

B6 – Downtown Commercial District Review – Project Update

ISSUE

A review of the B6 – Downtown Commercial District (B6 Review) is underway to identify and implement amendments to the zone’s regulations that better reflect current building practices, emphasize flexibility and encourage development in the Downtown, while ensuring a high-quality built environment. This report provides an update on work undertaken to date, an overview of items identified for review and the next steps with engagement in 2023.

BACKGROUND

City Council, at its February 26, 2018 meeting considered a report that outlined a number of initiatives, procedural changes and incentives with the intent to streamline and encourage development in the Downtown in line with Council’s strategic priority of Downtown Development. City Council resolved, in part:

- “9. That the Planning and Development Division review the zoning conditions for the B6 District and report back to the Planning, Development and Community Services Committee.”

Similar direction was also provided to review the RA1 – Reinvestment District 1, encompassing Downtown’s Warehouse District and now known as MX2 – Downtown Warehouse Mixed Use District. Amendments to that zone were approved by City Council on November 19, 2018.

The Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw Review Project has been underway since 2019. The B6 zone has been out of the scope of that project to allow for a dedicated and comprehensive review of the zone, separate from the work of the larger project. However, minor amendments identified through the preliminary work of the B6 Review were brought forward as part of an amendment package and approved on December 20, 2021.

CURRENT STATUS

The B6 – Downtown Commercial District is the primary zoning district in Downtown and encompasses most of its land area (see Appendix 1). The purpose of the B6 zone is to facilitate a wide range of commercial, institutional and residential uses in a high-density form in the Downtown area. This is supported by policies in the [Official Community Plan](#) that identify Downtown as the primary location for office, retail, recreation, culture and entertainment facilities and directs the highest densities of development to this neighbourhood.

In general, B6 is a permissive, flexible and high-density zone that accommodates a broad range of land uses and building forms. These characteristics are a considerable asset to the zone and accommodate new development. However, permissiveness and

flexibility must be balanced with appropriate development standards to ensure a high-quality built environment in line with the established vision for the Downtown.

Along with other key Downtown initiatives and investments, such as the Downtown Event and Entertainment District (District) Plan, Bus Rapid Transit and New Central Library, the timing of the B6 Review is appropriate to support new growth in the Downtown and ensure development outcomes meet community expectations and strategic objectives of the Official Community Plan and [City Centre Plan](#).

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Key Topic Areas for Review

Based on preliminary work undertaken on known issues and areas for review, Administration has identified the following key topic areas for review and identification of potential amendments:

1. Open Volume Regulations

“Open Volume” refers to a set of regulations which apply to B6 properties. Its purpose is to regulate building height and form in a manner that is related to the site area. It limits the scale and massing of a structure by ensuring three-dimensional open space and variation are provided in the built form. This is intended to achieve appropriate proportions and offer relief from the massing as experienced in the public realm, especially as building height increases. It follows the general principle that the larger the site and the more three-dimensional open space provided on a site, the taller a building can be.

Open Volume is only used in the B6 zone and exists in lieu of regulatory approaches in other high-density zones, such as Gross Floor Space Ratio and prescriptive building setbacks. Based on a municipal scan, Open Volume appears to be unique to Saskatoon. It has not been comprehensively reviewed since its introduction in the 1970s.

Known issues with Open Volume are that it is difficult for external stakeholders to understand and account for in building design, and for staff to clearly explain. Open Volume, as it exists, may not support the intent and policies of the Official Community Plan which identifies Downtown for the highest densities of development in Saskatoon. The B6 Review will consider options to improve the Open Volume regulations.

2. Surface Parking Lots

Currently, surface parking lots are permitted in B6 as “commercial parking lot” or “parking station” land uses. The Zoning Bylaw contains landscaping, screening, and hard surfacing standards for these uses. However, many existing lots in the Downtown lack some or all these site improvements. The City Centre Plan found that approximately 26% of the City Centre (Downtown and its environs) is dedicated to surface parking. The City Centre Plan recommended that surface parking as a principal land use be made a discretionary use in the B6 zone, but amendments to implement this have not been brought forward to date.

Planning and engagement exercises undertaken locally and best practices in planning more broadly consistently reflect the widely accepted conclusion that surface parking, especially in an unimproved state, is harmful to a high-quality urban environment, pedestrian comfort, and vibrant and complete streetscapes.

The B6 Review will consider options for the regulation of surface parking.

3. Design Guidelines

In 2015, design guidelines for the Downtown were added to the B6 District and M4 – Core Area Institutional Service District based on recommendations of the City Centre Plan. These regulations address basic considerations that address the quality of the built form including requirements for active frontage, transparent openings at-grade, façade articulation and wind mitigation. The B6 Review will consider issues around the practical application of these regulations since 2015 and review for refinement, clarification and flexibility where appropriate without undermining their intent to ensure a high-quality built environment.

4. Adaptive Reuse

Disruptions to the workplace due to COVID-19, continuing vacancies in commercial office markets across Canada, and ongoing efforts to retain buildings with heritage significance have drawn attention to how municipalities can best support adaptive reuse of existing buildings into new and productive uses. Generally, the flexibility and permissiveness of the B6 zone presents few, if any zoning-related barriers to a change of use. However, the B6 Review will work to determine if additional improvements to support adaptive reuse can be made.

5. Miscellaneous/Housekeeping

The B6 Review will consider a variety of other development standards for improvement, added flexibility, clarification and updating of language where appropriate.

Stakeholder Engagement Planned for 2023

The B6 Review will undertake stakeholder engagement in 2023, beginning with the formation and launch of a targeted Focus Group. The Focus Group will be comprised of Downtown and industry stakeholders who will work with Administration to review topic areas and amendment options and provide feedback from a technical perspective (see Appendix 2).

Broader engagement will follow the work of the Focus Group. Information will be made available through a project webpage, letters to property owners and dissemination of information through stakeholder groups and other strategies as identified to reach Downtown businesses, residents, and the general public. One-on-one meetings with stakeholders or interest groups will be accommodated and engagement events will be held through in-person, online and hybrid formats as appropriate.

Relationship to District Plan

The District Plan is also proceeding in 2023. Engagement and communications for that project and the B6 Review will be coordinated as appropriate. Clear ongoing communication of the separate project scopes and purposes will be necessary. The District Plan will consider land use and development objectives within its study area, which includes land currently zoned B6. Any land use and zoning amendments required to specifically achieve the District Plan’s vision for its study area will be put forward by that plan.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Minor incidental costs for third party conceptual design/modelling services are anticipated and can be covered by an existing funding source.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are no privacy, legal, social or environmental implications identified.

NEXT STEPS

Administration is currently working to launch the Focus Group with a call for participants this month and the group’s first meeting is expected to take place in March 2023. It is anticipated that Zoning Bylaw amendments will be brought forward for consideration by City Council in late 2023 or early 2024.

APPENDICES

1. Downtown Zoning Map
2. B6 Zoning Review Focus Group – Additional Information

REPORT APPROVAL

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