

## Buried Report Raises Disturbing Questions

Timely release of 2023 report might have changed fate of zoning bylaw.

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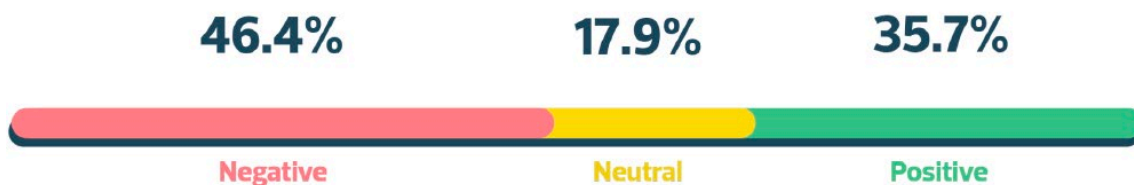
A report buried deep in a City of Edmonton online “document library” raises disturbing questions. The report, dated May 2023, is titled *Sentiment Analysis Report: Zoning Bylaw Renewal Initiative Engagement, Phase 3*. Its purpose was to “identify how Edmontonians felt about the changes proposed through the draft Zoning Bylaw.” In 20 of 32 themes analyzed, those feelings were negative. It appears the report was not presented to council meetings and hearings on the zoning bylaw.

An independent community researcher recently identified the 72-page report through a freedom of information request to city hall. It had been quietly posted to a city website with such low profile that its existence was unknown even to people who follow city hall closely. If it had been released when it was first prepared, the fate of Edmonton’s zoning bylaw might have been very different.

In the *Sentiment Analysis Report*, city staff examined 32 themes that emerged from public engagement for the final phase of the zoning bylaw. Listed in the table of contents by alphabetic order, the themes range from “Accessibility” to “Vehicle Access and Parking.” The report provided a brief discussion and summary of public comments on each theme, complete with a bar of green, yellow, and red showing the percentage of comments that show positive, neutral, or negative sentiments. The report said this “provides a snapshot of how people feel about each theme.”

For example, here is the bar on the theme of Accessibility, showing substantially more negative public sentiment than positive about the zoning bylaw’s inadequacy in addressing wheelchair access, barrier-free design, and usability:

### Accessibility



Public sentiment was more negative than positive for 20 of the 32 themes, a clear majority.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT RATED DECIDEDLY NEGATIVE.

The most important theme is “Public Engagement” because it cuts to the legitimacy of the entire zoning bylaw exercise. As the bar below shows, negative sentiments about engagement outnumber positive sentiments by a wide margin. “The majority of comments,” said the report, “noted concerns or dissatisfaction with the engagement to date.”

### Public Engagement



This negative rating was remarkable because it came from people who were deliberately engaged by the city, including various developer and real estate groups; MacEwan University; the public school board; and the federation of community leagues. The very people the city had engaged, gave the city failing grades for engagement.

At least those people knew about the zoning bylaw; most Edmontonians did not. The same month the public engagement for the sentiment analysis was done, May 2023, nationally recognized pollster Pollara found that 62% of Edmontonians had never heard of the zoning bylaw and only three percent knew any details. (See link at end of this article.)

Long before the zoning bylaw was presented to council, city administration described it as part of the largest overhaul of land use in Edmonton in sixty years, intended to fundamentally change the nature of the city. Change on this scale requires genuine public support. The zoning bylaw has never received genuine public support because it never had genuine public engagement.

## COMPREHENSION.

Reinforcing the poor grades for public engagement are the even worse sentiments about “Comprehension.” The report defines comprehension as “...the clarity and ease of interpreting the proposed Zoning Bylaw regulations,” including word choice, definitions, and intent. Fewer than one quarter of sentiments were positive and almost 60% were negative.

Comprehension

59.4%

16.4%

24.2%



Given the relatively high expertise of many of the people engaged, it's deeply concerning the zoning bylaw caused such confusion. For ordinary citizens trying to understand the impact of the bylaw on their homes and neighbourhoods, the bylaw would be largely incomprehensible.

### DID COUNCILLORS EVER SEE THE REPORT?

The *Sentiment Analysis Report* means Edmonton city councillors voted for the zoning bylaw when the city's own report showed widespread negative public sentiment. Only councillors Karen Principe and Jennifer Rice voted against the bylaw.

The question is, did councillors ever see the report? It wasn't listed among reports presented by administration to council's urban planning committee when it debated the bylaw in June 2023. Neither was it listed among reports presented to council at the final public hearing in October 2023.

According to the city's document library, the report was posted online sometime in October 2023. It's not clear whether it was posted before, during, or after the public hearings held that month on the bylaw. In any case, its existence remained virtually unknown to the public.

### THE QUESTIONS GET TROUBLING.

Why wasn't the *Sentiment Analysis Report* included in the material presented to urban planning committee, council, and the public? Was it selectively circulated to some people and held back from others? Were some senior city staff so committed to the zoning bylaw they refused to share the report, knowing the public concerns it could raise? Were any city policies concerning public release of information violated, or was this simply a slip in the wheels of city bureaucracy?

## WHAT THIS MEANS.

The many Edmontonians who raised concerns at hearings were dismissed by city council and administration. Unfortunately for them, and for Edmonton, one of the most important bylaws in a lifetime was passed under a veil of misinformation and concealment.

City hall had a choice: it could have presented the *Sentiment Analysis Report Phase 3* to council and the public, admitted there were too many concerns, and gone back to the public to rework the bylaw. That was the responsible option. Instead, the decision was made to manipulate the process, which fed public cynicism, mistrust, and anger, tarnishing both the bylaw and the municipal government in general. The challenge for the next council will be to rebuild trust through open and honest public engagement.

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## MORE DETAIL AND BACKGROUND:

### The most commented themes.

The themes in the Sentiment Report Phase 3 receiving the most positive comments, which may reflect the heavy weighting of the infill industry in the engagement process, were these:

- **Landscaping (122 comments):**  
Positives exceed negatives by 21.2%.
- **Building Design (110 comments):**  
Positives exceed negatives by 4.3%.
- **Setbacks (89 comments):**  
Positives exceed negatives by 21.7%.
- **Building Height and Scale (72 comments):**  
Positives exceed negatives by 2.1%.

The themes receiving the most negative comments were these:

- **Public Engagement (118 comments):**  
Negatives exceed positives by 19%.
- **Comprehension, including clarity and ease of interpreting the bylaw (102 comments):**  
Negatives exceed positives by 35.2%.
- **Neighbourhood Character and Heritage (70 comments):**  
Negatives exceed positives by 6.9%.
- **Implementation, Process, and Technology (65 comments):**  
Negatives exceed positives by 31.5%.

## Who was engaged?

The *Sentiment Report* said the city “heard from a wide variety of stakeholders,” including “residents” and various business and community groups. It also listed 6 “specialized stakeholders” with which it had “regular check-in meetings and presentations.” Four of the 6 were development industry groups; one represented business improvement areas; and one was the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues (EFCL). In 2022, the EFCL had gone through an internal upheaval and signed a new funding agreement with the city, and in January 2023 presented a letter to council offering its support for the proposed zoning bylaw.

The engagement also included “a few ‘Chat with Planner’ meetings” with MacEwan University; unnamed development industry representatives; property owners and residents; and the Edmonton Public School Board.

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## LINKS TO DOCUMENTS:

### *Full Sentiment Analysis Report Phase 3*

Click below to view full report

[VIEW REPORT](#)

### *Detailed Results of the May 2023 Poll*

Click below to view results

[VIEW RESULTS](#)