

Neighbourhood Character in Other Cities

Administration reviewed documents from several Canadian municipalities: Regina, Edmonton, Kelowna, Winnipeg, Kingston, Ottawa and London. Highlights from the jurisdictional scan include:

- Neighbourhood character can be defined using a wide range of attributes depending on contexts and motivations. Some attributes are more appropriate for policies and regulations, such as items that are typically included in development regulations like setbacks, massing, parking, driveways, screening and landscaping. Other attributes that are sometimes cited as character are inappropriate, such as resident demographics (tenure, income, etc.). Additionally, some municipalities have suggested the density or typology of residential buildings (i.e., one-unit dwellings vs. multi-unit dwellings), while often perceived as a part of neighbourhood character, is not in itself appropriate to segregate in the name of protecting character;
- Applying new or additional regulations on properties, beyond zoning matters, to protect neighbourhood character should be done judiciously, focusing on areas with threat of losing a character that is well defined and highly valued, and where there is strong consensus among affected stakeholders in support of additional regulation;
- Neighbourhood character is one of many considerations for municipalities and should be balanced together with other planning goals and priorities; and
- Initiatives that municipalities have previously done that involved community stakeholders in thinking about and promoting the balancing act between neighbourhood character and other planning goals include conducting broad engagement on residential infill regulations and guidelines, and hosting design competitions for innovative infill designs that meet a variety of planning goals.

Kingston is one municipality that has published proposed policy amendments which illustrate how the municipality is changing its approach toward neighbourhood character protection in light of its HAF commitments. Kingston is proposing to repeal policies that speak widely to protecting neighbourhood character across established low-density areas city-wide, while maintaining some protection for areas that have been previously identified as having significant heritage character.

Note: “City” refers to the respective municipal government described in each section. Also note that different legislation applies in jurisdictions outside of Saskatchewan; hence, information from other cities may not necessarily be applicable to Saskatoon.

Regina, SK – Neighbourhood Character Study and Heritage Conservation

Regina is home to the only heritage conservation district in Saskatchewan - Victoria Park Heritage Conservation District, which covers more than 20 buildings on several blocks of Regina's downtown core. Any property built pre-1965 that is part of the Victoria Park Heritage Conservation District is considered a municipal heritage property.

In 2021-2022, in response to community interest, the City of Regina engaged a planning consultant to conduct a study on neighbourhood character for the Cathedral and Lakeview neighbourhoods.^{1,2} This study aimed to define the unique 'character' elements of these two neighbourhoods and consider appropriate tools to protect this character. Tools offered by Saskatchewan legislation, as identified by the consultant, include:

- Holding provisions and demolition control;
- Architectural control districts and heritage conservation districts;
- Zoning regulations such as Regina's infill development zoning overlay; and
- Customized zoning for specific areas, i.e., direct control districts.

Community stakeholders identified many elements that contribute to Cathedral and Lakeview's character, including architectural variety and uniqueness, trees, art, walkability, gardens and green features, local business, porches and setback uniformity. However, many of these are difficult to regulate, and it may even be contradictory to regulate some elements such as architectural variety.

The consultant cautioned that "new regulation should be used judiciously, in areas of obvious threat of losing character and with a high degree of consensus amongst stakeholders". Considering these findings, and also that Regina's relatively new infill regulations may eventually alleviate some concerns about character, the primary recommendation resulting from this study was a consensus-driven process led by interested property owners to nominate a specific area within a neighbourhood for additional development regulation, through an opt-in heritage conservation district process.

The resulting opt-in heritage conservation district process was approved by Regina City Council in April 2023.³ City staff recommended that an area eligible to be nominated for a heritage conservation district must:

1. Consist of multiple contiguous properties;
2. Be at minimum one block or 80 metres in length;
3. Has shared heritage value(s) that gives it a distinctive quality or appearance; and
4. Obtain written support from all property owners within the proposed district.

¹ City of Regina & Wallace Insights. (2022). *Community Character (Lakeview and Cathedral)*.

<https://beheard.regina.ca/community-character>

² City of Regina & Wallace Insights. (2022). *RPC22-29: Neighbourhood Character - Lakeview and Cathedral*.

https://reginask.igm2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=5600

³ City of Regina. (2023). *EX23-19: Heritage Conservation Phase 2 Policies*.

https://reginask.igm2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=5802

Edmonton, AB

Edmonton City Council approved a new Zoning Bylaw in October 2023 that makes significant changes to land use and development regulation in Edmonton, including changes that would permit up to eight dwelling units on a typical low-density urban residential site.⁴

Glenora Heritage Character Area – Proposed Direct Control Zoning District

In approving the new bylaw, City Council directed City staff to restart work on a direct control zoning district for the Glenora Heritage Character Area, “in alignment with The City Plan and draft District Planning goals of increased density while encouraging the retention of heritage resources and ensuring new development respects the form and massing of the Garden City Suburb.” The adopted motion directs City staff to restart work that was previously started in 2017 but was paused in 2021.⁵ However, since then, the City has adopted new community plans that push for higher infill growth especially along primary nodes and corridors. Glenora is located on a designated primary corridor and is adjacent to two future rapid transit stations, and therefore significant development pressures would be expected. City staff are due to report back in spring 2024 on options for conducting this work.

Westmount Heritage Area – Direct Control Zoning District

In addition, Edmonton’s Westmount Heritage Area has its own heritage zoning regulations. The designated area covers approximately ten residential blocks.⁶ The stated purpose of the direct control zoning applied to these properties “ensure that development is sensitively integrated with the historic context of the area and reinforces elements of the area’s character including the traditional pattern of single-detached development, urban design characteristics and historic craftsman and foursquare architecture.” Regulations relate to permitted uses, site dimensions, site coverage, building height, building setbacks, front entrances, front porches and balconies, roof designs, building materials, windows, protection of City-owned trees, site access and requirement for façades to be generally consistent with the prevailing architectural style. However, unlike Glenora, Westmount is not directly adjacent to future rapid transit.

Other Motions

Other motions adopted by Edmonton City Council alongside approval of the new Zoning Bylaw, that may be motivated in part by concerns about neighbourhood character or impact, include motions related to infill construction issues, neighbour notification requirements, minimum tree planting requirements and tree retention incentives.

⁴ City of Edmonton. (2023). *City Council Public Hearing Minutes - October 16, 2023*. <https://pub-edmonton.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?id=caf6581e-1be8-4d31-89bc-b36cfd301664&Agenda=PostMinutes&lang=English>

⁵ City of Edmonton. (2021). *Glenora Heritage Character Area Rezoning*. https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/edmonton_archives/glenora-heritage-character-area

⁶ City of Edmonton. (2019). *Edmonton Zoning Bylaw, Part 4 - Direct Control Zones, Bylaw 18934 - Westmount Heritage Area*. <https://webdocs.edmonton.ca/InfraPlan/zoningbylaw/DC1/Westmount/18934.htm>

Kelowna, BC – Infill Challenge Design Competitions

In 2016 and 2021, the City of Kelowna hosted two Infill Challenge design competitions.⁷ These competitions sought innovative designs for development of three to four dwelling units on a single residential lot in select established neighbourhoods. The intent was to facilitate infill ideas that are well designed, broadly applicable and feasible, meet various community objectives and be sensitive or complementary to the neighbourhoods' context. Over the two competitions, the City invited individuals from many diverse backgrounds to participate by either setting out the evaluation criteria and/or adjudicating the submissions. These included architects, designers, developers and builders, planners, realtors, school board and health authority representatives, as well as community association representatives and residents of the affected neighbourhoods.

Winning submissions were used to inform regulatory changes that would facilitate the kinds of desirable infill housing expressed by those designs. For example, in 2017 after the conclusion of the first Infill Challenge, City staff developed a new infill zoning district permitting up to four units per site, led the rezoning of over 800 sites in selected core neighbourhoods and implemented a fast-track development permit process for pre-approved designs. These changes have resulted in the average number of sites redeveloped with infill housing to increase ten-fold from 2 to 23 sites per year, producing approximately 100 units annually.

The Infill Challenge acted like a pilot project that gave staff a starting point on infill. The City's current Infill Options project has a much wider scope in terms of the geographic area covering all core area neighbourhoods, as well as the infill typologies considered.⁸ The Infill Options project responds to evolving priorities and directives from Kelowna City Council and the Province of British Columbia. While the City has not used a design competition for their current project, City staff have been conducting broad city-wide engagement.

Given their directives, City staff posed questions to the community not about whether infill should be supported but rather how infill could be expanded and implemented. For example, one question asked what aspects of infill are important to prioritize for new development to complement existing neighbourhoods, such as proximity to services and transit, compatible look and feel, tree preservation, green space, on-site stormwater management and streetscape improvements (sidewalks and boulevards). Another question posed a trade-off between permitting taller buildings and preserving open space. Continued expansion of the Infill Options project has been identified as one of the City of Kelowna's HAF commitments.

⁷ City of Kelowna. *Infill Housing*. <https://www.kelowna.ca/homes-building/property-development/infill-housing>

⁸ City of Kelowna. (2023). *Get Involved Kelowna: Infill Options Project*. <https://getinvolved.kelowna.ca/infill-options>

Winnipeg, MB – Small Scale and Low Rise Residential Development Guidelines for Mature Communities

In 2021, Winnipeg City Council adopted the Small-Scale and Low-Rise Residential Development Guidelines for Mature Communities, which was developed over four years of community consultation through the City of Winnipeg’s Residential Infill Strategy project.⁹ This document contains guidelines on site design and building design, as well as preferred location criteria, that are intended to assist City staff in evaluating and providing advice for small-scale and low-rise development proposals in mature neighbourhoods.

Separate guidelines are provided for one-unit dwellings, two-unit (duplex) dwellings, semi-detached dwellings, triplexes, fourplexes, townhouses and low-rise multi-unit residential buildings typically up to four storeys. The guidelines address:

- Building massing, including lot coverage and height;
- Building setbacks and permitted projections into setbacks;
- Separation distances between buildings on the same site;
- Landscaping;
- Vehicle access and parking;
- Façade materials and building design;
- Main floor height;
- Privacy in terms of features such as fencing, screening, windows and outdoor amenity areas; and
- Utilities, servicing and mechanical units.

The guidelines do not dictate what type of architectural style a building should take, but rather “will help create a standard of development within [Winnipeg’s] mature neighbourhoods that respects the character of the neighbourhood it is in”. The City’s intent has been that the City’s Zoning Bylaw would eventually be updated to align with the “design direction” of the guidelines. However, to date, only regulations for one-unit, two-unit and semi-detached dwellings within one specific neighbourhood have been implemented into the Zoning Bylaw.¹⁰

⁹ City of Winnipeg. (2021). *Small-Scale and Low-Rise Residential Development Guidelines for Mature Communities*. <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/PPD/PublicEngagement/InfillStrategy/default.stm>

¹⁰ City of Winnipeg. (2022). *Glenwood Neighbourhood Infill Planning*. <https://engage.winnipeg.ca/glenwood-infill>

Kingston, ON – Housing Accelerator Fund amendments

The City of Kingston's HAF commitments include:¹¹

- Permitting four dwelling units as-of-right in residential zones city-wide; and
- Increasing density near Queen's University "while conserving heritage buildings in the area", specifically by permitting six-storey multi-unit residential buildings.

In January 2024, City staff published for public feedback an extensive package of proposed amendments to the Official Plan and Zoning Bylaw to meet the City's HAF commitments.¹²

Kingston's Official Plan currently contains a policy section titled Protecting Stable Areas, which was "fundamentally intended to prevent 'stable' neighbourhoods from changing". These policies "establish a framework for assessing when a neighbourhood is stable by looking at, among other matters, density and types of uses, architectural character, land ownership and limited new development applications altering land assembly [and/or] built form. The policies do not allow for new forms of development that are different from the prevailing pattern of development in terms of density, activity level, built form or type of use."

To permit four units on a site city-wide, City staff propose to fully repeal the Stable Areas policies and replace that section with locational criteria for simplified categories of residential development – low-rise, mid-rise and high-rise – that provide general guidance for new residential building proposals. The proposed policies for low-rise residential buildings, which would encompass all forms of ground-oriented housing up to four storeys excluding apartment buildings, state that they are appropriate in all existing low-rise residential areas of the city. The proposed changes also include changes to many zoning districts in Kingston's Zoning Bylaw, including Kingston's existing heritage zoning districts where City staff are proposing to add a new development standard permitting the maximum number of dwelling units per lot to be 4.0, unless a more permissive density requirement already applies.

For the City's commitment to upzone a specific area near Queen's University, City staff are proposing to apply a higher density zoning district to the prescribed four-block area, resulting in the maximum permitted height increasing from three storeys to six storeys. However, a specific exclusion is proposed for sites occupied by six buildings "that have been identified as potentially having heritage value". The proposed amendments also include applying a new holding provision onto the upzoned area which would require development proponents to ensure concerns related to servicing capacity, transportation impact, heritage impact and other considerations are addressed to the City's satisfaction.

¹¹ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (January 18, 2024). *Helping build more homes, faster in Kingston*. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/media-newsroom/news-releases/2024/helping-build-more-homes-faster-kingston>

¹² City of Kingston. (2024). *Winter Planning News*. <https://www.cityofkingston.ca/business/planning-and-development/-/news/6ffa1f8c33/4ee4f1d2e6/%C2%A0-Winter-2024/zBvH4xz05WOR>

Ottawa, ON – Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw Review

The City of Ottawa is developing a new comprehensive Zoning Bylaw.¹³ The City has developed informational materials that explain the concept of neighbourhood character in the context of zoning regulations. ‘Neighbourhood character’ can include a wide range of attributes, sometimes including intangible elements, and different individuals may be referring to different items when they express concerns about character.

Aspects of ‘character’ that are appropriately within scope for regulations include:

- Building height, size, floor area, bulk and massing;
- Building spacing in terms of setbacks;
- Location, treatment and size of parking areas and driveways;
- Location of waste storage areas;
- Requirements for landscaping and permeable surfaces – which could support, but not directly regulate, tree planting on private land; and
- Some basic aspects of exterior design such as front entrances and front façades, but not architectural styles or items that are covered by heritage legislation.

Conversely, aspects of ‘character’ that are not appropriate to regulate include:

- Number of units in a building. As the City explains, “built form, design and functional matters, such as the treatment of parking and garbage are legitimate character questions. However, these matters are separate from, and incidental to, the question of unit density. Multi-unit buildings are not in and of themselves incompatible with single-detached or ground-oriented dwellings”;
- People zoning – referring to any regulation, such as regarding tenure (rental vs. ownership), that impacts who can live in a neighbourhood; and
- Income of residents – noting zoning has historically been exclusionary by restricting housing forms that are more affordable to a wider range of residents.

City staff further noted neighbourhood character is only one of the City’s planning goals, and trade-offs must be considered with other goals, such as increasing housing choice, creating complete communities and reducing impacts to climate change:

“The main consideration in discussions of neighbourhood character [...] is not ‘will this change the character of the neighbourhood?’ The answer is always yes: To a greater or lesser extent, any new development necessarily changes the character of the site and the neighbourhood. The question is, ‘Is the change beneficial when we consider how well or poorly it serves the City’s other planning goals?’”

¹³ City of Ottawa. (2023). *New Zoning Bylaw*. <https://engage.ottawa.ca/zoning>

London, ON – Planning and Design Report Requirements

London's current Official Plan, approved in 2016, requires all planning and development applications to include submission of a Planning and Design Report (planning justification report) if a proposal requires amending existing plans or bylaws.¹⁴ For residential intensification proposals on sites within the Neighbourhoods Place Type (land use designation), the Planning and Design Report must “clearly demonstrate that the proposed intensification project is sensitive to, compatible with and fit within the existing and planned neighbourhood context” (Policy 953).

“Neighbourhoods” is the basic urban residential land use covering the vast majority of London, and “residential intensification” refers to any proposal for development at a higher residential density than currently exists on the site, including lot subdivision, vacant lot development and redevelopment of existing buildings that adds more dwelling units.

Specifically, the City will require proponents of residential intensification projects to justify how their proposal satisfies compatibility and fit in terms of the following “additional urban design considerations”:

- Site layout – including accesses, driveways, parking, landscaping, amenity areas and building location on site;
- Building and main entrance orientation;
- Building line and setback from the street;
- Character and features of the neighbourhood – which is not defined;
- Height transitions with adjacent development; and
- Massing appropriate to the surrounding neighbourhood's scale.

Like other cities, the City of London recognizes neighbourhood character must be balanced with other desirable goals. The overarching policies for the Neighbourhoods Place Type states that: “Intensification will respect existing neighbourhood character and offer a level of certainty, while providing for strategic ways to accommodate development to improve our environment, support local businesses, enhance our physical and social health and create dynamic, lively and engaging places to live.” (Policy 918_13)

¹⁴ City of London. (Approved 2016, as amended 2023). *The London Plan*. Refer to “Place Type Policies”, “Urban Place Types - Neighbourhoods”. <https://london.ca/government/council-civic-administration/master-plans-strategies/london-plan-official-plan>