

Opinion: When is zoning not zoning? When the city supports all changes

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By Steph Neufeld

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On Monday, city council will debate a thin slice of one of Edmonton's most historic streets. A property owner wants to build a boarding house on 89 Avenue, squeezing 15 units onto a 33-foot lot. The Garneau Community League thinks there are better places for this, several within a stone's throw. It's the third public hearing on the matter.

It may seem like ordinary business, but this is a test for the city's new approach. Because this property is within a "priority growth area," officials have abandoned past neutrality for brutalist logic: All upzoning in major nodes is supported regardless of history, context or community mix. Saying "no" is considered a repudiation of the City Plan.

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We like density. But that doesn't mean it's smart to plop a utilitarian monolith on one of Edmonton's best streets. Thanks to the 2023 zoning bylaw renewal, this land was already rezoned last year to increase density. The existing zoning already permits eight units, which could accommodate a similar number of residents, albeit in a less lucrative configuration.

Our community has been vocal enough to give council some pause. Coun. Andrew Knack has proposed a zoning compromise — a nice gesture but on a small lot doesn't alter the builder's

plans — and this proposal is likely to carry the day. But the fundamental problem remains: City officials are treating priority growth areas as free-for-alls.

A yes from council will incentivize speculators to buy, rezone and flip. For developers, it will create a precedent that undercuts opposition. For the community, all we may get is a lecture about how “change is hard.”

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As community league president, I’ve heard from other worried leagues in Edmonton’s core. They know that property speculation erodes affordability and livability. The prospect of an upzoned boarding house next door doesn’t just create fear, it disincentives residents from investing in their home and neighbourhood. Anyone living in a historic community should feel a chill.

The City Plan envisions an Edmonton that will grow up, not just out. The zoning bylaw renewal created opportunities to make it happen. Yet in practice, the execution is so one-dimensional that city officials won’t entertain a conversation about historic streets and encouraging permanent residents and families — even when heritage and vibrancy are explicit goals of the City Plan.

Our community wants to change that. We’re asking for equivalent zoning with modest considerations for heritage and multi-bedroom units under three storeys. In Garneau, this is only 30 per cent of the community footprint. The rest is zoned six storeys or more.

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“We’ve received support from the Edmonton Heritage Council and the Edmonton Historical Board — an advisory committee to council — along with many others. But when Coun. Michael Janz recently asked for an administration report, opposition was categorical.

“It doesn’t align with the approach that City Plan, the district plan, the new zoning bylaw has taken in terms of housing choice, evolution of the city in general, and the approach to neighbourhood level planning,” said a city planner. “This would be taking us back to [lot-by-lot planning].”

For a neutral public service, the rhetoric is absolute overkill. The City Plan is not a regulatory hammer; it's a policy document with competing objectives. There's no need to mischaracterize the community's position; Garneau has never asked for lot-by-lot planning or protections for single-family residences.

A year since the new zoning bylaw came into effect, the city appears most concerned with churning out press releases with housing stats and effusive quotes.

Our review would be less glowing. We have zoning on paper, but when the city supports all changes, it's not really zoning. We have public engagement, but if the city won't listen, it's not really engagement. We have public hearings, but if an unconditional "yes" is the only option, these are not public hearings.

They're formal opportunities for Edmontonians to scream into the void.

Steph Neufeld is president of the Garneau Community League.