

Garages, pool houses could help families care for seniors, provide for youth amid housing crunch

The process is now underway to determine whether families in Aurora will be allowed to turn buildings on their properties, like garages and pool cabanas, into standalone dwellings to help not only with the housing crunch but also in allowing seniors to age in place.

Council last week unanimously approved a motion from Councillor Rachel Gilliland calling on staff to review "appropriate locations" in the community that would allow for these "accessory dwellings" to take root on residential properties.

In her motion, Councillor Gilliland said permitting these accessory dwellings might go a long way in giving families options in caring for their seniors and providing a place to live for younger members of the family who are unable to break into the housing market.

"Our OP (Official Plan) doesn't have any enabling policies to allow for accessory dwellings," said Councillor Gilliland last week. "Since last summer, I was knocking on some doors and received some emails and calls specifically about this need and it's evident that we need more options like that for the community, today more than ever. It's no secret the cost of living has skyrocketed, such as gas, food and energy, we're seeing a 30-year high of 5.7 per cent inflation rates and possibly even climbing even higher. Most importantly, housing prices [have] ballooned to almost a national average of \$900,000 and this is reflecting about a 30 per cent jump in just one year alone. I really don't know how this next generation of kids are really going to manage.

"There are two glaring scenarios that I have heard from residents where families need support now more than ever and options to help fill these housing [gaps] and care for loved ones. I am most certain if this room was filled with young adults over 30 that most would agree they are finding themselves in their parents' basements. Why? Rent is simply too high. The cost of a home is completely unreachable and student debt combined with the cost of living has become completely unmanageable.

"The second scenario, which I am sure each family can relate to is [care for elderly parents]. Why are these things happening? They can't afford a for-profit retirement home, there is no room for subsidized long-term care or they simply don't qualify."

Options for these accessory units could be found in cabanas, pool houses and garden, carriage, or coach houses, she said.

Now, she added, is an ideal time for Aurora to consider putting these exemptions in place as the Town continues to update and re-draft the OP.

"Families need options to care for their loved ones and enacting enabling policies for accessory dwellings can offset this demand where deemed appropriate," she continued, noting that "appropriate" means locations that would offer off-street parking and lot coverage. "This is not intended to be a blanket policy, rather to identify areas where it would be a good, safe fit. This could identify maybe only three or five per cent of properties, but by eliminating this red tape to allow people to have these immediate options to care and support loved ones is something we can help right now."

This was a view shared by Council, including Councillor Sandra Humfries who said going down this road would suit many families.

"I just want to make sure it is done properly," she said.

From the perspective of Councillor Harold Kim, there is little debate that "creativity" is needed to add "much needed livable space in any municipality" but proceeding should be done with caution.

"Varying municipalities have initiated this initiative with varying degrees of success and acceptance by local residents," he said. "We always like the idea of having a park and more intensification in theory, but in reality, some people may not go for it when it is

happening in their back yard.?

Councillor Kim sought assurances that full public consultation would take place, assurances that were given by Director of Planning Marco Ramunno.

For Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor Michael Thompson, however, it was all about location.

?One of the key components [here] is being able to identify where it is deemed appropriate,? said Councillor Thompson. ?I don't think it is suitable for all areas of Aurora, but the criteria we establish?will be an important facet of this policy; to be able to provide that kind of direction and be able to see how staff are able to navigate these waters and identify a criteria that makes sense.?

Added Mayor Mrakas: ?I think it is beneficial that we ensure we find out what are the locations within our municipality that we would allow for these accessory dwellings to be permitted.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter