

Small Changes, Big Impacts:

Enhancing Mature Neighbourhoods in Winnipeg through Zoning By-law Alignments

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Abstract

key words

Zoning

Infill development

Gradual infill development in established communities is recognized as a good alternative to sprawl, but is seen as challenging to developers. Much of this challenge is caused by municipal regulations, such as zoning, which often do not allow many forms of gradual infill. In Winnipeg, the city's Complete Communities Direction Strategy (CCDS) supports gradual infill development, but proposed development in established communities can require any number of variances to be made to the Winnipeg Zoning By-law (ZBL). Approval is a time-consuming process for both developers and planners. In 2013, planners at the City of Winnipeg undertook a process of recommending small text amendments to the Zoning By-law so that it would be more aligned to the Complete Communities Direction Strategy. Proposed amendments included reducing minimum parking and lot size required for new developments in established communities, and greater allowance for mixed use buildings along corridors. It was hoped that these amendments would more easily allow infill development to contribute to the creation and enhancement of mixed use and walkable communities envisioned in the Complete Communities Direction Strategy. This alignment process is an example of the successes and challenges of planners making small reforms to municipal regulations.

Background

The role of zoning in building complete communities

In recent years, there has been a growing demand for infill development in older neighbourhoods, as growing numbers of consumers choose to live in walkable and diverse communities. While this kind of infill development is often in keeping with the local character of the neighbourhood, Levine (2006) states that municipal zoning regulations can make development approval a challenging, time-consuming, and uncertain process

amenities are already provided. Talen (2003; 2005) writes that more easily allowing infill responds to market demand and is more cost-effective for cities (Talen, 2003; Talen, 2005).

The City of Winnipeg's development plan, *Our Winnipeg*, which was legislated in 2011, encourages gradual infill development, and the creation and enhancement of complete communities. Complete communities are defined by the City of Winnipeg (2011) as neighbourhoods where a variety of land uses and housing types exist "in close proximity to each other." They are places where most things



Above: A new infill house in Seattle. Image from rethinkurban.com

inhibited this, even in the city's mature communities (neighbourhoods largely built up before the 1950s) that already possess many elements of a complete community.

So while the City's development plan encouraged gradual infill that supports complete communities, the zoning regulations – the implementation tools of the plan – did not line up with this vision.

The need for ZBL alignments in Winnipeg

As part of the implementation of CCDS, incongruences needed to be addressed and aligned by planners at the City of Winnipeg. Andrew Ross, a planner closely involved in this process, says there was some knowledge within the City's Urban Planning Division of incongruences between the vision of CCDS and the language of the ZBL at the time it was legislated in 2011. However, there was no



Above: A street in Savannah, GA which has many elements of a complete community. Image from kevinlinkenberg.com

(Levine, 2006, p.3). Baker (2008) writes that because of these regulations, much of the focus on walkable and diverse infill development instead goes to large brownfield or greenfield sites (Baker, 2008, pp.11-12). This larger-scaled pattern of infill redevelopment is important, but there remains a need for greater infill opportunities in existing residential neighbourhoods, where most municipal services and public

necessary for daily life can be found, and are accessible to people of all ages (Winnipeg, 2011).

Our Winnipeg's Complete Communities Direction Strategy (CCDS), which was approved by Council and enacted as a by-law in 2011, envisions complete communities in both new and older neighbourhoods. However, some of the regulations in the 2006 Zoning By-law (ZBL)

knowledge of just how many incongruences there were, or of what impact they might be having on development in mature communities.

To identify and examine these incongruences, a comprehensive review (or diagnostic) of the ZBL was done by working groups of planners from the Urban Planning Division in 2012, as well as from staff from other City departments (ie, Transit, Water and Waste), Included in this review process was mapping and data support (Winnipeg, 2013). A team of planners from the Urban Planning Division was formed to examine this review of the ZBL and make recommendations to Winnipeg's City Council.

Once the comprehensive review was completed, a steering committee identified the "low-hanging fruit" to propose amendments to the ZBL for. This selection was because of a lack of department resources and a perceived lack of political will on Winnipeg's City Council for big changes to regulations. And so this alignment was to be a tweak of the ZBL, rather than a complete overhaul (Winnipeg, 2012). The purpose of these text amendments was to reduce the number of variances and conditional use applications required for the types of development that were desirable under CCDS (Winnipeg, 2013).

Facts & Outcomes

Proposed amendments to the ZBL

A number of the proposed amendments were directly related to gradual infill efforts in Winnipeg's mature communities. These included:

A 20% reduction of parking requirements in all mature communities. A minimum number of parking spaces are required for new development, but in some mature communities, there is a 20% reduction to these requirements because of limited space and the existing compact form. This amendment would apply this 20% reduction to all mature communities.

Modification of Special Boundary Conditions in order to allow for more subdividing of lots in lower-density residential neighbourhoods. This would be done in order to add density without affecting the scale and character of the neighbourhood's built form. The Urban Planning Division estimated that this amendment would reduce the

need for a variance in 60% of residential subdivisions.

Reduction in lot size minimums to develop two-family dwellings in R2 districts. ZBL regulations require a lot size minimum that was not feasible on many comparatively small lots in mature communities. This amendment would reduce the lot size minimum for development of two-family developments on lots zoned R2, or two-family residential.

Formalizing newer parking management plan tools. As a way to work with parking minimums, developers could work with the City to come up with parking alternatives on sites with limited space for parking. For example, the provision of car-share vehicles by developers can offset parking requirements.

More easily approve multi-family housing above the ground floor in areas zoned C1 and C2. This was done to encourage more compact form and residential uses along



Above: A lot subdivision in Edmonton allows for modest increases in density. Image from globalnews.ca

regional and neighbourhood corridors, as outlined in the CCDS.

Laneway parking for multi-family developments. Parking spaces that faced directly onto a public lane were limited to only to lots zoned for single- or two-family. This change would allow multifamily developments to include parking spaces off the lane without requiring a variance.

Support from the Community

A public open house was held in May, 2013 in order to gain feedback from the public on the proposed amendments. In developing a strategy for addressing the identified incongruences, the alignment team determined that the public engagement process did not need to be extensive. This was because of the massive engagement in the development of CCDS, and these alignments were simply small steps toward implementing that plan.

In addition to a public open house, online feedback tools and social media were used to inform and engage the public. Communication was also made with local BIZ groups and the development community, inviting them to offer feedback on the proposed alignment. In total, 75 people attended the open house. Of those, 17 responded to the surveys. Another 18 people posted online comments. Ross notes that this feedback was almost entirely supportive of the proposed changes, and generally expressed a hope for further changes.

Support from Council and Adoption

Ross believes that City Council was generally supportive of the alignments. However, there were several key recommendations not accepted by Council when the alignments were adopted by Council's Standing Policy Committee on Property and Development in September, 2013. The rejected amendments included the 20% reduction of parking requirements in mature communities; modifications to the special boundary conditions;



Above: A car-share vehicle in a mature community in Winnipeg. Image from pegcitycarcoop.ca

and reductions in lot size minimums to allow for two-family developments.

In spite of these rejected recommendations, Ross notes that a few accepted amendments have already had a significant impact on the approval process for infill development in mature communities. These include the use of car-sharing services to offset parking space requirements, and the allowance of parking directly off the laneway for multi-family developments.

Lessons Learned

Ross looks back on the alignment process and says that it involved “a lot of work for a moderate set of changes to the bylaw.” In all, it took almost two years. Most of this time was spent in the approval process, which slowed the adoption of these changes long after they were proposed. And after all that time, some of the results were disappointing, with key recommendations being rejected by Council.

Small text amendments can

sometimes “stand alone” and have an impact on the development of complete communities, but it is important for planners to consider the broader regulatory context. The importance of this is seen in the approved amendment regarding mixed use development on corridors: while a conditional use residential uses above commercial uses was removed, a variance was still required. Because the City's dimensional standards are different for commercial and residential buildings, mixed use development on corridors now require more variances than before.

In spite of the setbacks, the alignment between CCDS and the ZBL stand as a good example of proactive municipal planning that was mindful of the political climate and limited resources.

When proposing changes to regulations, it is important to gauge the political will at the time: who the decision-makers are, and how receptive they are to regulatory changes. Goals for municipal planners must be framed with these political considerations in mind, but there must be some degree of risk taken. Understanding and communicating the bigger picture “up the chain” was another lesson Ross took from this process. In the case of the alignments, the bigger picture was that changing regulations would help make CCDS a relevant plan that would influence development in Winnipeg (Winnipeg, 2013), and that there is a relationship between infill development and infrastructure deficit reduction.

A certain amount of literacy regarding zoning alignment was gained by planners in the Urban Planning Division. Since this kind of amendments to zoning regulations had not been done in Winnipeg in many years, there was a great deal of work that was done during the alignment process that can serve as a template for further changes to zoning regulations in the future, which could make the process quicker.

Going forward, there is no specific plan for more alignment of the city’s development plan and regulations, or to make any other changes to the ZBL, but Ross

says there are certainly more opportunities to make these changes in the future. Since these alignments were approved in 2013, a civic election has brought in a new mayor of Winnipeg, as well



Above: Parking directly accessed from a public lane in a small multi-family development in Winnipeg. Image from Google Street View

as several new city councillors. There is optimism among planners that the new mayor and council will have a heightened interest in encouraging development in mature communities.

Conclusion

The alignment process was challenging and time-consuming for planners at Winnipeg’s Urban Planning Division, and in the

end resulted in only a small set of changes. After two years of work, and with several key recommendations rejected by City Council, it could be viewed as a disappointing exercise with only partial success. However, a number of the accepted amendments have greatly improved the approval process for infill development that meets the Complete Communities vision, and planners can quantify these improvements and use them to demonstrate the positive effects of zoning alignments. Moreover, the process of developing a set of proposals established a framework for further alignments in the future, which can be developed and proposed more quickly.

In spite of the setbacks, the alignment between CCDS and the ZBL stand as a good example of proactive municipal planning that was mindful of the political climate and limited resources. The disparity that can exist between development plans and regulations, and how this disparity can impact the ability to meet the vision of the plan, should remain a focus for municipal planners. Planners should also recognize the importance of these alignments undertaken in Winnipeg, both in terms of developing a framework for future changes, and in the positive outcomes they have so far had in helping to achieve the city’s planning vision of infill development that enhances the compact form, walkability, and diversity of mature communities.



Resources

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Top left: A variety of housing types in Winnipeg. Image from Google Street View

Middle left: A new mixed use building in Minneapolis. Image from nathanielhood.com

Bottom: A residential street in Winnipeg. Image from Google Street View