



SUPPORTING INFILL DEVELOPMENT IN ESTABLISHED COMMUNITIES

Gentle Density in Victoria's Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan

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ABSTRACT

Every city has different policies and initiatives in place to increase density in established and mature neighbourhoods to improve their health, inclusivity, and sustainability. The City of Victoria incorporated Gentle Density into the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan following collaboration with neighbourhood residents to support the continued population growth expected in the city. Gentle Density supports the development of ground-oriented detached dwellings with prescriptive design guidelines to maintain the existing character of a neighbourhood, and uses less prescriptive zoning regulations to allow for greater density.

As cities across Canada are looking to incorporate best-practices in their own pursuit of residential intensification, it is important to consider the lessons learned in Victoria and how they can be used to inform other cities in support of their own healthy, inclusive, and sustainable communities.

INTRODUCTION

Accommodating growing populations in already sprawling cities is at the forefront of municipal agendas. Gentle Density presents an opportunity for cities to increase density in established and mature neighbourhoods while maintaining the character that makes these areas desirable for existing and future residents.



FIGURE 1 | Ortho photo of Fairfield in Victoria

In addition to increasing density, it is also intended to create diverse housing options with additional considerations for affordability. Gentle Density is “...a strategy for responding to changing conditions and growth by supporting a variety of housing forms that absorb growth and change while minimizing their impacts” (City of Victoria, n.d.). It focuses on principles of urban design and development guidelines to maintain a similar scale and character to an existing neighbourhood with ground-oriented detached housing, but housing options are more dense than a single detached home. Gentle Density seeks to incorporate a variety of housing types with a comparatively low impact on an established neighbourhood.

“Our cities are growing from the inside out- and it’s a good thing”

— Smarter Growth Initiative



FIGURE 2 | Houseplex in Fairfield

BACKGROUND

The City of Victoria’s Official Community Plan strives to create a growth pattern for a more sustainable community “...where shops, facilities and jobs are located close to where people live and more residents in the area help downtown to thrive” (City of Victoria, n.d.), and to increase affordable housing options throughout the city. Fairfield is a mature neighbourhood of more than 12,000 residents close to Victoria’s downtown and is preparing to accommodate 40-60 new homes per year (City of Victoria, n.d.). It is comprised of mid- and low-rise apartments, townhouses, heritage homes, and single-detached homes on tree-lined streets.

The Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan (2019), recently adopted by city council, uses Gentle Density as a policy to support the plan’s strategic direction to integrate new housing that fits the character of residential areas while meeting the City’s growth projections. Gentle Density presents opportunities to diversify the neighbourhood by improving housing choice and affordability while complementing neighbourhood assets like frequent transit routes and an all ages and abilities active transportation network.

FACTS OF THE CASE

The Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan is an advisory plan intended to provide more specific detail on the OCP's policy on ground-oriented housing. Specifically, the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan provides direction for where, when, and how this policy will be implemented in Fairfield.



FIGURE 3 | Rendering of Fairfield

Official Community Plan

The City of Victoria's Official Community Plan (2012) has a goal to achieve affordable housing among a range of housing types and tenures. Acknowledging that there is little remaining undeveloped land in the city, the OCP seeks to create more compact built environments in the urban core and in areas in close proximity to transit to support multi-generational living. The OCP identifies a shortage of ground-oriented dwellings and a need to create the capacity required to meet future demands and to create more affordable housing options within the city.

Launching the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan

The Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan was developed in collaboration with residents to create opportunities for infill by identifying what kind of housing is desirable and where it should be located. The result is more specific policies to support the OCP and Comprehensive Housing Strategy to create an inclusive and more sustainable community.

Exploring Options for Neighbourhood Housing

In developing the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan, the City of Victoria had numerous considerations for housing options that suit changing demographics to accommodate new and existing people. These considerations included fit- to revitalize and enhance the neighbourhood- as well as using land efficiently and improving access to daily needs.

Public Engagement

The City of Victoria sought and used feedback from residents in numerous public engagement events to develop specific policy actions for the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan, including community workshops, surveys, open houses, and pop-ups. While residents were apprehensive about increasing density in their neighbourhood, they identified a need for new affordable housing and improved older purpose-built rentals for families and aging populations, and expressed a desire to maintain "...the low-rise, open and green feel of traditional residential areas" (City of Victoria, 2019, p.13).

Gentle Density

Fairfield residents pushed for Gentle Density as a response to the first draft of the Neighbourhood Plan. Residents saw Gentle Density as an alternative to the potential for large-scale multi-family developments, but also as a preferred way of living in their neighbourhood to accommodate growth and new family types. By regulating that higher-density development be located in the northwest near downtown and in urban villages, the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan encourages the retention and adaptive reuse of existing houses in traditional residential areas, as well as provides further guidance for infill housing that is sensitive to Fairfield's existing character, massing, materials, and building footprints.

"Gentle Density provides opportunities for intergenerational living, changing lifestyles, new families, and aging-in-place."

— City of Victoria

"I am writing in support of up-zoning all of Fairfield so that more desperately needed housing of all types and price levels can be added to the neighbourhood"

— Fairfield resident, 2019

Affordability

Fairfield is becoming more exclusive as the percentage of residents who rent in the neighbourhood surpassed 50% (City of Victoria, 2019). While the City's housing supply is increasing by approximately 1.5% per year, the supply is only increasing by 0.5% in Fairfield (Litman, 2019). With a higher demand than supply, the neighbourhood can become unattainable to many residents as housing and rental prices surge. Increasing housing diversity and choice in the neighbourhood through Gentle Density will help to increase the supply of housing in this central neighbourhood to provide more affordable housing options to accommodate a wider demographic.

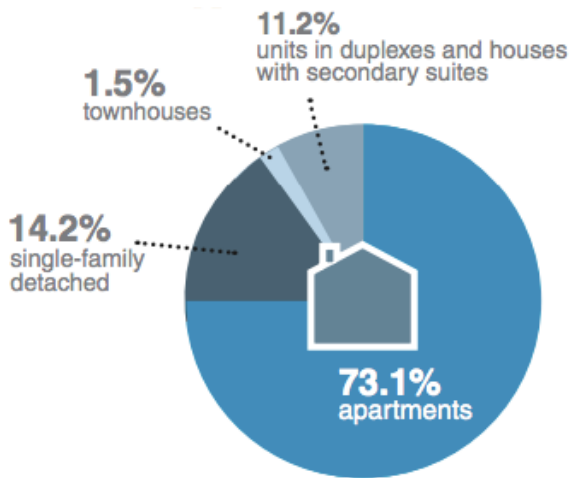


FIGURE 4 | Existing housing types in Fairfield

Ground-Oriented Detached Housing

The Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan supports the OCP's policy on ground-oriented development in new forms of ground-oriented detached housing, including garden suites, houseplexes, townhouses and stacked townhouses. Ground-oriented detached housing in traditional residential areas fit the existing neighbourhood character and the needs for future populations "...through adaptive reuse of existing structures and thoughtful new development" (City of Victoria, 2019, p.78). Ground-oriented detached housing will provide diverse housing options to allow for diverse family types, multi-generational living, and aging-in-place for new and existing residents.



FIGURE 5 | Duplex



FIGURE 6 | Stacked townhouses

OUTCOMES

The collaboration between the City of Victoria and the residents of Fairfield resulted in the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan incorporating feedback given in public engagement events to develop strategic directions and policies about the intensification of Fairfield.



FIGURE 7 | Concept illustration in Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan

Up-zoning

To accommodate the proposed growth in Fairfield, most of the neighbourhood needed to be up-zoned to allow for increased density and different lot size requirements, setbacks, and building heights.

Gentle Density as a Policy

The Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan designated traditional residential areas, urban residential areas, urban corridors, and urban villages to guide the densification of the neighbourhood. Gentle Density was incorporated as a policy in designated traditional residential areas to ensure sensitive infill and to meet the objectives of the OCP.

Density Bonusing

In order to build at higher densities than allowed for in the Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan, density bonusing is required, when permitted, to provide additional amenities to Fairfield residents.

Housing Information Sheets

The City of Victoria produced a 'Menu of Housing Options' that provides housing information sheets to demonstrate examples of and considerations for typologies that are compatible with Gentle Density. These housing information sheets provide an illustrative example, provide zoning considerations, and identify what changed from the OCP to allow these uses. The housing information sheets provide additional information on the benefits associated with each type, such as ideal lot characteristics and energy efficiency.

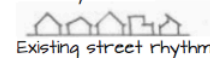
"New design guidelines are proposed to address considerations such as sensitive design and massing to fit into the neighbourhood"

— City of Victoria, 2019

Design Guidelines Summary

The Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan includes form and character objectives to "...inform the creation of zoning and design guidelines for diverse types of infill housing of two or more units" (City of Victoria, 2019, p.79). Examples of these zoning considerations and design guidelines include front, side, and rear yard setbacks to allow for access to green space, heights to approximately 2.5 storeys, the use of quality and natural materials, and to use design to break up longer rows of townhouses to give special attention to existing character.

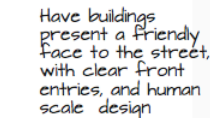
Ensure new development fits in with existing streetscape character and 'rhythm'



Disruptive redevelopment



Sensitive redevelopment



New developments should transition in height to existing adjacent residential buildings



Maintain pattern of green front and back yards, urban forest



Have buildings present a friendly face to the street, with clear front entries, and human scale design

Consider privacy in siting of windows

FIGURE 8 | Design objectives for new attached dwellings

Gentle Density on Southgate Street

On Southgate Street, infill development that prescribes to Gentle Density was built in the form of a converted duplex and fourplex, as well as a newly built sixplex. Emphasis was placed on scale, texture, and landscaping to allow them to blend in to the existing character of Southgate Street, and residents acknowledge the appropriateness of these dwellings.



FIGURE 9 | Newly constructed sixplex on Southgate Street

Gentle Density on Howe Street

A large character home on Howe Street was converted under the new zoning permissions to a sixplex. Noting its fit into the existing neighbourhood, as well as the maintenance of green space, and the retained availability of parking, proponents of Gentle Density emphasized the possibility of many more of this type of infill throughout the neighbourhood.

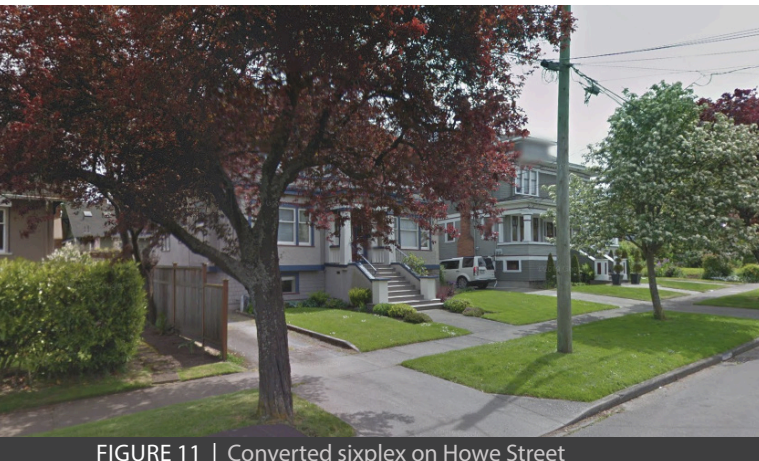


FIGURE 11 | Converted sixplex on Howe Street

“From my point of view, and I think a lot of people in the community feel the same way, you can’t have too much of this.”

— Fairfield resident

Gentle Density on Linden Avenue

Residents refer to Linden Avenue as a ‘catalogue for Gentle Density’ for its blend of unique housing types. Featuring homes converted into fourplexes and sixplexes amongst single-detached family homes, Linden Avenue is a prime example of how Gentle Density can enhance a neighbourhood while creating a diversity of housing types and improving affordability to accommodate changing demographics and growth.



FIGURE 10 | Home converted into a fourplex

LESSONS LEARNED

The implementation of Gentle Density as a policy in Victoria's Fairfield Neighbourhood Plan presents several lessons for cities seeking to increase density through infill development in established neighbourhoods.

Look to the Future

To build healthy, inclusive, and sustainable communities, cities need to look to the future and coordinate policies accordingly. To accommodate growing populations, changing and aging demographics, and to improve access to amenities and services, downtown and central neighbourhoods need strategic plans and policies in place to maintain their built environment now for the people who call them home while preparing for the needs of future populations.



FIGURE 12 | Cook Street Village in Fairfield

Use the Data to Tell a Story

Using data to respond to resident concerns is useful but may not always convince people, and therefore should be used to tell a story. Informing residents in detail on how the population is not only growing but also changing, what types of housing are suited to different households, the affordability of different households, and what the preferences are among a more diverse population will be important in having discussions that lead to amicable policies and frameworks.

Collaborate with Residents

Understanding what residents want for the future of their neighbourhoods is essential to having conversations about controversial topics such as infill and development. By collaborating with residents and incorporating their feedback into plans and policies, the concerns they have will be addressed and will remove some of the barriers that cities will face during the intensification of lower-density neighbourhoods.

Diversify the Engagement Process

Public engagement, particularly at the neighbourhood level, needs to be diversified so that different voices within the neighbourhood are heard and weighed. Lengthy engagement processes tend to be attended by those who have more resources, but in neighbourhoods with large rental populations and diverse family types public engagement needs to be more robust. Fewer rounds of consultation, with an emphasis on discussion between attendees of different demographics, will help to facilitate a more inclusive and accessible engagement process. The City of Victoria is also seeking to increase diversity through strategies like a Renters' Advisory Committee and city-wide consultations even for neighbourhood plans.

Build the Missing Middle

The issue of housing affordability points to one even larger: the missing middle. As cities fill-in rather than spread-out and the amount of undeveloped land lessens, property prices rise. Without diversifying neighbourhoods and developing higher-density housing options in residential neighbourhoods, such as houseplexes and townhouses, housing will become even more unaffordable to a wider demographic.

Use Less Prescriptive Zoning Regulations

By incorporating less prescriptive zoning regulations for residential areas into official city plans, more housing types that are compatible with Gentle Density and the missing middle can be developed, or converted, to provide infill in a sensitive manner to accommodate diverse family types, multi-generational living, and aging-in-place.

Understand Housing as a Continuum

The right framework is required to address housing on the continuum from existing to future residents' needs. Fairfield residents expressed concerns about gentrification and the decreasing affordability in the neighbourhood. Addressing the needs of the residents already living in a neighbourhood, in this case in regard to needs and affordability, is imperative in reducing the opposition to proposed changes and growth to accommodate future residents.

Apply More Prescriptive Design Considerations

By applying more prescriptive design guidelines, infill development can enhance the existing character of established neighbourhoods while providing higher-density dwelling options without disrupting a neighbourhood's existing fabric.



FIGURE 13 | Tree-lined street in Fairfield

CONCLUSION

Gentle Density alters existing policies and regulations to allow for higher-density infill development in established neighbourhoods. Intended to create more healthy, inclusive, and sustainable communities, Gentle Density offers opportunities for more affordable and diverse housing options that allow for multi-generational living, aging-in-place, and enhancing the neighbourhood for everyone. Neighbourhoods located in close proximity to downtown, services, and transit hold the key for cities filling-in instead of spreading-out, and working with the residents already living in these areas is essential to develop plans, regulations, and guidelines that will support their intensification. Gentle Density offers lessons for other growing cities, like Winnipeg, to alter existing regulations to allow for greater diversity, stronger design, and higher density.

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