

Urban design guidelines will provide clearer expectations on new builds in stable neighbourhoods

Urban design guidelines will set clearer expectations for those looking to build new homes in Aurora's stable neighbourhoods.

At least, that is the hope of consultants if Council approves such guidelines for the Regency Acres, Town Park, Aurora Heights and Temperance Street communities this month.

Urban Design Guidelines for Aurora's so-called 'stable neighbourhoods' are due for Council consideration next week.

In the works since June of 2019, the Urban Design Guidelines represent a planning tool that establishes clearer expectations for those designing and building new homes and additions within the designated Stable Neighbourhoods.

Even though the Town's Official Plan includes general Urban Design principles [they] are not specific to neighbourhoods with single detached dwellings, said Edward Terry, Senior Policy Planner for the Town of Aurora. The Stable Neighbourhoods Urban Design Guidelines identify key attributes that contribute to the character of the host community and provide a framework to guide the design of new builds, additions and landscapes that: reconciles compatibility with diversity, while avoiding both monotony and harsh contrasts; respects and reinforces the existing character of the neighbourhood; and promotes a contextual design approach that considers the adjacent and surrounding development while fostering pedestrian-scaled streetscapes while allowing for and encouraging appropriate flexibility, innovation, and diversity in design, essential to evolving communities.

Design guidelines will help communicate clearer expectations for those designing and building projects within Stable Neighbourhoods. Moreover, the guidelines complement the policies of the Official Plan and provide additional direction on means to achieve the objective and vision through building design, orientation and materials.

If approved, the guidelines will work alongside existing zoning bylaws to address placement, scale and design of new buildings, as well as look at planning applications through the 'context' of the neighbourhoods in question.

It is important, according to planners, that the guidelines ultimately adopted by Council when the time comes do not supersede zoning requirements. Rather, they are based on existing zoning measures.

As such, they are inherently flexible, said Wai Ying Di Giorgio of The Planning Partnership who co-authored the draft provisions, while presenting them at Council over the summer. While zoning deals with specific setbacks and building envelopes within the site to shape height, massing and lot coverage, the guidelines speak to character and context within a much larger area. Design guidelines, on the other hand, are qualitative aspects of looking at [what] the surrounding context fabric looks like, not only from a planned perspective, but also the streetscape perspective where the majority of development will be experienced by the public.

In developing the proposed guidelines, the Planning Partnership looked at the four key stable neighbourhoods individually for their specific contexts, as well as how they compared to each other.

In understanding compatibility to existing context, we first have to understand what is the context that we're dealing with, said Ms. Di Giorgio. A part of that is the establishment of identification of a distinct character. The guidelines start with all four neighbourhoods, an analysis of what is the character of all four neighbourhoods we're dealing with, and it breaks it down [further to] pattern of lots, the pattern of streets, what are the predominant built forms that we find in the neighbourhood, what are the complimentary landscape elements that go together to combine and make this a complete, whole comprehensive picture.

Aurora Heights was the starting point of the study an area deemed a newer, mid-century community where the streetscape is curvilinear and 'organic' with comparatively large lots.

Lot coverage and the landscape creates this sense of openness and low profile about the neighbourhood, she said. Similar to that, the Regency Acres neighbourhood has a very similar character in terms of being a newer development and a newer neighbourhood with a mix of lower profile homes as well as two storey homes. In this instance, we have generous landscaping, front lawns and trees that create a sense of [an] open, lower neighbourhood.

Older neighbourhoods such as Temperance Street and the streets around Town Park offer their own unique challenges.

Temperance, for instance, is smaller-scale but also directly connected to the Town's historic downtown core. This, said Ms. Di Giorgio, has an impact on how it is experienced by the community.

Smaller setbacks, tighter streets, and predominantly 1.5 to 2.5 storey houses, together with prominent porches, mature trees and generous landscaping, is how Ms. Di Giorgio characterized Temperance Street. Most noteworthy here [compared to Aurora Heights and Regency Acres] is it has quite a few older historic houses that make up the neighbourhood and quite a few of them are listed on the heritage register.

It is characterized by a very eclectic mix of homes on relatively large lots. A variety of architectural styles, prominent elements within the built form such as porches, porticos, stoops, and then we also find this community, in particular, has significant mature-lined streets and rich landscaping within the private realm.

Following the neighbourhood analyses, the planners developed guidelines based on height and massing, landscaping, forms, styles and materials used in proposed new builds and elevations.

Recommendations on height and massing look at the character of neighbourhoods from a street perspective.

When we travel and move through neighbourhoods and our sense of these places are really from the perspective [from] a car, as a pedestrian, as a cyclist within the guidelines, we're indicating that streetscape is one of the most important aspects of character-defining elements within each of these neighbourhoods, said Ms. Di Giorgio. It is important to maintain the rhythm, the height and the massing along the street and also to maintain the rhythm of the driveways, location of entrances and the actual streetscape, not only within the public realm but within the area of private lawns that create the transition between public and private. All of those things together combine to create that sense of holistic character within the public realm as experienced by the public.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter