

The Case for Neighbourhood Planning

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Over the past four years the City of Edmonton has dramatically revamped its approach to land use planning much to the detriment of neighbourhoods. The City Plan, District Policy, District Plans, the Zoning Bylaw and the Priority Growth Areas project all take a broad city-wide approach. Much of these high-level plans are certainly required as our City and other cities across the country deal with issues of equity, housing affordability, cost of building out and not up, population growth, climate change, increasing cost of services, serving a greater diversity of citizens to mention just a few.

And as the City has embarked on this new approach to land use planning it has repealed dozens of neighbourhood plans and policies that have, over many decades, enabled neighbourhoods to thrive. These plans encouraged social capital in each neighbourhood to grow and evolve to create many unique and special places throughout our city. After all, Edmonton is known throughout the country as having a unique and highly sought after mix of neighbourhoods. Our community league system dates back over 100 years and we now have over 160 leagues each with their own neighbourhood personality. With the City now seemingly abandoning small scale local neighbourhood planning, the value and importance of neighbourhoods will be greatly diminished.

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There is no question that land use planning can be messy, but the City seems to have ‘thrown the baby out with the bath water’. Yes, the policy landscape needed to be cleaned up. And, yes, as the City states we need to “simplify land use plans to ensure our neighbourhoods are adaptive and responsive to our collective city-building goals”. But we should not and must not abandon planning at the neighbourhood level.

Case in point is the work the City has done over many years to plan for more density around LRT stations. The now abandoned Transit Oriented Development policy and guidelines identified appropriate transit oriented development around LRT stations and transit centres. As stated, the guidelines:

“contain a Station Area typology for each existing and planned LRT station throughout the entire system. Station types were identified based on the area’s existing conditions and development potential. The guidelines recommend the minimum and maximum residential densities for each station type. . .”

The assignment of a station type to each station takes into account the neighbourhood and assigns one of seven station types to each station ranging from Neighbourhood Stations to Downtown Stations.

What is most admirable about this approach is that it takes into account local neighbourhood context and conditions. Whereas the new policies embedded in the current planning documents establish a one size fits all policy that allows for the same scale of development at all Mass Transit Stations. There is little opportunity to refine what can be developed based on the neighbourhood where the station is located.

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Blanket plans that treat the entire city the same are unable to consider the rich diversity of its neighbourhoods. Residents, who live and work in these neighbourhoods, have valuable insights into how development can proceed while preserving local character. They understand the specific needs and identity of their neighbourhood and could provide meaningful input to ensure that density and growth are balanced with livability and heritage. However, without incorporating these perspectives, the City is missing the opportunity to create nuanced, vibrant neighbourhoods where development respects the past while accommodating the future. Instead, the rush to implement broad policies leads to a loss of authenticity and further alienates citizens from the decisions that shape their daily environments.

Citywide planning, as many neighbourhoods have experienced it, has very much been a top-down process where the City makes strategic decisions based on citywide needs, projections, and data analysis. Neighbourhood planning involves bottom-up participation from local residents, businesses, and stakeholders, ensuring their voices shape the planning of their immediate environment.

At this time in our growth as a City, we seem to be moving to a plain vanilla approach to planning that does not embrace the rich diversity of neighbourhoods across the City. This is not an 'either' 'or' argument. But it is a call to revisit how we do good planning in our City and inculcate neighbourhood planning in the planning structure we have created.