

Council approves transformative downtown plan with Community Planning Permit System

Aurora's Community Planning Permit System, one which has the potential to transform Aurora's downtown core while respecting its history, was approved by Council last week.

Council's approval came despite a last-minute motion to delay approval by approximately a month to allow more time for residents more time to weigh in on the proposal.

“Aurora Town Council approved the Downtown Community Planning Permit (CPPS), a streamlined tool that combines zoning amendments, minor variances, and site plan applications into one process,” said the Town in a statement following last week's Council meeting. “This tool improves efficiency in the application and approval process, supports a mix of housing options, and helps deliver community benefits such as parks, public facilities, and infrastructure upgrades. The CPPS sets clear, proactive criteria for downtown growth, guiding revitalization with design standards that build on the Downtown Urban Design Study.”

The plan also sets clear criteria on intensification in the area, allowing buildings of up to eight storeys to be built in the core, with step backs of more than 10 metres from existing designated buildings in order to preserve heritage façades and the local streetscape.

While some residents previously spoke out at Council regarding parking and traffic worries as a result of bringing more residential units into the downtown core, most feedback was positive, stating that intensification and bringing more people into the area, while respecting the heritage feel of the corridor, was the right way forward.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, however, questioned whether there has been enough time for Aurora residents to weigh in on such a transformative system, particularly one that delegates some of the approval process to staff rather than Council, if the proposals in question meet the set-out criteria.

“The CPPS represents a significant departure from our normal planning process, and my primary concern is the loss of transparency and meaningful community involvement,” he said. “Under this system, developments that would traditionally come before Council through rezoning, site plan, or variance applications, could proceed without the same level of public notice and debate.”

Residents and downtown stakeholders expect to be engaged when major changes are proposed in their neighbourhoods. This model reduces opportunities for residents to be heard and limits Council's ability to weigh in on site-specific impacts. Decisions that shape the future of our downtown core could be made largely behind the scenes, even when they are technically compliant. Planning should not be efficient; it must be open, understandable and trusted. When people feel decisions are made without them, confidence in the system erodes regardless of the outcome. Downtown Aurora is too important to risk a process that prioritizes speed over transparency. Until there is clear community support, stronger safeguards, and a defined role for Council, I cannot support moving forward.”

Similar views were offered by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said while she herself supported the CPPS, the public feedback wasn't there yet.

“We're dealing with a vision that is going to be an enormous change for the downtown,” she said. “Do I agree with it? I do. Do the residents agree with it? I have no idea. Nobody I have spoken to in the last week has any idea about this. I think this is perhaps the most monumental thing we're going to do in Aurora, ever. I could say we need a referendum, but we know they don't work very well, but definitely what we need to do is more education, more engagement with the public.”

“If we approve this tonight, it is set in stone. I'm not ready to do that yet. I believe we're all here to represent the residents and, frankly, I think as many people don't pay attention to politics, most people are unaware and, okay, it's our responsibility to make them aware, and I think they're going to agree with it because I think it's very well done, but I want to know that. I want to have the

feedback.?

Councillor Gaertner's motion to delay approval by a month failed to gain traction around the Council table, with other members stating they were comfortable with the level of public engagement, and with the plan moving forward.

‘We went through an extensive Public Planning process to get to this point,’ said Mayor Tom Mrakas. ‘We’ve gone through that extensive process, we’ve dealt with the public, we’ve had Open Houses, we’ve done everything transparently and open with the public. We’ve defined the parameters, similar to creating the Promenade Plan as a Secondary Plan, similar to creating the Official Plan. We’ve done all these things and we’ve done them properly. It’s the only way. If we approve this, if an applicant comes forward and wants to build what we’ve approved as a community, as residents of this community have decided we’re going to move forward with this, and Council has decided we’re going to move forward, then yes, they move forward.’

‘All this does is set the guidelines that we’ve gone and done an extensive public consultation and already gone through the Public Planning’. If anything comes in above and beyond that, we would go through that process again and be transparent with the public. This is about creating a vision for our downtown which [is] what this has done, and this is through the engagement of residents and our community.’

While Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said he understood Councillor Gallo's perspective about engagement, he said he appreciated the work that the Planning department had done to engage residents and said getting community input has often been a challenge.

‘I don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater,’ he said. ‘There is a tremendous amount of good work done here and I have a great feeling that this is the right direction to go, even though the fine points are not put on it. I just want to say that I’m a little disappointed that we don’t have more communication out and in, but I don’t think that’s reason enough for me to vote against this, just simply because of the enormous amount of work and effort and thought that’s gone in here and the professional consultation that has gone on.’

‘If someone would tell me that we could put this off for another month or two and we could gather surveys and all the rest of it, I would be happy to do that, but I don’t think that’s going to yield any more information than we have right now.’

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland was also supportive, citing how long this plan has been in the works.

‘We’ve been trying to regulate and plan for this downtown for at least 30 years, I know,’ she said. ‘What I have learned is that the unclear rules don’t protect our downtown. What they create is a lot of uncertainty, appeals, and one-off decisions and benefits, whoever can push the hardest.’

‘I find this approach here is really different. It doesn’t just allow more height; what it does is it controls where and how height happens. Along Yonge Street, the historic scale is protected through the deep setbacks, keeping the street human-scaled [in] look and façade, the taller portions are pushed back in interior blocks’ for that heritage façade.’

Similarly, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said a motion to push things to a later date ‘pushes it down the hill’ without any new information, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim said while he too understood the concerns over having residents weigh in on future developments in the area, a delay would be a ‘huge setback.’

‘It’s been talked about 30 years prior. We have this momentum going with Aurora Town Square, and I would like to keep that momentum going,’ said Councillor Kim. ‘I think this is a huge step in the positive progress in the Yonge and Wellington corridor. I think that our business owners have said that this would be a very positive impact to that end, so I’d be in support of this. When you look at other communities like Brampton and Gananoque that implemented CPPS, Gananoque did it Town-wide, and Brampton was in their downtown core, and they were able to preserve historical and history of their architecture and the personality and the character of their downtown core. There are examples out there to believe that this is a step in the right direction.’

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