

Public open house on Affordable Housing Action Plan set for September 9

Members of the public will soon have a chance to weigh in on Aurora's draft Affordable Housing Action Plan.

A public open house on the draft plan will be held Monday, September 9, from 6 ? 8 p.m. at Town Hall.

First presented to Council this spring, lawmakers gave their tentative approval to the draft at the end of June with the assurance that public engagement would take place this fall.

The plan is intended to serve as a 'blueprint' to foster affordable housing options within the community through 2051, a time that's expected to see significant population growth within Aurora.

The plan is guided by six key objectives: increase housing supply, promote housing affordability and stability, ensure complete community growth, streamline approvals, enhance partnerships, and 'continually monitor, assess and educate.'

Among the recommendations in the draft plan to boost housing supply is to permit four units per residential lot to 'increase 'missing middle' and rental opportunities'; increase density 'incrementally' within the downtown Aurora Promenade area and the MTSA; undertake a study to look at opportunities to convert land designated for commercial and employment uses; looking at housing opportunities at 'key sites,' with 50-100 Bloomington Road West held up as just one example; and update zoning provisions to support housing creation.

Under the objective of Promote Housing Affordability and Sustainability, the Town will, should the Plan be implemented, develop an Affordable Housing Reserve Fund, funded through Community Benefit Charges or developers' contributions, to allow the Town to 'assist with affordable housing projects' such as non-profit and co-op models.

Additional goals here include requiring affordable housing assessments for all new residential developments; implementing inclusionary zoning for the MTSA; prioritizing government-owned land for housing use; and exploring the 'benefits and feasibility' of modular and prefab construction.

To ensure 'Complete Community Growth,' the draft plan suggests eliminating minimum parking requirements within the MTSA to lower housing costs; creating an Affordable Housing Community Improvement Plan, which would arm a municipality with tools to direct funds to 'incentivize' the creation of affordable housing through grants, loans and tax breaks.

Streamlining the approval of developments is a key pillar in the plan. Recommendations here include a Community Planning Permit System that would allow multiple application processes to be consolidated into a single review; continuing to enhance the Town's online planning application system; prioritizing the approval of affordable housing developments; and waiving application fees for 'critical housing opportunities,' including emergency, transitional and supportive housing.

Since Council tentatively approved the draft, it didn't spend the summer sitting on the shelf.

Stakeholders, including the grassroots organization Aurora Cares ' Housing for All, have met with staff to share their views on whether the plan meets the mark.

Aurora Cares was founded by a group of residents concerned over Council's rejection of a planned men's transitional and emergency housing development in Aurora's south end. While they're still advocating for transitional housing at the originally proposed site, they have expanded their scope to all forms of housing.

They say that a full 'continuum' of housing ranges from 'transitional housing, social housing, affordable rental, and all the way up to market homeownership.

'Given the short amount of time staff had they did a pretty good job on the plan,' says Aurora Cares member Len Bulmer, stating the plan is 'rather light on the first parts of the continuum', including shelter and transitional housing.

'The plan talks about the median household income in Aurora for a certain segment of the population is something like \$135,000 in the last census, which is information [that's] more than four years old,' he said. 'We pointed out to them in the same census that the median income for tenants in Aurora, which is a growing population of people, was not \$135,000 but \$51,600.'

Another concern offered by the Aurora Cares team was costing in how to make the goals of the plan a reality. Partners at different levels of government and from the community itself need to come on board to realize change, they added.

'There is only so much resource availability to throw at this thing. It's going to take a lot of money and resources in order to affect that plan. We said to go to the average household income in Aurora sort of hides the fact that that's maybe not where the need is,' says Bulmer.

'What we were saying to [staff] is there has got to be a lot of resources thrown at this to meet the plan. The Town can't do it by itself. We suggested to them that perhaps they use the plan as an information and leverage document with the Region, the Province and the Feds to say we're doing a lot of good things in this plan to facilitate affordable housing ' and they are; local municipalities are limited to in their toolbox. In order to make that plan really happen, we suggested to them the Town will have to say, 'we're going to do our part to the extent we can by looking at processes and zoning and what have you, which are all really important things, but if we're willing to do that, we're asking the three other levels of government to come into partnership with us with' much bigger, more impactful tools that you have to make this plan go as far as it can.'

'They can't do it by themselves and to the extent they can raise a few boatfulls of money from people, who are you aiming this plan at? The housed? The well-housed? The over-housed? Those who need shelter, transitional programs and services and programming, tenant populations and other subgroups within the community that are really most in need of shelter and housing?'

By Brock Weir