

Town explores new parking standards in bid for affordable housing

Could eliminating minimum parking requirements for new residential builds around the GO Station help pave the way for more affordable housing?

That's a question the Town is exploring following a Council decision last week.

On July 11, Council unanimously approved a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas tasking staff with looking at options for eliminating minimum parking requirements for new residential developments around the GO, designated as a Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) by the Province, and whether the Town can require new developments to have auto share and bike share programs.

“The MTSA is planned to accommodate a proposed minimum density of 150 people and jobs per hectare as part of creating housing opportunities in close proximity to higher-order transit,” said Mayor Mrakas in his motion. “The Town of Aurora Official Plan already contains policies that encourage the use of alternative and reduced parking requirements, specifically in the MTSA, and according to the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON), the cost of constructing below-grade parking in residential condominiums and apartments has increased significantly over the past decade, with these costs being passed onto unit owners and, in turn, negatively impacting housing affordability.”

“An emerging trend across the GTA is that new condo projects are being left with parking spaces being unsold, and that there is a pattern of over-building parking in new higher-density residential developments due to outdated zoning requirements. Reducing parking will improve the livability of the Town overall by creating healthier communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and creating space to improve conditions for transit, walking, and cycling.”

Speaking to the motion at the table, the Mayor said going down this route addresses priorities already identified by the Town including matters related to the “climate emergency, improving housing affordability, and encouraging alternative forms of transportation and mobility.”

“I think implementing this will help us achieve some of that, or at least move down the path where we start to work towards what we like to talk about all the time: creating a complete community within our Town,” he said.

He also noted that if staff recommend these changes and if they're ultimately approved by Council, the exemptions should only be granted if developers meet what is already required in the Town's Official Plan in areas such as height and density.

“We're going to make sure that the developments are in keeping with the way we want to see the community built and ensuring also that there are some housing units for those that don't necessarily have a car or have alternate modes of transportation, and give them the opportunities to be able to buy properties without paying the excessive charge that comes with having parking for every single unit.”

The motion was moved and seconded by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland and Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner. Although the idea passed unanimously, lawmakers wanted to make sure that whatever recommendations came forward that there would be a benefit to the community and wouldn't result on a financial hit on current and incoming residents.

“I certainly support the concept and it will be interesting to see the report come back,” said Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson. “The one concern I have is if you're going to give the developer an exemption or reduce the parking standard for them, I want to see the benefit go to either the community or to the people who are going to be buying those units. My concern is that if you reduce the standard and all of a sudden, as we have seen in some cases, the density or the lot coverage increases significantly and it is the builder who is benefiting. In this case, to me, the intent is to address some of those concerns.”

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese stated that although he was supportive of exploring the possibilities, he wanted to make sure that

eliminating minimum parking requirements in this specific area of Aurora wouldn't have spill-over impacts elsewhere.

"The concern of residents adjacent to these larger developments are always [about] people not having enough parking and leaking out into the community," he said. "I hope that when the staff report comes back there are provisions there about how we're going to manage this, if there is a minimum parking standard, the developer accepts that and that we understand the consequences that may occur, particularly the Town Park area that is under a lot of pressure with Town Square already and what may happen if it is as successful the way we encourage it to be.

"There may be a lot of other parking problems so we have to look at this as a double-edged sword, but I am certainly on side with this."

Particularly supportive of pursuing auto and bike share programs, Councillor Gilliland said this could result in further housing choice for the people of Aurora.

"I think it is a great way to encourage people who are purchasing [a home] to give them a choice, number one, but also to encourage active transportation," she said. "I think that we are trying so hard to change, behaviourally; by putting it in the MTSA as a place to start makes sense because infrastructure is intended to be there to service that need. At the same time, hopefully we are targeting more affordable areas with this density."

Councillor Gaertner agreed that auto and bike share programs are "most pertinent" in the discussion, with Mayor Mrakas concurring that it could lead to "a healthier and more active lifestyle within our MTSA area."

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