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NRU IS NOT PUBLISHING NEXT WEEK, AND OUR OFFICES WILL BE CLOSED, BUT WE WILL BE BACK WITH A NEW ISSUE OF TORONTO EDITION **FRIDAY, JANUARY 6, 2023**. SEE YOU THEN!

CITY COULD IMPLEMENT 'TRANSITION ZONES' AFTER APPROVAL OF 2023 HOUSING ACTION PLAN

ACCOMMODATING THE SPACE BETWEEN

Rahul Gupta

The **City of Toronto**'s planning department is studying how to implement a potential new zoning designation that if approved would allow for new housing to be developed on sites located between residential neighbourhoods and commercial avenues. Proponents of so-called 'Transition Zones' say that if implemented properly, they could establish areas within the city where mid-rise density could be accommodated. That, in turn, could help address the city's ongoing need for more 'missing middle' housing options. Neighbourhoods accommodating missing middle options would offer more diverse and affordable housing choices within buildings of a scale in-between high and low-density located within walking distance of public transit.

At its special meeting last week, Toronto council voted to support advancing a housing action plan to take in effect starting in 2023 to secure the development of at least 285,000 new residential units across the city over the next 10 years. The action plan brought forward by Mayor **John Tory** includes directing planning staff to review current City, zoning by-laws, design guidelines and planning policies to see where they can be 'optimized' to increase housing density.

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City of Toronto graphic showing a possible built-form for midrise housing that could be located adjacent to Danforth Avenue and nearby residential neighbourhoods with the establishment of a designated Transition Zone. The concept is currently under study by City of Toronto planning staff for future implementation as part of the 2023 housing action plan that was approved by council last week.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

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Newly-appointed City manager **Paul Johnson** has been directed to submit an implementation report for the approved housing action plan to the mayor's executive committee by March 2023.

As part of its review of housing plans and policy currently on the books that will inform the future implementation report, city staff has been directed to issue recommendations to council for creating 'transition zones' between residential and commercial areas.

Transition Zones were first proposed in 2018 by **Sajecki Planning** partner **Blair Scorgie** and **Hertel Planning** principal **Sean Hertel** as a potential zoning concept that would allow the city to establish designated areas where missing middle housing types —multiplexes, stacked townhouses and low-rise apartments to name some examples — could be developed at the edge of neighbourhoods, on largely underutilized lands located between existing residential areas and city avenues or main streets.

As explained by Scorgie, the intention of transition zones is to allow for additional mid-rise housing development to take place at the edge of neighbourhoods within Toronto in close proximity to more built-up and transit-connected areas. This would allow for the development of new mid-rise affordable housing that that would not disrupt the 'stability' of existing neighbourhoods, he says.

"The idea was that the transition would occur over several properties," Scorgie told *NRU* following council's approval of the housing plan. "We gave the example of under 250 metres into the core of neighbourhoods. So, that's an entire city block, or bigger." "You could develop that land at higher densities, somewhere between what you would have seen at the centre of [existing] neighbourhoods, and the type of density that you're developing on commercial main streets," Scorgie continued.

While there are no formally-established transition zones in any areas of Toronto currently, the City does make reference to an 'in-between-scale' of permitted building scales and types within its existing urban design guidelines, zoning by-laws and planning policies, as well as within site-specific plans and development applications, City of Toronto urban design project manager **Shawna Bowen** says.

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City of Toronto map showing a proposed Transition Zone as part of a recent planning study for Danforth Avenue. Transition zones are areas between low-rise neighbourhoods and taller mixed-use areas where an 'intermediate' scale of building height is possible. The concept was first proposed by Toronto-based urban planners Blair Scorgie and Sean Hertel as a way to accommodate more mid-rise housing in the city. Transition zones are intended to help create new intermediate-scale residential development that is affordable and within walking distance of major commercial areas and public transit. As part of its recent approval of a new housing action plan city council has directed staff to come up with an implementation strategy that includes the creation of future transition zones between residential and commercial areas city-wide.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

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"We don't call them 'transition zones' necessarily, but we've talked about transition a lot," Bowen told *NRU*, noting that recent planning studies undertaken by City staff for sections of Danforth Avenue and St. Clair Avenue West have included references to creating transition zones.

According to Bowen, there is currently a wide range of options the City allows to establish transitions between buildings.

"Transition between differing building scales can be achieved through a variety and combination of methods – stepping height limits, location and orientation of the building, the use of setbacks and step-backs of building mass, and separation distances," Bowen said.

While Bowen is unable to provide details on the future implementation of transition zones within Toronto with the review mandated by council currently underway, she suggests that a city-wide approach to their creation could be similar to what has been done with the ongoing Expanding Housing Options in Neighbourhoods (EHON) initiative.

Approved by council in July, one of EHON's objectives, Bowen says, is to address the existing deficit of missing middle housing by allowing intensification in existing low-rise residential areas. In addition to permitting 'accessory housing' options such as garden suites, EHON allows for future development of duplexes, triplexes and other mid-rise building typologies within residential settings where historically, they have not been allowed.

"The EHON work can continue to inform the response to this latest motion about transition zones. The scale and type of buildings that are the focus of this work absolutely reflect the idea of a transition zone," Bowen said.

Scorgie suggests that transition zone boundaries could be delineated in way that is similar to zoning for major transit station areas. As required by the province, such areas are designated by municipalities to ensure that higher density residential and mixed-use development will occur near major public transit connections in order to maximize the amount of housing available near transit.

"You'd have to define what [transition zones] are and identify the boundaries so that there's a specific set of planning policies attached to it that target missing-middle development," Scorgie said.

Scorgie says that with council's recent approval of the 2023 housing action plan, he's cautiously optimistic that after years of study —going back to the City's approval of mid-rise urban design guidelines back in 2010 — transition zones may finally be implemented.

"I'm reluctant to get overly optimistic, but it does seem that we are at a point now where we have, I think, the right members on council," Scorgie said. "We have some new progressive voices on council with respect to issues around housing…which I think gives us reasons to be optimistic."

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