

Stable Neighbourhoods guidelines up for debate November 17

Design guidelines on new builds within Aurora's so-called 'stable neighbourhoods' will be up for Council discussion on Tuesday, November 17.

Council was due to discuss the proposed guidelines at last Tuesday's General Committee meeting, but voted to delay the debate until the next meeting after impacted residents said they were provided with out-of-date information before they could formally express their concerns.

'Last week, we had asked for hard copies of this item so that we could go over it, delegate and address the issues,' said Rebecca Beaton representing the Regency Acres Ratepayers Association, who made a delegation to Council by phone last week.

'Unfortunately, we received an incorrect report. It was actually the report from June of this year and it was too late to get in touch with staff.'

Ms. Beaton requested the deferral, which was ultimately granted by Council, but some residents were already prepared to weigh in.

Two written delegations were received and these residents identified a number of what they felt were shortcomings in the recommendations up for approval, particularly the fact that these guidelines are just that and might not have the teeth necessary to make a difference.

Dave and Lenore Pressley, for instance, identified that some pockets on the outskirts of the Town Park area were left off the map and questioned provisions with the recommendations that indicate new buildings should be comparable in height, massing and placement on the lots if in proximity to heritage buildings and should also be 'complimentary' in style, materials and details.

'We notice that multiple older homes in the southeast Aurora area have been demolished, only to put up homes that look like subdivision homes and after, of course, cutting down all or nearly all of the trees in the property,' they said. 'We now have streets with few heritage homes on them looking like they're stuck in new subdivisions. That's compatible?'

'Promoting this as a quaint, historic area to entice visitors to Library Square will be a lie by the time it is finished. Since the new size bylaws allowing 4,000 square foot homes ' the only thing that has changed is the demolition and rebuilding happens more rapidly. We can only assume that these words are to make it sound like something is being done to protect our area when, in fact, nothing will change. It appears as though Council is more interested in developers' opinions [above] the people who live in the area. Since Council only talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk, in our opinion there is no point in discussing the urban design guidelines. They are only guidelines and like suggestions it is up to the individual developer what they envision. If they don't want to make the changes, they won't as there is no way [they] want to lose any income.'

Aurora Heights resident Peter Smith echoed many of these concerns, as well in a written delegation.

He questioned some of the suggested guidelines, particularly those concerning the Regency Acres community, deeming them 'relatively new' builds.

'Since when are 60-year-old buildings described as 'new''? he questioned. 'Regency Acres has at least two distinct characteristics based on building dates and styles which are not recognized in the report. This needs to be added.'

'Compatibility is a theme that runs throughout the report and yet is both erroneous and unachievable at this late stage of development. Design guidelines are not enforceable and will undoubtedly be tested to the limit by developers. The damage has already been done by the new zoning bylaws that allow monster homes to be erected in the stable neighbourhood area. The zoning bylaws were a blanket approach which did not take into account the distinctive characteristics of each stable neighbourhood. The current exercise seems like an attempt to close the gate after the horse gets out.'

Council last discussed the proposed stable neighbourhood design guidelines in July.

At the time, they had a difference of opinion on whether or not the proposals were either too lenient or too restrictive.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, questioned whether these guidelines would have any impact if other provisions on the books allow for 4,000 square foot homes on smaller lots.

‘If we just take the Aurora Heights [neighbourhood], the description is mature trees, large building setbacks, feel of the neighbourhood, consistency, privacy, space for light and landscaping ? I don’t know how this can possibly be achieved if we put a 4,000 square foot home next to a home that has 1,000 or 1,200 square feet,’ she said. ‘They often remove the beautiful, mature trees that are there. Certainly, a house of this size is going to have a major effect on privacy, light, etc.

‘[The guidelines] are very well done?but I don’t think they are going to do much to help, considering the zoning that we have put in place.’

Councillor Michael Thompson also had concerns, but he questioned whether the guidelines were too prescriptive in some cases ? specifically when the document ‘wades into building materials and what things should be used and look like.’

‘To me, that is an area where there may be differences of opinion, whereby the homeowner or builder wants to use something in particular and Council, as the final arbiter, is not in agreement,’ he said.

Indeed, Councillor Thompson questioned how the process would look if the Town and property owners did not see eye-to-eye on the guidelines.

‘We often talk about it in Public Planning meetings where we get applications that don’t conform to our Official Plan or don’t conform to our zoning bylaws and those applicants are looking for exceptions and variances,’ he said, noting that applications would then come forward through the planning process itself for Council and public alike to have their say.

By Brock Weir Editor/Local Journalism Initiative Reporter