

Council looks for area-specific restrictions in Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods

By Brock Weir

Area specific zoning bylaw restrictions designed to protect Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods will come forward to a future General Committee meeting at Council, following issues identified by members of Council and the public alike last week.

Council held a Public Planning meeting last Wednesday night to review a series of recommendations for amendments to existing zoning bylaws, as well as design guidelines, aimed to ensure that future infill developments in four communities – Town Park, Regency Acres, Aurora Heights and Temperance – are compatible with what is already in place in these established neighbourhoods.

Dozens of residents came forward to state their case to Council, most of whom suggested further changes to what was presented by independent consultants retained by Town Hall to carry out an unbiased review of the issue and to draft a solution.

“Neither side is happy with what've done, and that might be the right balance,” conceded consultant Ron Palmer after presenting his findings to Council. “I still think we have heard such diverse public opinion. Does the conversation continue? If the conversation continues, my fear is these neighbourhoods are left with existing zoning with no additional management tools in them. I still believe that the management tools that have been identified are appropriate and that the metrics that are within them could be debated forever.”

Some Council members were less sure the recommendations were appropriate.

In his presentation, Mr. Palmer recommended a mix of 28 guidelines and seven specific amendments to the Town's zoning bylaws.

Guidelines, he said, were designed to be flexible and covered areas ranging from building height and massing, to gross floor area and footprints of proposed buildings, garage and driveway widths, rear yard setbacks, front entrance treatments and building materials.

More concrete recommendations included setting the maximum building height of nine metres from the current existing standard of ten metres; that attached and detached garages be flush with or set back from the front wall of existing dwellings; that detached garages should have a gross floor area of 40 square metres and be counted towards maximum lot coverage; that rear yard setbacks shall be a minimum of 7.5 metres or 25 per cent of a total lot depth, whichever is greater; and that detached garages may be located within the rear yard with an appropriate setback.

Zoning bylaw changes pertaining to the gross floor areas of new builds, however, was a stickier point for Council.

Mr. Palmer recommended the maximum floor area of any dwelling should be no more than 317 square metres (3,933 square feet), and the maximum building footprint be no more than 236 square metres (2,540 square feet), or a lot coverage of 35 per cent, whichever is less.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, said further work needed to be done on setting specific rules on gross floor area in each of the four identified stable neighbourhoods as a blanket rule would not work across the board.

?In Regency Acres, we have homes that are 1,200 to 1,500 square feet; you're going to put a 4,000 square foot house next to that?? she asked. ?No matter how you want to look at compatible or any other words, I can't see how that could work or could be right. Aurora Heights is a little different. I think they are probably closer to 2,000 square feet, but I don't think that says exactly in the report. Town Park is all over the place.?

Mr. Palmer said he looked at the ranges and averages of each neighbourhood in question and came up with one number. He said Council could change that approach to whatever they felt appropriate.

Councillor Gaertner contended that the numbers for Regency Acres were ?skewed? because data lumped Golf Glen, the area just north of Regency Acres which boasts larger homes than the older subdivision, was lumped into the equation.

?The residents have been saying this to us for months and I never really understood the significance of it,? she said. ?It is just not possible, in my opinion, that Regency Acres and Aurora Heights could have the same average lot coverage, just because of the difference in sizes of the houses and the lots.?

In addition to this, Council members also offered reservations on design guidelines included in the report which, they said, ran the risk of being too restrictive.

?There doesn't seem to be that inherent flexibility in terms of building materials,? said Councillor Michael Thompson, citing the guideline recommending roofs of just cedar and asphalt to confirm with the existing look in stable neighbourhoods. ?How do we ensure that there is inherent flexibility in materials, colours, and so forth??

Councillor Rachel Gilliland was on a similar wavelength, adding: ?It is important we use 'encourage' or 'may' rather than should use, just so it doesn't come off as scary or fear that you have to use cedar shake. I think we need to meet in the middle with that. I recall the last time when

the ratepayers were coming up and they were stating what they thought was relevant to their neighbourhood that a three-metre driveway was really only addressed by Town Park area residents based on the fact a lot of the garages were set back or built in behind. I wasn't happy about the fact it was blanketed across all four areas because they are very specific and I recall the consultants suggesting that Town Park was in a very unique and eclectic variety of homes, but did have unique garages and setbacks. Those guidelines, in my mind, do need to be fine-tuned a little bit and softened a lot.?

But where these motions could be fine-tuned ? whether at the next General Committee meeting, or further Public Planning meeting ? was a source of debate.

?I would hate seeing this put on hold again,? said Councillor Gilliland.

In the other corner was Councillor Gaertner: ?I want it to be over, but I want to get it right,? she said. ?What's an extra month??

In the end, Council voted 4 ? 2 (Councillor Sandra Humfries was not present) to go forward to General Committee.

?I feel we have found and have struck a balance and that is what we're looking to do,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?I also do believe that, as elected officials, as a Council, it is our duty to look at how we grow as a community. We have restrictions for our downtown core, for commercial buildings. We don't allow more than six storeys, five plus one in areas. We need to make sure that how we grow is how we see it ten, 15, 20 years down the road, not just today. That is our job. I believe that this report has struck that balance.

?It is our job to move forward, make the decisions because that is what we're elected to do ? make decisions and not to put it off to the next day. Do I think it is right? I do think it is right. Do I think that some of the guidelines that are being presented in there that the language needs to be softened? 100 per cent. But we can do that by continuing to move forward and going to GC we can make those decisions. I am in favour of what's on the floor right now.?