

Proposed Community Permit system for Aurora's downtown gets tentative Council support



A Community Planning Permit System (CPP) in Aurora's historic downtown core, which is designed to streamline the planning process and intensify the area in a way that respects existing heritage buildings, got tentative Council support last week.

The CPP System was the subject of the October 29 Public Planning meeting and was the first formal opportunity Council had to weigh in on the plan, following public open houses and presentations to citizen advisory committees.

While the proposal is designed to streamline the process, it is also intended to give the municipality more of a say in how intensification takes place, including setbacks from the street – particularly Yonge Street – and materials used to ensure it fits well within the surrounding area.

“The CPPS consolidates Zoning, Site Plan, and Minor Variance applications into one streamlined approval process,” said staff in a report before Council at the meeting. “A CPP Bylaw implements the CPPS by setting the development standards and requirements for the bylaw area. Through the CPP Bylaw, the Town is proactively setting the criteria for development in the Downtown and positioning itself to responsibly manage future growth in the area.

“The CPP Bylaw can manage future growth in the Downtown in a sensible manner. The as-of-right development concept within the CPP Bylaw area would allow for approximately 1,100 units with maximum height being six storeys north of Wellington Street and five storeys everywhere else. Although the maximum heights under this development concept are currently permitted as of right, the zero metre setback and three metre step back above the third storey on Yonge Street would create a pedestrian environment that is possibly less friendly and also less sensitive to the heritage buildings in the area, as referenced by the Downtown Urban Design Study. The lack of step back distance creates an imposing street wall and any additional massing would significantly alter the built form character of the area.

“The alternative development concept proposes greater heights but offsets the height increase by concentrating the massing of new buildings in the interior of the sites with greater step backs. By increasing the step back above the third storey to ten metres and requiring an additional ten metre step back again above the fifth storey, totalling to 20 metres of step back, the taller buildings proposed under this concept have less of an impact on pedestrian views, the heritage façade, and the street wall of Yonge Street. Through careful consideration of increased step backs, the alternative development concept introduces greater height while producing a better built form.”

At this first Council meeting getting into the details surrounding the CPP, Council voiced support of the alternative development

concept, going for greater heights in the core but with greater step backs to preserve the heritage feel of the Yonge and Wellington corridor. Questions, however, still remained over the impacts such a move would have on downtown parking and on surrounding streets, particularly Temperance, which could see large builds dwarfing existing homes.

"I personally prefer the alternative option mainly because it offers more flexibility and incentivizes owners to make the necessary changes to make the downtown more vibrant and walkable and certainly makes a business case to do that," said Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim.

While he said he preferred the alternative option, he asked staff for assurances there is flexibility within the proposal so "we're not going to have any regrets given that this is locked in for five years."

Tentative support was also offered by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who represents the Ward that would be most impacted by the CPP, if it is ultimately approved by Council.

"Frankly, I'm emboldened by this," he said. "I've lived in this community for 40 years and this revitalization of the downtown area has been a concern for 40 years or so. It's a pleasure to see the attempts going forward. I think there's some work left to be done that we've heard here and some of it is very practical, but I want to thank the group for pulling this together and the Planning staff for the work that they've done in it."

Some of the work left to be done, Weese said, included the potential of looking into step backs as an opportunity to create greenspace above street level, and ensuring that any builds that result from the CPP in the years ahead be subject to pre-construction evaluations to ensure that vibrations and any other disruptions from construction won't damage nearby heritage buildings "commercial or residential."

"From a communication standpoint, it's important to identify what those revitalization benefits really are to the public and others," he said. "When we talk to residents, they always talk about connectivity, walkability, all the things that this is going to provide, so I just hope we can do that."

Also voicing support for the concept as a way to install "some guardrails in place to manage how development is done downtown" was Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

That said, however, he noted he hoped further details, including greater visualization on how larger builds would appear from street level, would come forward to Council before too long.

"I would have really liked to have seen some type of a fly-through or a walk-through of these streets to give us a sense of what does 10 metres look like at eight-storeys versus 30 metres at nine storeys, 10 metres at five storeys," he said. "Maybe that can still be done for Council and the public. I believe it would be very, very helpful because I feel like that's the big decision we're making. What are we allowing to take place in our downtown that will never be changed? Let's get it right. Let's see what an average person would actually see if they're walking through in these various scenarios."

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