

New planning system could allow for significant redevelopment in Aurora's downtown

A new Community Planning Permit system in Aurora could lead to significant intensification in Aurora's historic downtown core.

The new system, which is intended to streamline the planning process for the Aurora Promenade area, bordered by Temperance Street in the west, Centre Street to the north, Victoria Street to the east, to 70 metres south of Church Street, will be up for discussion at a Special Council meeting this week.

The goal of the system, if ultimately established, will give the municipality more control on how the Town's historic core is intensified - from building materials used to height limits - while maintaining the facades of heritage-designated buildings.

The new system will set an approval timeline for applications at 45 days.

It prescribes minimum setbacks from the street level for intensification projects, and could lead to builds of up to eight storeys in the core set back at least 10 metres from the heritage frontages.

At large, the Official Plan recognizes this area as a destination that will build on its assets and evolve into a vibrant place to live, shop, work and play, say municipal staff in a report that will be before Council on the October 29 meeting, noting the Promenade area, as well as the Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) around the GO Station, are identified as Aurora's primary focus area for growth and intensification, accommodating the highest densities, while also maintaining and preserving the built heritage assets.

This is where the community meets, interacts, celebrates, shops, entertains, and is where visitors will want to come to experience sophisticated culture in a small-town setting, the report continues. The Community Planning Permit Bylaw will become the primary tool setting the development standards in the Bylaw area. The CPP Bylaw will outline the policies, standards and provisions surrounding use, heights, step backs (the horizontal recession of an upper storey), setbacks (distances from property boundaries), parking, façade articulation and materiality, amongst other matters.

The continued preservation of heritage buildings and facades is a recommendation within the plan, with significant step backs of ten metres on upper levels of buildings above the three-storey heritage facades and above the fifth storey. It will also set a general height limit of six to eight storeys on interior blocks within the area subject to the step backs.

A maximum height of nine stories strategically located at Wellington Street West and Temperance Street due largely to the slope in elevation and reduced impacts on neighbouring properties is also recommended, as is limiting heights to interior blocks behind the heritage facades to protect the distinct Yonge Street heritage street wall.

The initial development concepts were presented at an Open House [in June] and feedback from residents, business owners, and property owners were generally supportive, the report continues. Suggestions provided by the attendees stressed the need for protecting the heritage façade and materiality of existing buildings, incorporating street beautification elements and infrastructure, and increasing height where appropriate. In addition, there were also suggestions of the CPP Bylaw going further as the bylaw will guide long-term growth in the area. There is a need for the CPP Bylaw to recognize the necessity of incorporating greater densities based on current and future housing demands and realities. However, the increase in density cannot come at the expense of neighbourhood character or heritage buildings.

The general consensus was that balance was necessary, respecting the character of the Downtown and providing transition to lower-density areas while overall heights and densities increased in a sensible manner, and where impacts are minimal, such as the portion of lands near Wellington Street West and Temperance Street.

This initial feedback resulted in changes to what will be before Council this week, including increases in height in strategic locations

and ensuring appropriate step-backs.

Feedback on the proposals were also offered at the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) earlier this month. While local historian David Heard, a delegate to the HAC meeting, expressed concern on the preservation of facades ? citing examples on Wellington Street East where such facades were to be maintained but were ultimately demolished after being left to become structurally unstable, and how the site of the Fleury Foundry, now home to Bacon Basketware, could be incorporated into the vision ? feedback was cautiously positive.

?The benefit for the Town is that by taking on this Planning Act tool, which is available to us, it puts us in the driver's seat. It allows us to be a bit more proactive in setting the actual detailed development standards for our downtown,? said Town Planner Adam Robb at HAC.

?Through this, you can actually go back and say, ?I want stone, I want brick, I want certain materials,' so that's a positive here. But recognizing this, too, it's our downtown core. Our downtown core has heritage assets galore, as we know, designated heritage properties, and the premise of all of this work is that those are to not be unsympathetically altered in any way. Those heritage facades need to be maintained.?

Protection of area heritage assets, Robb added, was ?a non-negotiable.?

?That is absolute,? he said, noting passage of the new system will not impact heritage designations already in place.

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