

Guest column: Huge change coming to city, and only three percent know about it.

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The biggest changes in land use in sixty years are coming to neighborhoods across Edmonton, and most Edmontonians have never heard of them. These changes will be brought about by the proposed Zoning Bylaw Renewal Initiative, and if city council approves this initiative every neighborhood inside the Anthony Henday will face disruption.

Tens of thousands of people who now live on quiet residential streets will face the possibility that mid-rise (5-8 stories) or high-rise buildings will be built on their blocks, or even next door. In every neighborhood inside the Henday, infill developers will be permitted to build eight housing units on any fifty-foot lot; on wider lots, more. Provisions requiring developers work with the character of neighborhoods will be removed. On almost any lot, structures with higher and bigger walls will be allowed without regard for impacts on neighbouring properties. More surface will be paved over. The bylaw eliminates most appeals by neighbours.

One architect told me infill developers are drooling. No wonder.

The city has worked with infill developers on these changes for several years, but most people I speak with know nothing about them. A dozen of us from various parts of the city pooled our money to hire a reputable polling company to ask Edmontonians a straightforward question: “How much do you know about the City of Edmonton’s proposed Zoning Bylaw Renewal Initiative?” The results were startling: only *three percent* (3%!) felt they could explain it to another person. Eleven percent had a general idea of its details and 24% had heard about it in passing. The largest group by far, 62%, had never heard of it. (The margin of error was 5.8%, 19 times out of 20.)

Whether you support these changes, want them tweaked, or oppose them, all of us surely agree the people of Edmonton deserve to be well-informed and genuinely consulted about them. City council and administration have failed completely to meet this threshold. The Zoning Bylaw Renewal Initiative must go back to the drawing board.

The first round of consultations was during the pandemic. When the city held two public information sessions in June, 2021, and four people attended one and twenty-nine the other, the initiative should have been put on hold until the pandemic abated. The final consultations were May 1-31, 2023, an exact overlap with the provincial election campaign, when media and public attention was elsewhere. The city held a major online public meeting about the bylaw the same evening as the provincial leaders’ debate. About forty people signed up (including city staff), out of 850,000 who’ll be affected.

It’s not that the public lacks interest. Two recent meetings about the bylaw were organized by a handful of volunteers with no budget and drew 170 people from 41 neighborhoods. One woman said, “The city has told me more about garbage than about a bylaw that could upend my neighborhood.”

The proposed bylaw is meant to increase density, which is reasonable. There are many good infill densification projects in Edmonton. Let's learn from these. I've spoken in favour of increased density at city council hearings and my wife and I developed a small but highly successful infill densification project. But density should not be our goal. Our goal as Edmontonians should be to create a sustainable, affordable, attractive, welcoming, and safe city. If managed properly, density helps reach some of these goals, but it works against others. A bylaw like this can do more harm than good.

Density can help with sustainability if buildings are built to net zero energy standards, but until building codes are upgraded few of them will be, so we shouldn't rush. Density could decimate Edmonton's urban forest, one of our greatest environmental assets. Density can be attractive if it fits well in its setting, but this bylaw eliminates requirements to take a building's context into account. Density works against affordability by driving up land costs; if it led to affordability, Vancouver would have Canada's cheapest housing. In Edmonton, think of all those affordable homes replaced by two far more expensive skinnies.

City council's urban planning committee meets on June 20 to either endorse this bylaw to council or send it back to administration for more work. The committee should send it back to be redone, starting from square one.

The city needs to host a series of in-person townhall meetings about zoning plans in every ward, where people have in-depth opportunities to learn, comment, and suggest changes, and then host a further townhalls where the public can review the changed plans and comment. The city used to consult this way, and it needs to do so again.

Let city council know your views.

Kevin Taft served three terms in the Legislative Assembly.