

Council hopes new Official Plan will promote affordable housing options

The Town of Aurora is close to finalizing its new Official Plan, one which will guide development in the community for the next 30 years.

The final draft of the Plan, which has been four years in the making, was presented to Council last week, resulting in questions ranging from environmental impacts to density.

Affordable housing, a hot-button issue throughout the consultation process that informed the Draft Official Plan (OP), was very much in focus at the Committee level.

Providing a 'range and mix of housing' is one of the key tenets of the new OP, with the document stating that this mix is 'required to meet the needs of current and future residents.'

'In addition to the more conventional housing types such as single-detached dwellings and townhouses, the provision of an appropriate range of housing includes buildings geared to seniors as well as emergency shelters, affordable housing and special needs housing,' reads the draft, which goes on to explore the needs of the so-called 'missing middle.'

'This refers to housing options that accommodate multiple units at a low-rise scale and built form that are compatible with lower-density housing types such as single and semi-detached dwellings. These housing types are often 'missing' from established neighbourhoods. The provision of a range of housing types, including 'missing middle' housing types, tenures, and forms enables people to live in the community as they progress through the stages of life, and helps to address affordability and access to housing.'

The draft OP calls for a 'minimum' of 35 per cent of all new residential developments within the GO Station area 'the Town's Major Transit Station Area, or MTSA' and 25 per cent of new homes elsewhere in Aurora meet a definition of affordable housing.

Affordable housing in the OP is 'housing that is affordable for low- and moderate-income households' that can be 'promoted' through higher density and compact housing forms 'where housing is more affordable due to reduced per unit land costs; multi-unit housing of various forms 'to provide affordable family-sized units where housing is more affordable due to both land costs and construction costs; a range of unit sizes in higher-density housing forms, and 'building smaller units where housing is more affordable due to lower development and/or redevelopment costs.'

'In order to facilitate and provide opportunities for affordable housing units, Council may consider: relief from municipal permits or development fees for projects that provide affordable housing; streamlining and prioritizing development approvals that meet the Town's objectives for affordable housing; maintaining an ongoing inventory of potential and appropriate municipal-owned sites for the purposes of developing affordable housing; giving priority to the development of affordable housing on municipally-owned surplus lands; partnering with the Region and other levels of government to make surplus land available to affordable housing providers at little to no cost; working with and supporting community groups in their efforts to obtain funding allocations for community-based affordable housing initiatives; reducing parking requirements and/or parkland dedication requirements for projects that provide affordable housing; and informing the development community of government grants and/or subsidies, including land dedication, that will reduce overall development costs.'

The OP was presented to Council last week by planner David Riley of SGL who said the latest draft 'added policies to promote and prioritize the provision of affordable housing' while also focusing on 'gentle intensification' within existing neighbourhoods.

'We received a lot of feedback and the Town has done a lot of work on Stable Neighbourhoods in the past and it was certainly something we had to recognize, that we had these low-density residential areas that are part of the Town, but it's important to think about reinforcing the idea of gentle intensification and gentle density within existing neighbourhoods so that you can make sure this type of intensification is compatible with existing densities and character of neighbourhoods. That includes additional dwelling units

where three units, two additional dwelling units can be located on every property and also permitting denser forms of housing on the edges of Stable Neighbourhoods? and those edge sites where you might have up to four storeys or a little bit more dense development ? still low-rise, but there is an appropriate transition in terms of density, height and mass.

?What's unique to Aurora and some other municipalities with respect to density is that you have done some detailed work with respect to your low-rise areas and protecting the character of stable neighbourhoods. What came out of that were some new policies, some regulations that really put into place what's allowed there. We're now in a world where as of right municipalities have to permit additional dwelling units, up to two additional dwelling units on every property and that on its own is going to change the character. Aurora understood that and when I say Aurora, I mean everyone ? the Council, the community members that we do need to accommodate that.?

Throughout the meeting, density in key areas was an important issue for Council members with Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese questioning the possibility of requiring incoming developers to adhere to minimum height requirements rather than just a maximum limit of floors.

Similarly, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she was ?not so sure? developers would be able to ?achieve? affordable housing without intensification and incentives for them to do so.

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner was blunt in her line of questioning.

?Do you see the possibility of affordable housing?? she asked Riley. ?Even basement apartments are going for more than \$2,000 a month. Is that a fair question??

?I share your concern that things are difficult right now, but I think what Aurora is doing through this Official Plan is setting the foundation for further work,? he replied. ?Part of that work is going to be the implementation of a Community Planning Permit System in the Aurora Promenade where you will be able to actually leverage affordable housing from developments.

?It's up to landowners and developers to provide it beyond what can actually be required.?

?I will be optimistic as well,? Councillor Gaertner concluded.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter