

New Year brings new and revived ideas on tackling affordable housing crisis

A retooled Community Improvement Plan (CIP) could be used to tackle the issue of affordable housing.

Revamping the CIP, which has previously been used by the Town of Aurora to provide incentives for façade improvements, the preservation of heritage properties and more, is just one method being eyed by the Town in the New Year to address the housing crunch.

According to Town Planner Edward Terry, the need for affordable housing is something that has been heard 'loud and clear' from the community as Aurora continues to advance its new Official Plan forward.

The Official Plan, which is currently in draft stage, has been subject to input from community leaders and members of the public alike for more than a year with the latest public open house held at Town Hall just last month.

Once approved, the Official Plan (OP) will serve as a blueprint for growth in Aurora for the next 30 years.

'The OP is an opportunity for the residents and anyone who is a stakeholder at the Town of Aurora to have their say as far as how they would like to see their Town grow,' says Mr. Terry. 'As we have said from the beginning through the consultation process, this is the residents' and the Town's document. We want to listen to all stakeholders and make sure that it reflects the needs and wants of the community. This is an opportunity for them to articulate what they want their Town to look like within the next 30 years.'

'From the beginning of the consultation process, something we've heard from the community is they want to see balanced growth, allowing for new residents to come within that 30-year period and also to maintain and protect the environment, maintain their 'Stable Neighbourhoods' and be a diverse and inclusive community. [These are the themes] we have heard from the public and we've tried to ensure they're included in the draft and going forward.'

At the most recent session, Terry says 'a lot' of comments received from members of the public had to do with protecting the natural environment, managed growth, and what the Ontario Government's controversial housing legislation, Bill 23, will mean for the community.

A peer review process on environmental matters was an issue pushed for by residents, which Terry says the Town is looking at.

'It's ensuring we can get an environmental firm to look at something in more detail than the planners would,' he explained. 'They might look at an Environmental Impact Study (a key part of the planning process) from more of a high level, but just to ensure that we have somebody looking at it from a very technical level.'

'Something we have heard loud and clear from the public is they want to have a variety of housing types, so that is something we're definitely going to be including as far as policy and the OP, and it's in the draft now. There will be Regional corridors and local corridors that allow for higher densities than our Stable Neighbourhoods and then our highest densities would be in the MTSA (Major Transit Station Area) around the GO Station and the Promenade (portions of Yonge and Wellington Streets). That allows for more intense housing types and more transit-supported housing types as well. We're hoping that creates more affordable housing.' The CIP, he added, was also another option for incentivizing affordable housing types.

'It's still very early in the process, but it would be coming up with programs that provide incentives to developers; it may be looking at partnership opportunities and maybe looking at fast-tracking applications somehow. It's still very early, so it's hard for me to say what the programs will be, but that's the type of idea. We've also done some work with the students from Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson) to develop an affordable housing toolkit and out of that we're looking at some ideas we can include about a CIP program as well.'

This past spring, the 2018-2022 Council urged a re-think on the CIP after uptake in the program as it stood was less than what was anticipated.

After CIP goals fell short, the Town initiated a review of the program to determine which goals were ultimately met. The report focused on four key themes: sustainability, heritage, accessibility and affordable housing.

A few of the Town's neighbouring municipalities offer accessibility-related grants as an eligible expense within their Building Restoration and Improvement Program, said Economic Development Officer Nick Kazakoff in the report. For example, the Township of King offers the installation of automatic doors and accessibility ramps as an eligible expense in their Property Improvement Grant. Similarly, the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville offers eligible expenses for barrier-free entry under their Building Façade and Signage Loan program. King's maximum eligible grant amount is \$10,000 and Whitchurch-Stouffville is \$15,000.

The inclusion of accessibility improvement investments in the Aurora Promenade CIP could be easily addressed by adding them as an eligible expense as part of the Building Restoration, Renovation, and Improvement Program similar to Whitchurch-Stouffville's CIP.

Heritage improvements, he added, were already covered within the CIP plans but including affordable housing as well could be a problem.

The addition of an affordable housing financial component in the Aurora Promenade CIP may be out of the scope as it would require significant cost analysis in order to realize any benefit. However, non-financial incentives could be developed and offered under a CIP. For instance, projects that offer an affordable or attainable housing component might be eligible for a streamlined planning process, fee deferment plans, or assistance with grant applications from the Region, Province, or Federal granting levels.

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