

Urban design guidelines approved for Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods

Urban design guidelines to help steer new builds in long-established local communities were formally endorsed by Council last week.

The extensive list of guidelines provides parameters on everything from size to materials in order to ensure the new builds fit into what is already in the Regency Acres and Aurora Heights communities, as well as neighbourhoods on Temperance Street and around Town Park.

Along with the guidelines, Council approved a semi-annual report that will outline to lawmakers the variance applications that have come forward and what has been approved.

'The report will allow staff to identify trends and allow Council to better understand what development activity is taking place within the established Stable Neighbourhoods,' said the Town in a statement. 'Under the Official Plan, stable neighbourhoods are protected from incompatible forms of development, and new development in these areas must respect and reinforce the area's existing physical character and uses.'

While a semi-annual update to Council was a request made by residents, particularly those in the Regency Acres neighbourhood, the report process as approved did not go far enough.

They requested the semi-annual updates include a list of what applications were denied and why, a process which staff said would be too 'onerous' to compile.

Council agreed while sitting at the Committee level the previous week and when their decision came up for ratification on November 24, Councillor Wendy Gartner renewed the call.

The main concerns of residents, she said, stemmed from privacy, particularly concerning rear yards, and the maintaining of the existing streetscape.

Privacy concerns included minimizing the location of second floor balconies on rear side elevations.

Additional issues ranged from the protection of trees to setting a maximum of three entrance steps to 'encourage low profile entrance features close to the ground.'

'The residents have requested reporting when consistency with the design guidelines is not adhered to by the developer,' said Councillor Gaertner, making a motion that the report 'include instances where staff-approved variances regarding front and side yard setbacks, privacy and streetscapes are not consistent with the stable neighbourhood guidelines.'

'Staff should be keeping a record of what they recommend to developers, that the developers aren't interested in following,' she continued. 'I think it is information Council should know and the residents want to have.'

But this motion was ultimately unsuccessful with other lawmakers stating they were unsure what was hoped to be achieved by the report.

'I am always happy to provide the residents with more information [but] I just fail to see the value it will get by doing this,' said Councillor John Gallo.

Also casting doubt on including that in the report was Councillor Michael Thompson, who said as what was being recommended were guidelines for developers, the ultimate tools for compliance are the Town's zoning bylaws.

?The guidelines [are] meant to be able to shape the design, but there is a degree of flexibility in it,? he said. ?If we want compliance in these areas, let's reopen the zoning bylaw and put it back in the zoning bylaw and go down that road. Guidelines are just a tool and what Councillor Gaertner refers to in all those [areas] are subjective terms and they are open to interpretation.

?The design guidelines are not meant for that kind of compliance. They are just meant to shape it and that is why producing this report would be so onerous because then it becomes a question of debating the subjective determination of what each term means and whether it was correct or incorrect. I don't want to go down that road at all.?

Councillor Harold Kim agreed, noting that the motion would take these guidelines in the direction of a bylaw.

?I want to keep it high level and even if we went to that level of detail, what are we going to do with that information? I suspect we're going to try and create bylaws out of that and we go back to Square 1 where we started two or three years ago. It is for those reasons as well intended as the amendment is, I cannot support that,? he said.

Keeping an eye on how the guidelines go was something Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she supported, and that she understood what the residents were looking for, but what was being asked was too broad.

?I feel if they came with their Top 2 or Top 3 concrete things that were the most important [and] relevant, maybe we can have a conversation, but it is almost the entire urban design guidelines that are being asked here,? she said. ?It is so subjective and it is so many topics. I would think it would be very a very onerous thing for our staff to be reporting back on.

?We're stuck between a rock and a hard place here with some subjective opinions, but it is not really going to do us any service.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter