

Smart Choices for Changing Our Neighbourhoods – A Report Many Community Leaders Unaware

A City project underway for two years went largely undetected by most community league leaders despite the significant ramifications it may have on their neighbourhoods. In an effort to tell people about the project, the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues organized a special information meeting for them on June 21, 2008.

A meeting about neighbourhood redevelopment, on a warm sunny Saturday morning, does not sound like it would attract a lot of interest. It is a testament to the volunteers' and leaders' dedication and commitment to their communities that 50 of them attended the event. EFCL invited City officials to describe the types of redevelopment that will be permitted in mature neighbourhoods across the city. About two thirds of the attendees had not heard of the project before that day.

In 2006 the City's Planning and Development Department began designing new rules called **Smart Choices** for how future change will happen in Edmonton's older neighbourhoods. The Department defined the kinds of infill housing ranging from single family homes on much smaller lots to high rise apartments that will be allowed to replace existing housing in Edmonton's communities. EFCL encouraged the City to have a broadly based public participation program to make sure citizens and community leaders in all affected neighbourhoods would know about the changes and be able to help to shape them. When those efforts were unsuccessful, EFCL decided to host its own meeting where community leaders could learn about the proposed new rules.

More than 40 leaders from the community league movement plus 8 private citizens attended. The City's consulting Planner and **Smart Choices** program manager gave a cursory

overview of what they had concluded, and described different kinds of both low density and multi-family housing forms that they felt can be successfully introduced to existing neighbourhoods and where they will be allowed. They also told of changes they were making for how high intensity rezoning applications will be processed and how citizens and Community Leagues will be involved.

Two thirds of the attendees provided EFCL with feedback about the event. The majority, 71%, confirmed EFCL's belief that community leaders and the general public were effectively in the dark about the City's initiatives. Even though most said the meeting was informative and clearly worthwhile, a significant minority reported they were still unsure of what exactly was being proposed and precisely how it will affect their communities. Two thirds said there was not enough time to properly describe the new rules and explain how they will work.

On the City's plans for new ways to review high intensity rezoning applications, only slightly more than half said they had a good understanding of those procedures and the implications for citizen volunteers and community leaders.

Most attendees felt they had learned much from the event, but a third said they still did not fully understand what was to come. More than half were not satisfied that their concerns had been heard or resolved. EFCL compiled their comments and questions and recently shared them with the City Planning and Development Department. The summary report of those comments and questions is attached.

FEEDBACK

On June 21, 2008, the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues sponsored a meeting for approximately 50 community league leaders and citizens to hear about the City of Edmonton's plans for redevelopment in over 100 older neighbourhoods. These are their departing comments and questions.

Note: for ease of compilation and analysis, statements have been edited. Some statements of a similar topic have been consolidated.

Comments & Questions About the Infill Guidelines Proposal

- 40% site coverage maximum should not increase with smaller lots but due to lot size looks more massive - should be less than 40% to reflect typical character of surrounding homes
- All building under the guidelines will need rezoning or Zoning relaxation on a project-by-project basis.
- Architectural fashions come and go - Smart Choices needs to accommodate unexpected trends
- Are existing projects going to be made subject to these guidelines?
- Big homes aren't typically for larger households - simply for small households with lots of money
- City has failed to consider the combined impact on a neighbourhood if infill happens as these guidelines say PLUS other redevelopment happens like secondary suites.
- City needs to balance increase in rate of infill with a decrease in rate of suburban sprawl (density credit trading approach?)
- City should apologize for past neighbourhood abuse that did not adhere to principles like these
- Developers should have to compensate neighbouring landowners for infill development that diminishes enjoyment of their properties
- Development Officers have to be qualified enough and willing/expected to consider community input when using discretionary power
- Do citizens really want a quality city? Recently development is entirely market driven - PDD does not plan - lack of direction plus cheapest land dictates city shape & quality
- For TOD if the City puts a cap on how much parking is allowed for high density developments next to LRT, that would allay neighbours' fears about excess traffic within the community
- Garages are often too tall
- Guidelines are not enough to protect existing bungalow residents from higher bigger next-door development that shades yards, blocks sunlight and intrudes into privacy
- Guidelines don't do enough to protect existing single family homes from oversized infill - monster buildings negatively impact neighbours' privacy impact neighbours' privacy and access to sun, local streetscape, local environment (loss of mature trees > affects birds, wildlife, air quality etc)

- Guidelines fail to protect existing mature landscaping - very critical feature of a neighbourhood
- Guidelines should consider architecture too - some neighbourhoods are unique, defined by very distinctive architecture - new homes often conflict and undermine that identity
- Guidelines should cover exterior materials too (brick, vinyl, etc)
- Guidelines should require "sight lines" (aka "view planes") be considered to avoid larger redevelopments from obscuring views of significant buildings, places, etc.
- Guidelines still allow larger developments (even single family) that are oversized compared to neighbouring lots - don't respect neighbours' rights to sunlight, privacy
- Guidelines treat all neighbourhoods the same but they are not the same - some older neighbourhoods are already intensively developed – should they be expected to take more growth while lesser areas take less?
- Guidelines will not work if City continues to fail to apply and then enforce the zoning rules
- Guidelines won't be effective unless they are converted to rules
- Have good ideas for larger developments but not good enough re: impacts on single family homes
- Having ground floor units face street with access at street is good but that rule already exists and the City waives it. Why? Will this guideline change anything?
- How do guidelines limit corner lot redevelopment zoning? If density zoning exists, does development reorient to the flanking street (one lot changes streetscape for bigger part of the neighbourhood)?
- How do the guidelines ensure street level retail/service commercial will fit into large size redevelopments?
- How do we get a neighbourhood plan for our community?
- How do you ensure the guidelines will be reflected in Zoning Bylaw and are enforceable?
- How does recent Glenora redevelopment fit with these guidelines?
- How will guidelines affect heritage areas?
- How will the City enforce "asymmetrical" design in redevelopments?
- Infill development removes too much open space from properties - bigger buildings, more hard surfaces etc = less green space -- Infill often not sensitive to those features and character of the area that make it attractive.
- Infill guidelines need to be tempered for unique community qualities, features, values -- no one-size-fits-all
- Infill principles must apply equally to all neighbourhoods - be democratic

- Infill should have to add benefit to the host community before it is approved
- Issue of shadowing is not addressed in small scale mature neighbourhood infill
- Land use should be publicly imposed, publicly directed -- not the result of purchase price variations and random sales
- Mature trees on private land have to be protected as part of neighbourhood infrastructure
- Medium and larger developments should be forced to retain heritage facades/features
- More than 6 rowhouses (150 ft long) -- too much "wall" - needs to be broken up into smaller lengths
- Need community consultation before Parks Dept allows public landscaping/street trees to be cut down and before Transportation Dept allows front driveways.
- Perimeter/edge development for higher density is already accepted - need pressure to follow through and enforce it
- Row houses need a height limit
- Secondary suites
- Should be a separate study/guidelines for infill redevelopment of commercial sites e.g. Whyte Avenue, 124 Street, Beverley, etc
- Should include guidelines for small scale appropriately sized/designed commercial - throughout neighbourhood not just at edges or in suburbia
- Should provide a "model" for small scale infill (e.g. duplex on a corner) like was done for the large scale development.
- Should show us some existing projects in Edmonton that illustrate these guidelines?
- small lots should not be too small - e.g. 2 33' lots should not become 3 22' lots but 2 50' lots could be 3 33' lots
- Some good ideas but City's willingness to vary rules for Dev. Permits can render them useless.
- Some neighbourhoods are already intensive and planned that way (eg already at/near 125 u/h for entire neighbourhood), will these guidelines be allowed to add even more intensification that is contrary to approved ARP?
- Sun angle should apply to small scale residential too, not just high rise - higher buildings impact neighbouring homes, yards
- These guidelines must be coordinated with the secondary suites and garage suites or the infill objectives will conflict
- Transportation and Parks Depts work against Planning when they okay removal of blvd trees and allow front drive curb cuts before Planning even approves the redevelopment
- Understand and agree with intensification but not when it means removing existing homes , building big out-of-character homes, changes the streetscape

- Using "crime prevention" focus is not enough - need "safety enhancement" - more inclusive, less confrontational
- Where are considerations for social implications - meeting places, parks, shopping area, walkability, livability, loss of sun on adjacent sites, etc?
- Why are 8 neighbourhoods being treated differently than all the rest (e.g. secondary suites) -- will they also be exempted from Smart Choices initiatives too?
- Why is secondary suites project being done outside the Smart Choices guidelines project if they are both trying to do the same thing? Will they compound each other in an unexpected way?
- Why is the City not modeling or predicting population increases resulting from Smart Choices and from secondary suites projects to determine impact on individual neighbourhoods?
- Why is there no consideration of population implications of higher density projects - more transient populations like students? Young professional couples? -- will force families with children even further to the suburbs
- Will City use community park space for infill housing?
- Will Development Officers use infill guidelines to vary Zoning Bylaw rules?
- Will guidelines be enforceable?
- Will guidelines be modified so they don't allow development that detracts from historic/heritage buildings?
- Will guidelines be used to justify changing ARPs that already have design & height policies in them?
- Will guidelines harmonize with efforts to protect top-of-bank along river valley and ravines?
- Will guidelines overrule neighbourhood ARPs?
- Will infill guidelines override or trump ARPs? Or be used by PDD to vary Zoning Bylaw rules?
- Will money for new infrastructure to handle infill get priority over money for suburban infrastructure and remedial infrastructure?
- Will not work if not strictly applied *and enforced* by the City
- Will SDAB have to adhere to these guidelines?
- Will the City use incentives (tax relief, levies, grants, etc) to encourage private ownership over absentee investments?
- Will the guidelines include "building design" rules? If so, how will they be enforced? Both small and large developments should go through an aesthetics review process before any relaxations are given.

Comments & Questions About the “New Model

- Can Community Leagues charge for developer initiated public consultations held in community league halls?

- City planners cannot ensure a fair unbiased process because they are already involved with developers in applications - need independent person to oversee process
- City should engage unbiased ombudsman/mediator to resolve conflicts between PDD & community and between PDD & developer
- Community Leagues cannot afford (money, volunteer time, time taken from jobs, etc) the level of review work suggested.
- Define what it means to say a "substantive" change will trigger action. What is "substantive?"
- Developers get certainty through rezoning process but not communities - "consultation" is not defined.
- Existing consultation re variances is flawed - gives developer priority over residents' rights re: privacy, sunlight, mature landscape, space etc
- How will new process rules be mandated to ensure they work?
- If developer has to pay City's costs for rezoning, who will pay for Community League's costs?
- Large scale developments should have to include commercial space suited to the area
- Makes too many demands on community leagues and their leaders
- Question whether it is a good idea to put Community Leagues in a political process
- Residents should have access to a non-involved planner to help through the process, explain technicalities
- What's to prevent the developer from changing his proposal after he presents different drawings to the community just before making the formal application?
- Wrong to rely so much on Community League for consultation - need broad public consultation

Questions & Comments About Both Infill Guidelines and New Model Proposals

- Developers of medium/large scale redevelopments should have to be responsible for traffic calming measures on nearby streets
- good information - hope City follows through and goes forward with it

Questions & Comments About the Process to Generate The Proposals

- City Planner should go to Community League meetings to present these ideas directly to local leaders, residents.
- How are the guidelines going to be approved?
- How will Community Leagues be able to contribute to EFCL's review?
- Infill guidelines need to be presented to the general public in a broadly seen (televised?) interactive way like a Town Hall meeting
- Need ongoing contact with people like this event - network, communicate - City's process keeps ordinary citizens out of the loop

- Who was on the focus group that PDD consulted? Every Community League should have had opportunity to participate.
- Why was the general public not consulted? Community Leagues don't always represent everyone.
- Will all reports and studies be publicly available - on-line?

Miscellaneous Comments & Questions – Neighbourhood Planning & Development in General

- "Planning" Dept a misnomer - when will the City put "planning" back into the Planning & Development Dept?
- All adjacent neighbours should be consulted before Dev Permit application is made that involves any variance, not just Overlay variances
- Basement height - 9' ceilings mean Mature Nbhd Overlay variance or false grade measurement needed - limit ceiling height to 8'?
- City needs a planning commission - like Vancouver
- Current pre-application consultation rules are frequently ignored - they are not checked, verified or enforced
- If Smart Choices has been going on for years, why are PDD staff still insensitive to the issues?
- Info in Notices of variance etc is inadequate - need to show site plan, building footprint etc so people understand implications
- Insufficient time is allowed re: development permit Notice to consider appeal, get more info, work out issues
- Need consultation before application is made, not after it is approved by Development Officer.
- PDD culture errs on developers' side whenever they can
- Should give every Community League a manual on infill guidelines
- Will transit service always follow demand, or should it anticipate and lead land use?

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