

Striking "balance" key in protecting stable neighbourhoods: Consultant

By Brock Weir

Significant changes to building height and lot coverage in Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods could be approved by the end of March following a Public Planning meeting last week.

Council voted on Wednesday to accept a number of recommendations from an independent planning consultant retained by the Town to provide what was intended to be an unbiased review of what needs to be done to protect such neighbourhoods from out-of-scale infill development in three distinct Aurora neighbourhoods, developments which area residents often refer to as 'monster homes.'

The recommendations brought forward by Ron Palmer of The Planning Partnership call on the Town to align its zoning bylaws with policies within Aurora's Official Plan that were intended to provide such protections to long-established communities. He further recommended that changes to zoning bylaws should set a maximum floor area for new builds as opposed to size being determined by lot size, setting a height restriction of nine metres, and establishing Council-approved design guidelines.

After considerable debate, Council accepted these recommendations on a unanimous vote.

Proposed changes will be the subject of a 'substantive public outreach' program to ensure all impacted landowners have a chance to understand and respond to the suggestions ahead of the Public Planning meeting at the end of March.

In making his recommendations, Mr. Palmer stressed the importance of striking a balance for residents living in the Regency Acres, Aurora Heights and Town Park communities.

'There is a huge diversity of opinion [in] what should happen in these neighbourhoods,' Mr. Palmer told Council last week. 'There are some ratepayers who feel that the character-giving elements [of their neighbourhoods] should be well-understood and highly restricted, thereby protecting the existing feel of those neighbourhoods, and there are others who say there should be some flexibility to permit new forms of development and different scales of development and, in fact, the existing zoning as it stands today does permit that. There are still others who are not quite at each end of that spectrum, talking about ways to think about the community and how we provide a balance between protecting the character-giving elements while still allowing innovation and investment.' Balance, he said, is important in reviewing all neighbourhoods, not just the three neighbourhoods designated by Council for the purposes of its Stable Neighbourhood study.

'These are unique neighbourhoods,' he said. '[The residents] want to live here. That's a really important thing to remember: it is our job and your job to find the right balance between protection, innovation and investment.'

Looking at what each of the three neighbourhoods had to offer, Mr. Palmer said reducing maximum building height from ten metres to nine metres is an 'absolutely appropriate thing to do' as nine metres is the height set out in the Town's Official Plan.

'The zoning bylaw must conform,' he said. 'There was a discussion on how to measure height. There was talk about a different way of measuring not using the midpoint of a sloped roof. My concern if you do that you will be promoting a flat roof because people will try to maximize GFA (Gross Floor Area) in roof form. I would suggest you continue to measure if there is a sloped roof to the midpoint and potentially a lower height limit to a flat roof, recognizing that sloped roofs are part of the [character] of that neighbourhood.'

Lot coverage was another area of concern, he said, because there is a 'huge variance' in lot sizes in each of the three neighbourhoods in question. If Council adopted a straight number when it came to lot coverage, some lots would be able to accommodate an 'extremely large footprint and still be within the 30 per cent.' Using percentage as a tool is not effective in this case, he added, instead proposing a tool to determine that all-important GFA.

'I like to think of looking at stable neighbourhoods as having the right connectivity between what the Official Plan says and what the zoning bylaw says and how you're going to use site plan approval as a new tool here to improve the product that is built,' he said. 'One thing that is very important based on my experience and the experience of others?the more restrictive you are, there are impacts. There are impacts on the marketability of the property and there are impacts on price. Mostly, that comes from the fact that if you're shrink-wrapping an existing built form on the existing lot, you remove the market that is looking to rebuild and when you have a smaller market it tends to have an impact on price.'

Part of that balance, at least from the perspective of real estate professionals, is making sure you're not 'stifling innovation, investment and change' while recognizing there is value in 'maintaining, conserving and promoting those really important character-giving elements that keep the neighbourhood a nice place to live.'

'I think you should proceed with new zoning for all three neighbourhoods, with some minor adjustments,' Mr. Palmer told

Councillors. ?Try not to use lot coverage as a tool, but perhaps go with a limit on gross floor area as a tool. Height limit of nine metres I think is appropriate. It is a moderating bylaw. It does have some effect, but it is not so restrictive that it will have a huge impact on property value and marketability.

?In addition, I think you should proceed with the development of a Council approved design guideline document that would be relatively generic, but it would help articulate more specifically what it is that you're trying to control through site plan approval. In fact, the preparation of these guidelines is a requirement to use site plan approvals to the full extent of the planning act and gets into architectural detail, colour and materials, which I think are actually important. The more restrictive you are, the deeper dive you take, the more important public consultation becomes. It's really, really important to get it right. It's a fundamental element of planning and people need to have a say and you need to hear from everybody.?

Council accepted the consultant's recommendation on a unanimous vote, but various amendments were suggested by Councillors along the way that were ultimately rejected, including a suggested amendment from Councillor Rachel Gilliland which would have pinned down specifics on setbacks and driveway widths, steps the consultant suggested should come further down the road.

?I think they are important issues to deal with, but I see them as being dealt with through the design guidelines or looking at individual areas,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I don't necessarily think driveway width is the same between all three neighbourhoods. This may not be a case where one size fits all. We'll get there and we'll deal with it, but it won't be at this stage.?

If Council accepts the report and recommendations that will be presented at the March Public Planning meeting without any further amendments, these changes will come onto the books. If any further amendments are made at that meeting, however, it would trigger another round of public consultation before a further Public Planning meeting.

Councillor John Gallo left the door open to that possibility, stressing the importance of getting that balance just right.

?I really don't want to rush this,? he said. ?I realise we want to get it done fast, it has been a long time, and all of that, but we'd be doing a disservice if we really rush this just to get it done. I don't think that's fair to anyone. I am not sure we have enough information, sitting here today, to answer all of those questions for March without further investigation and further consultation with residents. I know that might not be a popular opinion [but] I just want it done properly.?

Councillor Sandra Humfryes agreed: ?The residents have waited for so long, so let's make sure we do it right and it is going to be an appropriate impact for everyone.?