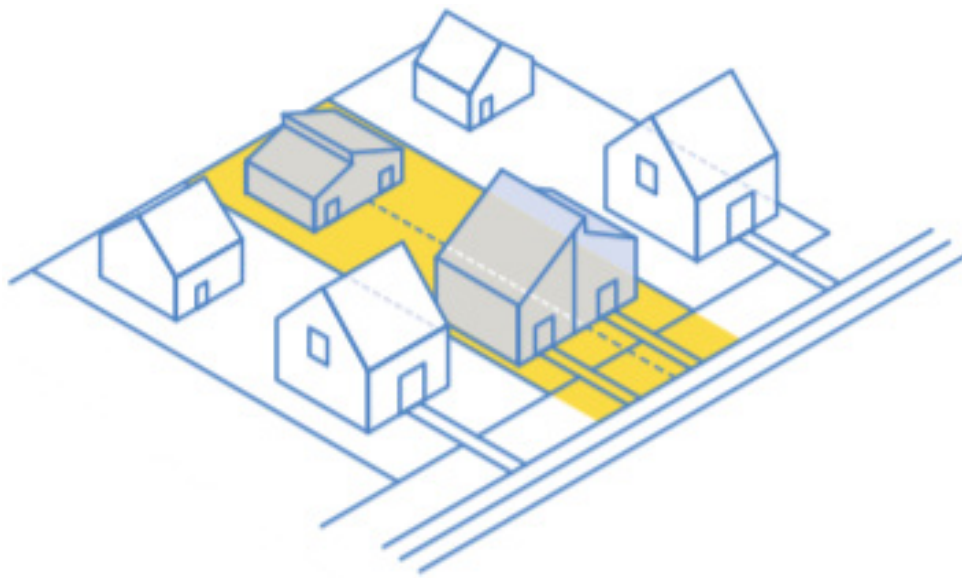


Infill Development and Relaxed Zoning in Edmonton

Case-in-Point 2019



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Background & Context

The revitalization of inner-city residential neighbourhoods, specifically through infill development, is a common land use planning goal today. Infill is prized by planners for its potential to reduce land consumption on the urban fringe, reduce automotive dependency, return investment into mature neighbourhoods, expand housing choice, and optimize the use of infrastructure (Kim, 2015, p. 280).

One of the strategies municipalities have begun to implement to incentivize infill development is a relaxation of zoning to allow for greater flexibility in what can be built. Specifically, secondary suites, garage suites, duplexes and other similar lower-density ground-oriented housing types have been introduced into single-dwelling zoning in the last year in several high-profile cases, such as Minneapolis (Capps, 2018), Vancouver (Larsen, 2018), and Edmonton (Stolte, 2019).

Given its mid-range population and commitment to a comprehensive infill plan, Edmonton was selected as the focus city for this case study. It offers an opportunity to demonstrate how zoning changes can fit into a larger infill strategy and is of a size that makes these findings relevant to a broad variety of North American cities, for example ranging in size from Houston to Winnipeg.

The context within which the City of Edmonton enacted its infill plan and subsequent zoning changes is one that is common in many other urban areas. While the population of Edmonton is projected to increase by 170,000 by 2025, it has lost 73,000 people from its mature neighbourhoods in the last 40 years (City of Edmonton, 2019b). This discrepancy strains infrastructure and its financing, contributes to hastened urban expansion, and dilutes the human activity that contributes to businesses and a strong sense of place in the inner-city. In response, the City of Edmonton made changes to expedite the infill development process and encourage its sensitive implementation into mature neighbourhoods.

The zoning changes to permit semi-detached and duplex housing as a permitted use in low-density residential neighbourhoods were framed in contrast to the existing practice of redeveloping single-family dwellings with “skinny” houses. The premise of these changes is that semi-detached and duplex housing would be developed on sites where two single-family dwellings would be permitted. In other words, these zoning changes are not intended to and will not increase residential density in existing neighbourhoods above what is already permitted; rather, they are intended to promote a greater diversity of housing types and accommodate infill development that may be more in character with the neighbourhood.

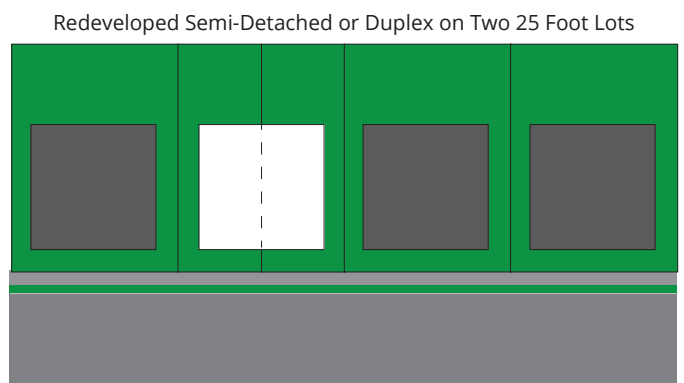
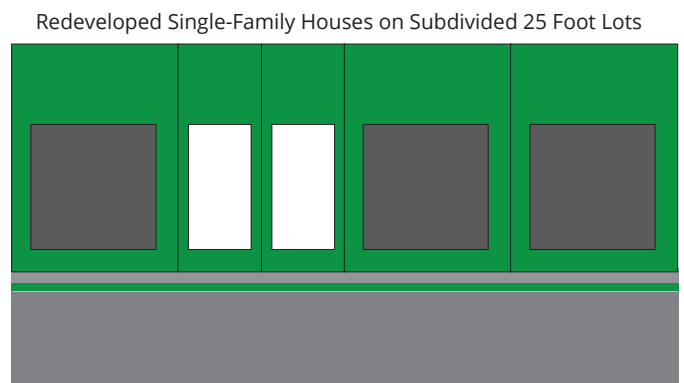
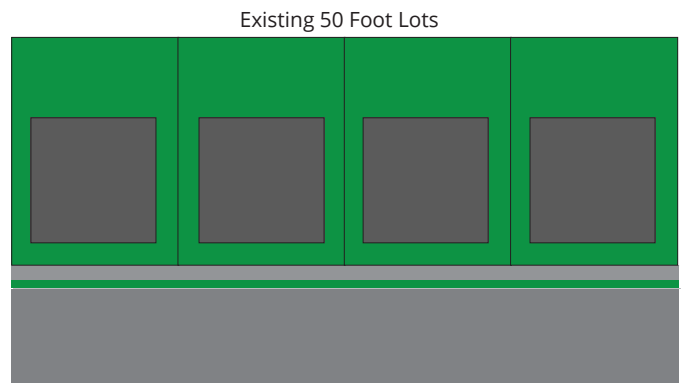
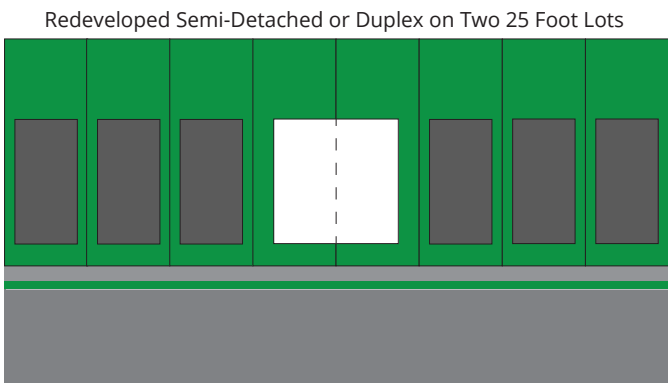
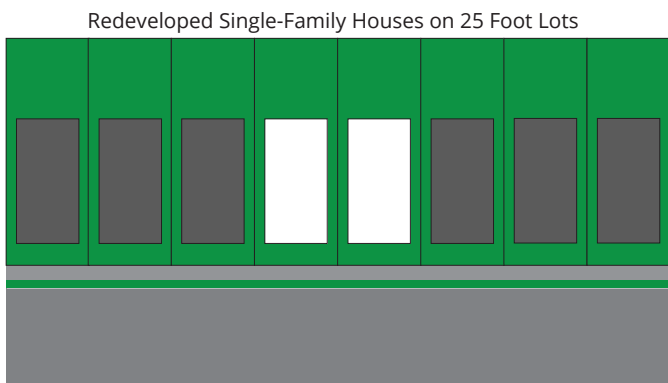
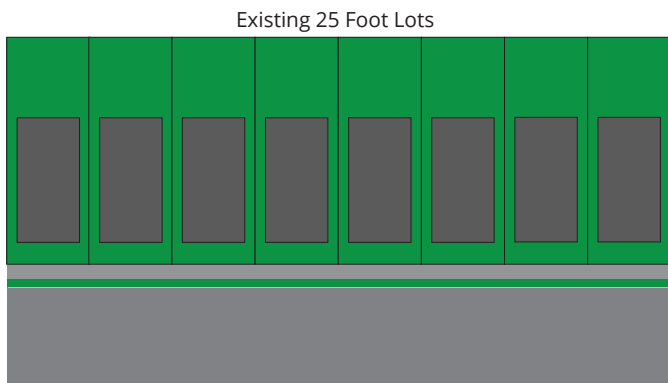
Lot dimension regulations are a key consideration in the RF1 zoning relaxation. In Edmonton, single-family housing lot regulations were reduced from a minimum area of 3,875 ft² and width of 39.4 ft to 2,700 ft² and 25 ft respectively in a 2015 zoning bylaw amendment (City of Edmonton, 2015, p. 7). The reduction of the requirements in Edmonton in 2015 created a context that allows for greater employment of the later zoning relaxations and is more conducive to additional forms of infill development, most notably semi-detached housing. The most recent lot dimension regulations in Edmonton are included in Table 1, along with minimum requirements for duplex and semi-detached housing.

	Edmonton (RF1 Single-detached)	Edmonton (RF1 Duplex)	Edmonton (RF1 Semi-detached)
Minimum lot size (ft ²)	2,700	3,230	5,257.1
Minimum lot width (ft)	25	32.8	48.6
Minimum lot depth (ft)	98.4	98.4	98.4

In Edmonton, there are now two ways through which low-density residential infill could occur, as dependant on the existing lot structure. One is redeveloping two single-family houses on two adjacent narrow lots into two new single-family houses, or into a semi-detached or duplex building that straddles the lot line (Figure 1). The other is subdividing one single-family house on a wider lot into two narrower single-family lots, or redeveloping the one single-family house into a semi-detached or duplex building (Figure 2).

Figure 1 - Narrow lot infill and redevelopment

Figure 2 - Wide lot infill, subdivision, and redevelopment



Facts of the Case

The zoning changes highlighted in this case study are only one component of a larger infill strategy developed by the City of Edmonton. Specifically, two “actions” were recommended in the strategy that informed the changes ultimately made.

The first was to “pursue regulatory changes in RF1 and RF2 Zones that allow semi-detached housing to be permitted uses and to be located mid-block” (City of Edmonton, 2018c, p. 23). Prior to this change, semi-detached and duplex housing was only permitted as a discretionary use on corner sites, fronting onto arterial or service roads, or siding onto lots where semi-detached and duplex housing are a permitted use (City of Edmonton, 2018d, p. 2).

The second was to “create opportunities to include a mix of suites on a property.” Prior to this change, a limit of one secondary suite—whether basement, garage, or garden—per residential lot was set (City of Edmonton, 2018c, p. 24). The introduction of secondary suites as a permitted use in the RF1 zone was approved in August 2018, four months before the changes to semi-detached and duplex permissions (City of Edmonton, 2019c, s. 110.2).

In all, the intention with the implementation of these changes was to expand opportunities for developing a greater diversity of housing types in a neighbourhood or on a lot. In recognition of the benefits of infill development, the City of Edmonton demonstrated a desire for the facilitation of a greater variety of housing types while arguing that it would ultimately introduce minimal negative impacts in communities. In a sense, their answer to the question of why additional housing types should be permitted in established neighbourhoods was that there was no reason why they should not be.

Much of this rationalization is found in the staff report presented to Edmonton City Council on the subject of these zoning relaxations. For example, semi-detached and duplex housing was claimed to be “typically the same size and scale as a single detached home,” thereby carrying limited impact on neighbourhood character (City of Edmonton, 2018a, p. 2). The report specified that semi-detached and duplex housing in low-density zones is “subject to the same built form regulations as single detached housing” as a further argument for its compatibility in mature neighbourhoods (City of Edmonton, 2018a, p. 2). As such, not only does the permission of semi-detached and duplex housing increase housing diversity, it also provides the opportunity for the built form and lot dimensions to be potentially more in keeping with the existing character of a street than may be possible with two “skinny” houses.

The report also supported semi-detached and duplex housing based on their identical parking requirements of one parking spot per dwelling. Given that the number of dwellings does not increase between a pair of semi-detached houses, a duplex, or two “skinny” homes, no increase in traffic would be expected to be generated (City of Edmonton, 2018a, p. 2-3). Furthermore, in studying existing semi-detached and duplex housing development data in areas they were already permitted, the report concluded that their uptake in newly relaxed zones would be minimal (City of Edmonton, 2018a, p. 3). The City found that in zones where semi-detached and duplex housing was already permitted only 0.9% of eligible lots were developed per year (City of Edmonton, 2018b, p. 2).

Prior to the change to permit semi-detached and duplex housing in RF1 zones, there were two opportunities to build such development. One method was through the RF1 zone, where semi-detached and duplex housing was a discretionary use (City of Edmonton, 2018d, p. 2). The other method was through a limited number of RF2 Low-Density Infill zones, where semi-detached and duplex housing was a permitted use. In both cases it was permitted with significant locational constraints: on corner lots, along arterial or service roads, and siding onto lots where it was a permitted use (City of Edmonton, 2018d, p. 2).

Simplifying this regulatory environment in a way that encouraged additional semi-detached and duplex housing development was a core goal of the zoning changes. The staff report to Council noted that the status of semi-detached and duplex housing as a discretionary use created “risk for applicants, as discretionary uses may be refused by the Development Authority even if they meet all the regulations” of the zoning bylaw (City of Edmonton, 2018a, p. 2). Furthermore, when “an application for a discretionary use is approved, property owners within 60 metres are also notified of their right to appeal the decision, which leads to an automatic 21 day delay during the notice period” (City of Edmonton, 2018a, p. 2). A companion document therefore argued that “making these uses permitted provides a more consistent approach to regulating low density residential uses and creates greater certainty for applicants and communities” (City of Edmonton, 2018b, p. 1). However, the City also emphasized that their expediting of the “infill permit process does not mean guaranteeing application approval” (City of Edmonton, 2018e, p. 8).

In crafting the broader Infill Strategy, the City of Edmonton consulted with a broad range of stakeholders including developers, community organizations, and the public. The concerns of the development industry related primarily to the various barriers to infill development, which both the Infill Strategy as well as the RF1 zoning change worked to reduce (City of Edmonton, 2018g, p. 7). Public sentiment towards the changes was more mixed. Those in favour of the proposal echoed many of the benefits touted by the City, with the creation of additional housing choice, the diversity of individual and family makeups served, the potential for improving affordability, the more efficient use of energy and infrastructure, and the

improved sensitivity to existing neighbourhood character collectively being raised (City of Edmonton, 2018f). Those opposed to the proposed zoning changes raised concerns with the devaluation of properties in the RF1 zone, the potential for single-family dwellings to be phased out, the increased numbers of renters, the clash with existing neighbourhood character, and the increased housing costs associated with new development (City of Edmonton, 2018f). However, when asked for a response to the statement “I support allowing semi-detached and duplex housing wherever two skinny houses are allowed in the RF1 and RF2 zones,” 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (City of Edmonton, 2018f, p. 3). This was further demonstrated by local resident groups, with one representative of the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues supporting the concept of providing opportunities for “one two-unit building that’s a similar size to others on the street [rather] than two skinny homes” (Stolte, 2019).

Conclusions & Outcomes

The final outcome was a unanimous Council vote in favour of the zoning change amendment (Stolte, 2019). This suggests a successful campaign to advocate for the changes as being in the interests of both Edmonton residents as well as City Council. The public engagement component of the infill strategy extended 20 months, the extent of which likely contributed to a city-wide contentment with the final proposals that helped avoid a political escalation (City of Edmonton, 2019a). In addition to the public engagement process, the infill strategy was supported by two large research and background documents: a Municipal Tools Review and a Market Housing and Affordability Study. Overall, this work demonstrates an extensive process that supported the infill initiative. While the changes to semi-detached and duplex housing zoning permissions were only one action derived from the infill strategy, it benefitted clearly from the work put into it.

Ultimately, the approach taken by the City of Edmonton demonstrates that “application of policy tools can be as simple as identifying desirable development and reducing barriers to that kind of development” (City of Edmonton, 2018e, p. 8). While it is too early to tell the effect that these zoning changes will have on development and market preferences, social factors, and infrastructure, the passing of a large-scale zoning change by unanimous vote is a significant outcome in itself.

Lessons Learned

The experience of Edmonton in establishing semi-detached and duplex housing as a permitted use in its base single-detached zone across the city presents a wide variety of lessons for planners in other cities considering doing the same.

The first lesson is that these changes can be implemented gradually at a pace that fits the city's context and resources. Edmonton first allowed duplex and semi-detached housing as a discretionary use with locational restrictions in 2013, and reduced lot size requirements in 2015 (City of Edmonton, 2013, pp. 5-6; City of Edmonton, 2015, p. 7). Edmonton then permitted garden suites in September 2017, secondary suites in August 2018, and semi-detached and duplex housing as-of-right in December 2018 for a current maximum of four dwellings per single-family lot (City of Edmonton, 2019c). This stands in contrast to the approach taken by Minneapolis that moved from allowing one dwelling per single-family lot to three in a single zoning bylaw amendment (City of Minneapolis, 2019). Different cities will have different circumstances and goals to adapt to, and the timeframe they use must reflect that.

The second lesson is related to the first, in that just as the timeframe for enacting such changes is flexible, so is the method for implementing them. For example, some cities may have a separate zone for duplex and semi-detached housing before moving it to their single-dwelling zone as a permitted use, while other cities may initially have it as a discretionary use in their single-dwelling zone before creating a zone with it as a permitted use and undertaking a widespread rezoning throughout the city. Maintaining semi-detached and duplex housing in the single-dwelling zone may avoid or mitigate a sharp reaction from the public, and allows for rapid implementation throughout the city while establishing a general low-density ground-oriented housing zone. One commentator argued that with this expansion of permitted uses and any others that are added in the future, Edmonton is slowly "moving away from Euclidean Zoning to a set of rules that primarily regulate the shape of the building — not who or what is done inside" (Stolte, 2019).

The third lesson is that zoning relaxations similar to those done in Edmonton are unlikely to rapidly transform a neighbourhood, and instead contribute to a moderate evolution. Though the zoning change in Edmonton was recent, the City's research on semi-detached and duplex housing construction on already permitted sites illustrates the limited development those housing types currently see. This means that fears of rapid change and loss of character in neighbourhoods are unlikely to be realized. However, it also means that any increase in housing diversity is unlikely to occur in the short-term. Cities can change the conditions under which developers operate, but market forces will ultimately drive reaction to them.

The fourth lesson is the importance of meaningful and extensive consultation with development stakeholders and residents (City of Edmonton, 2018g, p. 4). Not only did this contribute to strengthened and better-informed final policy recommendations, but it also diminished political controversy and created certainty for all those involved. While citizen perception doubtlessly remained mixed towards the zoning change, the emphasis placed on explaining the City's goals, how the

zoning change would help meet them, and how impacts on existing neighbourhoods would be mitigated served to inform residents and allow the changes to proceed.

Planners are often interested in expanding housing diversity and density, particularly in central neighbourhoods, and Edmonton serves as a strong case study on how to pursue this ambition. By being focused on its goals and taking a deliberate and comprehensive approach to enacting these changes, Edmonton was able to be one of the first of likely many cities to undertake similar initiatives.

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