

Residential Infill Strategy: Focus Group Meeting Notes



Date: Thursday, June 15, 2017

Time: 7:30 p.m. – 9 p.m.

Location: 4th floor, 10 Fort St., Winnipeg, MB

Attendees: 5 people in attendance

Organizations:

- City of Winnipeg Urban Planning and Office of Public Engagement
- Richmond West Neighbourhood
- Osborne Village West
- Point Douglas
- South St. Boniface

Overview

The goal of this meeting was to connect with residents and resident associations to pre-consult on how we should conduct engagement for the infill strategy project.

The focus group discussions were based on the following questions:

- Who should we be talking to?
- What information should we be providing?
- What formats for engagement should we be using?
- This event was meant to inform the Urban Planning Division about who should be consulted, what information should be shared, and how information should be communicated when the infill strategy consultation process begins in the fall of 2017.
- The meeting began with introductions, followed by a 5-10 minute powerpoint presentation by the Urban Planning Division. Once the presentation was complete the floor was opened up for discussions focused around the 3 questions. One member of the Urban Planning Division captured notes on a flip chart throughout the discussions.

At the end of the meeting it was communicated to the group that the notes would be typed up and sent out to participants for their record and to ensure that points were captured accurately. Further, the participants were encouraged to provide feedback, either to elaborate, provide clarity, or further explore ideas related to the conversation.

- Meeting notes include comments from the initial meeting (in black) and feedback from attendees (in blue).

Who Should be Engaged in this Process?

- Seniors Groups
- Builders Association
- Manitoba Housing
- Property Management Companies
- Other professional organizations (engineers, architects, etc.)
- Talk to other jurisdictions (e.g. Edmonton)

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *PPD said that they were looking at what other cities were doing for infill. OVW suggested that Edmonton was an excellent example and that as far as OVW was concerned, we could just take Edmonton's guidelines and adapt them to suit Winnipeg, and we would be done. PPD admitted that Edmonton had the best infill guidelines in the country. (post-meeting OVW comment: the Edmonton Infill Guidelines can be found here: https://www.edmonton.ca/business_economy/documents/PDF/Residential_Infill_Guidelines_Sept_2009.pdf)*
- *With regard to who they should talk to, Point Douglas mentioned seniors groups, property managers, Manitoba Housing. RW mentioned Habitat for Humanities, builders assoc.*

What information should we be providing?

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *I stumbled upon this article about densification in New York and I figure that, if anyone knows a thing or two about the ramifications of densification, it would likely be folks in New York. Perhaps it can help with the question of "What information should we be providing?" as well as "Who Should be Engaged in this Process?" I would think that councillors could also benefit from this perspective.*

http://www.businessinsider.com/the-future-of-suburbia-2017-2?utm_content=bufferb7bee&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-ti

What formats for engagement should we be using?

- Meetings should be held at various times of the day to accommodate peoples schedules
- Small groups and informal gatherings
- With regard to formats for engagement, OVW mentioned that a number of informal round table discussions like we were having tonight were the best way to proceed.

Other points raised in the meeting

- Getting Developers to engage with residents. Consultation should be with more than just immediate neighbours

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Has the potential to save city, developers and residents time and money.*
 - *A common theme expressed by each community was the need to consult with the community well before new developments ever proceed to public hearing. RW said the slow process involved with setting up good consultation is time well-spent.*
 - *RW said that more than just the adjacent neighbours need to be informed; the entire street and even entire neighbourhoods need to be informed. RW cited the construction a new cell tower in their neighbourhood as an example of the need to inform more than just adjacent residents.*
- How does disaster management fit into infill planning (with reference to example of speedway and St. Boniface area)

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Cosmetic buffers are not acceptable and can actually increase chance of risk and harm.*
- *SSB said that planning needs to include disaster management. SSB cited a few projects in South St. Boniface where the local residents had local knowledge about disaster risks that was not sought and was being ignored when the community tried to raise their concerns. SSB also mentioned 825 Tache and the distance between the proposed building and railway line as an example of the City not doing the necessary consultations concerning disaster management. Cosmetic buffers that are used for industrial in current planning with reference to*

the disaster management, do not factor in health or physical harm to residents. This was brought up by SSB early on in its opposition to Marion.

- Consideration needs to be given on keeping neighbourhoods 'family friendly'

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *To assist in promoting "safe" environments.*
 - *Our Winnipeg addresses the character of neighbourhoods, which is all too often is not a consideration in the planning or approval process. With specific reference to design and size.*
 - *SSB said that infill needs to keep neighbourhoods "family friendly". If not, families will be forced to the suburbs and infill will fail.*
- More consideration about parks for the neighbourhood
 - Where does dedication money go?

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *OVW said that many of the OVW developments with their variances have had to pay the city 10% land use dedication fees when providing less greenspace than would otherwise be required. OVW said that that money should go back into the given neighbourhood to provide greenspace elsewhere in the community. OV asked: Where is that money going? Into some kind of general slush fund? Is it being spent in the suburbs? Devin made a note asking where Land Use Dedication money is being spent.*
- How will guidelines be applied? And how will they related to other policy regulations in place such as the Zoning By-law and Secondary Plans?

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Our concern is that the infill guidelines will be interpreted, applied when convenient, and even ignored, as is happening today with our neighbourhood plans. We have neighbourhood plans and a zoning by-law now that are not being respected today. The zoning by-law is being modified habitually through variances, and neighbourhood plans are being treated as policy; provisions are cherry-picked or out-right ignored; loop holes are being exploited—all to maximise density and developer's profits. Why should we expect the infill guidelines to be treated any better? Since the infill guidelines will be just that... guidelines, and not law.... there will be no means of enforcement or grounds for appeal. What measures can/will the City put in place with this initiative to assure*

the public that the infill guidelines will in fact be respected, upheld and applied consistently in our neighbourhoods?

- *OVW used the Roslyn Crescent house situation as an example of their neighbourhood's concern that the City has neighbourhood plans and zoning by-law that are not being upheld now; therefore, why should OVW expect the infill guidelines to be upheld any better? (post-meeting OVW comment: "Our concern is that the infill guidelines will be interpreted, applied when convenient, and even ignored, as is happening today with our neighbourhood plans. We have neighbourhood plans and a zoning by-law now that are not being respected today. The zoning by-law is being modified habitually through variances, and neighbourhood plans are being treated as policy; provisions are cherry-picked or out-right ignored; loop holes are being exploited—all to maximise density and developer's profits. Why should we expect the infill guidelines to be treated any better? Since the infill guidelines will be just that... guidelines, and not law... there will be no means of enforcement or grounds for appeal. What measures can/will the City put in place with this initiative to assure the public that the infill guidelines will in fact be respected, upheld and applied consistently in our neighbourhoods?)*

- There is a current lack of trust between residents and developers and City.

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *SSB - I apologize for belabouring these points but I think it's important to note the reasons why distrust might exist rather than simply noting that it does. If we can get to the root of these issues, we then have a chance to address the problems and collectively choose more appropriate solutions. It might also help us with the development of the needed guidelines.*

- How do we know if there is sufficient infrastructure capacity for development?

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *SSB raised concerns about infrastructure capacity with infill development (eg. sewer overflow into the rivers) with common sewers in the mature neighbourhoods and over-development.*

- Transparency is key.
- A culture shift is needed.

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Lack of trust, lack of respect, and need for public consultation came up many times. A need for a change in culture was also expressed.*

- Need to look at construction guidelines management.
- Need better enforcement of development standards and impacts on neighbourhood during construction.
- Need a riverbank development strategy that protects the riverbanks and natural features.

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *OVW also mentioned that Edmonton considers its rivers and river banks as natural heritage to be conserved. OVW read the following extract from Edmonton:*
- *"Natural areas indeed are part of our heritage.[...] In the absence of any effective programs to protect and conserve remaining natural areas, many of our most significant natural sites have been lost to development. We may be at a crossroads that will determine the future character of the city. Either we must move quickly to protect the natural features that we cherish and take for granted within the City of Edmonton or we will see the remaining fragments of our natural heritage lost forever."*
- *(post-meeting comment: This extract is from 2.2.4 Natural Heritage found in the Technical Report for Edmonton's "CONSERVING EDMONTON'S NATURAL AREAS - A Framework for Conservation Planning in an Urban Landscape" https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/environmental_stewardship/parkland-conservation.aspx)*
- *OVW said that we are at the same crossroads here in Winnipeg; our riverbanks, in the most mature neighbourhoods (under the most infill pressure), are all getting the biggest developments with no public access or public green space along the river banks.*
- Need to look at "gentle density" and how to transition between high density and low density residential uses.

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Common concerns were "maxing out" lots and too many variances. SSB said that conditional uses not only max out land usage, but some outright fly in the face of prohibited uses in the city's own by-laws. SSB mentioned that 3 new modern houses are going up on a street with post-war houses. They do not fit the scale or character of the street/neighbourhood. They also fail to respect the adjacent homeowners whose greatest investments are likely in their own properties. OVW said they have the same situation on Roslyn Crescent.*
- *SSB also mentioned the need to avoid sudden change from low to high density, to buffer the transition more to keep both desirable, and to provide more of a*

staggered effect from low to medium to high, as high density right beside low density could have adverse effects on low density single family homes.

- *SSB said that the city thought urban sprawl was the way to go for a while; that was a mistake; so now they are going completely the other way with high density; another mistake; SSB asked: isn't there a happy medium somewhere between the two extremes?*
 - *Just to add to what Elaine sent, a point that really needs to be noted is that densification can be done badly. There's a saying that "a little knowledge is dangerous" and I think that applies well here. Understandably, city councillors cannot be fully informed on all potential developments/projects throughout the entire city however, they must nonetheless vote on accepting or rejecting them with whatever information they do have. The tendency seems to be to rely on little bits of info which includes their colleagues' information on which to base their vote decision. If a fellow councillor has adopted the latest buzz words like urbanism and densification with a surface knowledge as the single answer to the city's problems and, thinking that any and all densification is good densification, there is the potential for a host of new problems waiting to happen in voting to accept all proposed developments.*
 - *[OVW] brought to light a perfect example of what too much of a "good thing" can do to an area. Osborne Village seems to be the poster child for overdone densification. Just a few short years ago, that area was exactly what we would want urban design to accomplish; there was always pedestrian traffic and it was one of "the" spots to go in Winnipeg. In the last few years, that has changed. Natural features like forest, which contribute so much to aesthetics and healthy living, was virtually obliterated. Parking is ridiculous. The riverbank is choked off by high-rises and its' beautiful views are no longer accessible to the general public. The merchants are feeling the decline and businesses are folding. An analysis of what went wrong with this neighbourhood needs to be done to figure out what the tipping point is that turns an area from an organically vibrant one that everyone would want to visit or live in to one that is now to be basically avoided.*
 - *OVW spoke about the situation in Osborne Village. OVW said that it was an example of how not to do infill. OVW mentioned that they used to have a village with character, but the character is gone now, stores are closing, they have many store vacancies on Osborne, inadequate parking, etc. SSB agreed saying that OVW was a village with character once that has been killed, so now, the City wants to make a village in the Parker Wetlands...*
- **Need to protect Urban Forest**

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Strategic planning of Trees in design – Better understanding required in planning for their impact for cooling and reducing heat islands, benefits to infrastructure, improved air quality, aesthetic value, cost benefits, benefit to runoff and water quality. A good link to start <https://www.epa.gov/heat-islands/using-trees-and-vegetation-reduce-heat-islands>*
- *OVW also said that our urban forest needs to be protected in infill areas and that it is being decimated in Osborne Village. SSB said that trees are beneficial for water runoff, heat effect, and filtering pollution and have some really overlooked cost/benefit impacts.*
- *The Parker Wetlands and Forest seem to be an example of unfortunate planning. In an effort to create "walkable neighbourhoods," the city is destroying a perfectly sound natural feature that contributes to a healthy and beautiful environment. Instead of working with what already exists on Pembina Highway which is just a short walk away, the city chose to locate a BRT in a place where it will not be seen, thus not encouraging its' use by everyone seeing it whip past clogged traffic and where there may be somewhat of a safety issue for those waiting for it in a remote location. In order to now turn it into a transit-oriented development, I understand that new housing and a new mall of some kind will be added by developers. With yet another new mall having just opened near Ikea, it's hard to imagine that the city needs another one. Will it be a destination in and of itself or is it meant to cater to local residents? I can't help but think of Portage Place and its' unintended effect on Portage Ave.*
- *In reference to parks and wooded areas, understanding that they can have a very positive impact on increased property values and can make areas more desirable to live in.*
- **Parking needs to be better understood – impacts of traffic, lack of parking, etc.**

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *OVW also said that infill needs to include adequate parking.*
- *impact to existing clientele and potential restriction for access, will the neighbourhood density be enough to support these businesses?*
- **Wind studies should be factored into high rise development planning.**

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *OVW also mentioned that wind analysis needs to be done. During the 1960s when many of the high rises in OVW were built, architects and planners did not know*

about wind effects. However, now wind effects are known and should be properly analysed for new infill.

- *In planning of new industrial areas or businesses, wind direction also needs to be applied in planning to better understand potential impact on nearby existing or potential new areas. E.g. - Potential Canada Packers site may have higher exposure to pollution from nearby intensified industry due to the most common wind directions.*

- Need to consider healthy communities

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *When planning active transportation in large infill areas, particulate matter needs to be understood in planning and which areas have higher concentrations as well as its potential impact on human health.*

- Work to find balance of development with community needs/wants

Feedback and additional notes provided in response to circulated meeting notes:

- *Representatives approving projects need to know the bylaws, and not approve conditional uses or variances that go directly against prohibited uses.*
- *Finally, regarding zoning bylaws and variances, as has already been mentioned, secondary plans and the zoning bylaws seem to be simply a suggestion that is easily over-ridden. There are at least a couple of problems developing from this. Firstly, if we simply disregard these plans, we risk losing complete sight of a long-term vision for the city and ending up with a hodge-podge of capricious developments. Secondly, it removes any chance of authentic citizen participation from the process since the “rules of the game” are subject to change at any given moment and at the whim of decision-makers. Solid trusting relationships are not built on such foundations. As a resident on Sargeant Ave. essentially asked while going against a development that would have a serious impact on his property, what good are zoning bylaws if multiple variances can be arbitrarily added in order to unreasonably max-out neighbouring properties by developers? As it turns out, the development was unanimously approved by the committee. Thus, resident-opposition is viewed as a necessary evil that must be tolerated rather than really considered.*
- *Lack of citizen engagement risks increased numbers fleeing to bedroom communities, as they will be viewed as the “safer option”.*

Additional Comments

- *Encouraging walkable neighbourhoods, not large roadways. There are many articles on why catering only to cars, will fail.*
- *The Marion-Widening issue is an example of a city planning contradiction. Putting in a freeway to cater to outlying suburbs and bedroom communities while expropriating affordable housing and businesses in an already walkable neighbourhood would have flown in the face of urbanism and densification. It likely would have served to encourage urban sprawl at the expense of a vibrant and valuable piece of core area land while at the same time not solving the traffic issues for which it was conceived since the traffic jam occurs due to all the south and southeast traffic heading to a single bridge, ie - Norwood Bridge.*
- *OV said that these infill guidelines are probably too late to save Osborne Village, but hopefully they will protect other neighbourhoods from the same fate.*
- *Point Douglas said that they welcomed infill development in their area; any development there lifts the entire neighbourhood.*