

Monster Homes: A growing problem or "much ado about nothing"?

By Brock Weir

An interim control bylaw to put a halt on new residential builds and additions that don't conform to standards in surrounding areas is set to be enacted this week in a bid to protect Aurora's 'stable neighbourhoods' from 'monster homes'.

If passed this week, the interim control bylaw will be in place for a year while a study is carried out on existing policies for protecting development standards in established communities. However, Council, after tentatively approving the measure at last week's General Committee, cautions that it might fall short of residents' expectations.

Once approved the Interim Control Bylaw will prohibit new residential dwellings and additions to existing homes that exceed current development standards set out in current residential zones for the year. An amendment was made to the motion last week giving staff the authority to sign off on minor variance applications brought forward to the Committee of Adjustment but Council members were still divided over whether the interim control measures will hit the mark.

'The interim control bylaw does address one of the problems, which is granting extra height and massing for a home, and I know that is a problem on some of the streets in the stable neighbourhoods,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, addressing concerns over 'monster homes' that have been expressed over the months since Council began looking at ways of addressing the issue. 'I think the way this [bylaw] is worded, we will allow residents to put additions on their home, that is not what we're trying to stop here; we're trying to stop the even larger builds.

'It does not prevent a developer from knocking down an existing home and creating something that does not fit in with the neighbourhood and causes adverse impact to the neighbourhood. In plain English, the zoning bylaw that exists will continue to allow the very large homes, some of you are calling them 'monster homes' or 'neighbourhood busting homes.'

This will continue, she said, until Council is able to fully look at current zoning bylaws in place to see if they fit with Aurora's Official Plan and go towards protecting older neighbourhoods. Chances are they won't, she said, and Council will 'hopefully' move to do more to protect stable neighbourhoods.

'I think this is a first step and until we actually look at zoning bylaws that exist and talk about how we're going to change things, you will not have increased protections,' she told the healthy crowd in the public gallery. 'That is why the timing of this issue is very important. We have to try not to miss entirely this building season.'

It is important, she added, that something be in place by September when Council wraps up ahead of the October municipal election.

Also calling the proposed Interim Control Bylaw a 'good first step' was Councillor Paul Pirri, who said he agreed it is 'not going to solve everyone's problems' in the end.

'I intrinsically believe people have property rights,' said Councillor Pirri. 'We have set out some rules and regulations to say this is our zoning bylaw, these are the standards you have to live up to and I think, as a municipality, we have set those rules. Now, to turn around and say that you can't even build to our standards is not something I agree with. I am in favour of moving forward with what we have in front of us today. That will ensure our rules and regulations are being abided by, but I am not sure I would like to go much further.'

While Councillor Paul Pirri was comfortable with this as a first step despite his reservations over anything more stringent down the road, Mayor Geoff Dawe was clear with his opposition.

After asking Planning Director Marco Ramunno how many applications, on average, come into Town Hall each year that exceed standards, and receiving a response of 'six to seven,' the Mayor said this whole thing is 'much ado about nothing.'

'We have six to eight houses a year and for that we're going through this interim control bylaw,' he said. 'I think what we need to be doing is going back to what the Region is doing and looking at our entire Official Plan. If we truly want to protect our stable neighbourhoods, we have to look at it from a holistic point of view. This is not going to get us what I suspect a lot of people in this audience are looking for, or what they feel might be happening. It might be a start, it might not.

'I think that's up to the individual person to determine. Council may remember that some people on this Council were aghast that we would actually forward a budget recommendation to the 2018 Council because it would not go over a term and that was just a recommendation to look at something. I do not support this.'

But, from the viewpoint of Councillor Tom Mrakas, the very measure on the table was the first step in a 'holistic' approach to addressing the perceived problem.

'We're doing a study and that study is looking at how we can better protect those stable neighbourhoods,' said Councillor Mrakas.

?The interim control bylaw is to be put in place to make sure that while the study is happening that no one can come forward and ask for changes from what is allowed currently.

?When I hear this is 'much ado about nothing,' really there [are] no facts when it comes to that. When we look at protecting our stable neighbourhoods, we need to do what we can and I think taking this approach is a good first step and combining it with the study is when it will come back. We'll take that look and decide how we're going to move forward. I am in full support of this. I think this is the way we move forward. I am not here to please the development community. I am here to please the residents of this community.?