PICKERING CITY CENTRE

TRANSFORMATIONAL ZONING

Andrew Cohrs

Seeking to leverage public investment in transit and meet provincial growth targets in its city centre, Pickering is introducing a new zoning by-law and urban design guidelines to pave the way for redevelopment and intensification.

“It is somewhat a necessity to conform with the provincial requirements but also it’s a good incentive and good opportunity for us to put the proper zoning in place, get things ready to attract business and take advantage of being designated as an urban growth centre... We want to have our doors open and be shovel ready,” Ward 3 Councillor David Pickles told NRU.

Over three years in the making, its new zoning by-law and urban design guidelines set out to transform downtown Pickering into a dense, transit supportive and complete community. Moving away from its one and two-storey commercial and industrial buildings and vacant lots, the city envisions mixed-use buildings of up-to-40 storeys, improved pedestrian environment and new transit connections. The existing large shopping mall and Durham College campus will remain.

Pickles says the new regulations will act as a catalyst to spur redevelopment.

“We would like to attract investment into the downtown, we would like to see some vacant properties utilized, [and] some underutilized properties redeveloped so where we have two- and three-storey residential building we could see 15 storey buildings or greater... We’d like to see more people in the downtown area, so a greater density of people but also office space and mixed-use opportunities.”

Meanwhile, the city has a long way to go to meet the provincial growth targets, chief planner Catherine Rose told NRU.

“Our population and employment objective under the growth plan is 200 jobs and persons [per ha] and right now we are only at 68 jobs and persons per hectare so we do have quite a [lot of] capacity to [fill]. And we’ve got some key lands immediately east of the GO station... ripe for redevelopment.”

The new zoning regulations will make that redevelopment easier, according to Rose. They include increases to minimum and maximum heights, and

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minimum densities for all uses and require active at-grade frontages, such as restaurants or retail stores with transparent façades, and reduced parking for commercial uses.

Design guidelines provide standards for public realm and streetscape improvements, such as wider sidewalks, increased pedestrian and cycling connections and different types of public gathering places. They also offer design standards for low-rise, mid-rise and tall buildings, as well as signature buildings that create a sense of place, including construction materials and façade treatment.

Rose says that the city has taken care to balance flexibility with clarity. For example, while minimum and maximum heights are established in the zoning by-law, the types of construction material and use of sustainable materials are left to the guidelines. As well, the design guidelines provide structure for the incorporation of public realm improvements into proposed developments.

“It is a balance between what you put in policy language, how much you actually regulate through zoning and how much you leave in the guidelines so that you’ve got some flexibility... We are doing what we can on our part to make that investment opportunity appear.”

Pickles agrees, saying that often times, developers propose higher densities that are higher than currently permitted and thus they are required to apply for site specific zoning amendments. He says this is often enough to dissuade developers from pursuing projects. The new zoning by-law provides those greater densities and heights as of right.

“It brings in higher densities [and] it brings in taller buildings so I think it really prepares us to attract the sort of business, investment and growth that we are looking for... A downtown core with more restaurants and offices and entertainment opportunities, and more people and better transit opportunities gets us to where we want to be as a city centre.”

The city centre zoning by-law was prepared by city staff and peer reviewed by MMM Group and SGL Planning & Design. The planning and development committee will consider both the zoning by-law and urban design guidelines at its meeting January 9.