

Aurora's Affordable Housing Action Plan presented to Council

Aurora's Affordable Housing Action Plan will soon be up for public review after a draft of the plan was presented to Council last week.

The Affordable Housing Action Plan, if ultimately passed, 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 draft plan, as presented at last week's Committee of the Whole meeting, received mixed reviews from local lawmakers with some questioning whether the goals set out in the plan will achieve objectives, as well as just what constitutes 'affordable' in a community like 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.'

Among the recommendations to increase 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 Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) around the GO Station; 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. Streetscape improvements in the Aurora Promenade Area to 'reduce the overall cost of development' and 'Assist with housing affordability for the area' while adding to its vibrancy.

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.

Success of the plan will also hinge on enhancing partnerships with housing stakeholders, including assisting York Region and Housing York in identifying appropriate sites for housing. Partnerships could entail working with school boards to identify opportunities for housing; connecting developers with 'Affordable and Rental Housing Providers at the pre-consultation stage'; advocating with upper levels of government for housing funding and support; and supporting community housing providers.

Additional objectives range from developing an Aurora-wide assessment of housing needs and gaps, advocacy and education work to 'remove the stigma' associated with certain housing types, and a commitment to regularly update the plan in question.

The Draft Plan goes one step further to address what's always been a thorny issue in discussions around affordable housing: just

what constitutes 'affordable' in this day and age.

Generally, 'affordable' in the housing context is pegged at 'no less than 30 per cent of an individual or family's gross income,' per the Plan.

The draft Plan notes that the average Aurora rental is \$1,371 for a one-bedroom, \$1,794 for a two-bedroom, and \$2,065 for a three-bedroom dwelling, based on 2021 Census data. The average market value for a home is \$1,450,000, notes the report, through data provided by the Toronto Regional Real Estate Board, while the average gross total income for families locally is \$180,200.

'The Affordability Price Threshold is a measurement to determine the maximum price that households can afford to pay for private market dwellings, which includes the cost of a mortgage, mortgage insurance, and property taxes relative to 30 per cent of gross overall income,' the draft notes. 'The [Threshold] based on these factors for Aurora is \$682,000 for the average gross total income for families, but then \$509,000 based on the median gross income for families.'

These numbers drew questions around the Council table, with Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson suggesting Aurora would be 'hard-pressed to find any success in that particular area' if those prices are the target.

Some lawmakers suggested that the targets and objectives outlined in the plan were not 'aggressive' enough looking ahead to 2051.

'I really hope we can get some true actionable items out of this,' said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese. 'We're supposed to be asking for 25 per cent of all our developments that are supposed to be affordable and we've had that in our Official Plan for quite some time, but it just hasn't worked.'

Councillor Weese also said some of the goals were 'pretty non-specific' and sought assurances that Aurora's so-called Stable Neighbourhoods were protected with rules that protect their character.

'I am still not convinced that in specific areas, such as the Berczy Street area, that minimum parking is going to be useful and beneficial, even though it is in the MTSA,' he added. 'It may create problems in the adjacent residential areas because there is no parking and I hope we're going to be looking at a parking strategy and a traffic strategy that goes along with this because it is not just about housing.'

Developments within the MTSA were also on the radar of Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner. While she said it makes 'perfect sense' for developers to look at areas like this, it will take 'persuasion' to make affordable units happen.

'There is not going to be as much profit in affordable housing and possibly not in attainable development,' she said, citing the Affordability Threshold. 'I don't see developers being that excited about doing this kind of housing, but I really hope we can [incentivize them] because it is needed.'

Perception, however, was key for Councillor Weese who said 'stigmatization' was 'one of the biggest problems' in achieving more affordable units.

'I think one of the biggest problems we have is considered to be a stigmatization of people who may not have the affordability and the ability to do things,' he said. 'I think it is really an important part that we do to relieve the stigma of all of that. We have seen it before here and it raises its ugly head, and I think it is important that we have a community that is bound together with a cause to improve the quality of life for all of our residents, including those people who aren't at the upper echelons of income.'

From the perspective of Mayor Tom Mrakas, achieving these goals will require creativity.

'I am looking forward to seeing what comes back to us after going out to the public,' he said. 'Personally, I think that we've got to start getting really creative when it comes to this stuff. I think as we're doing at the Region now, we need to start doing it here:'

looking at properties that possibly we own that we can repurpose or look at land-lease deals where you eliminate the land cost for the development, which would significantly reduce those financial burdens and be able to create true affordability in rentals in our community. I think those are some of the things we need to look at.?

By Brock Weir