Aurora Promenade (the Yonge and Wellington corridors in the Town's downtown core) as part of the plan and how it related to affordable housing.

These streetscape improvements, replied Ramunno, have been 'on the books for a number of years' and enhancing those streetscapes 'may encourage some of those property owners to move forward with development opportunities to generate more housing.'

'There is also some infrastructure work that needs to be undertaken as part of that project that will support future development within that section of the Town,' he concluded.

But Councillor Gilliland suggested that that work should be undertaken outside of the plan.

'I think we all agree we want to see downtown revitalization and beautification. I just feel it is not appropriate here,' she said, adding she wanted a detailed timeline for consultation and, ultimately, implementation. 'I believe we're in a situation where we want to speed things up and understanding what can Council do now as opposed to waiting for next year, two years, three years down the road.'

Quick wins, replied Ramunno, include updating zoning bylaws around the Aurora GO Station, which has been identified as an area of intensification as a Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) by 2025 and this, he said, would help streamline housing approvals in this specific geographic area.

"I guess we will see what happens around the Council table and vote forward projects that come forward," said Councillor Gilliland. "We have had projects come forward that do emulate some of these action items but we have still held up these developments. I think people and the public need to pay attention to how Council does vote on projects that are good for the community when it actually aligns with this. I look forward to utilizing this action plan when we are talking about public planning meetings. If we are going to adopt this in principle, that this is something we should look to."

Among the recommendations in the draft plan to boost housing supply is to permit four units per residential lot to "increase 'missing middle' and rental opportunities"; increase density "incrementally" within the downtown Aurora Promenade area and the MTSA; undertake a study to look at opportunities to convert land designated for commercial and employment uses; looking at housing opportunities at "key sites," with 50-100 Bloomington Road West held up as just one example; and update zoning provisions to support housing creation.

Under the objective of Promote Housing Affordability and Sustainability, the Town will, should the Plan be implemented, develop an Affordable Housing Reserve Fund, funded through Community Benefit Charges or developers' contributions, to allow the Town to "assist with affordable housing projects" such as non-profit and co-op models.

Additional goals here include requiring affordable housing assessments for all new residential developments; implementing inclusionary zoning for the MTSA; prioritizing government-owned land for housing use; and exploring the "benefits and feasibility" of modular and prefab construction.

To ensure "Complete Community Growth," the draft plan suggests eliminating minimum parking requirements within the MTSA to lower housing costs; creating an Affordable Housing Community Improvement Plan, which would arm a municipality with tools to direct funds to "incentivize" the creation of affordable housing through grants, loans and tax breaks.

Streamlining the approval of developments is a key pillar in the plan. Recommendations here include a Community Planning Permit System that would allow multiple application processes to be consolidated into a single review; continuing to enhance the Town's online planning application system; prioritizing the approval of affordable housing developments; and waiving application fees for "critical housing opportunities," including emergency, transitional and supportive housing.

By Brock Weir