

City Infill Guidelines Policy – May 2021

ABOUT THE WINNIPEG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Founded in 1873, The Chamber is Winnipeg’s largest business organization, dedicated to fostering an environment in which business, and all Manitobans, can prosper. The Chamber’s vision is for Winnipeg to be a competitive, technologically innovative city with a skilled labour force and modern infrastructure to support existing and emerging industries, and a city with a bright future.

Through its membership, The Chamber feels it can identify and provide valuable insight into currently held perceptions and concerns for Manitoba’s future, as well as potential solutions. We are therefore pleased to present this submission on behalf of our 2,100 member companies that employ over 90,000 men and women in the City of Winnipeg.

BACKGROUND

In its 2018 submission to the OurWinnipeg review, The Chamber recommended the city should “develop a robust infill strategy” that encouraged further density and provides a clear set of rules for developers and civic decision makers to follow.

The City conducted a wide-ranging public consultation in 2019 and 2020, which included surveys of the general public and multiple workshops with representatives from the real estate industry, environmental advocacy organizations, and neighbourhood associations. The City also established a technical advisory committee made up of development, planning and environmental experts to advise on the development of the infill guidelines.

The City released the draft guidelines in April 2021, for consideration by the Standing Policy Committee on Property and Development, Heritage and Downtown Development. Of particular note were two changes the technical advisory committee says were never previously discussed: a ban on any additional density on streets with gravel back lanes (unless the developer pays to pave the back lane), and an annual limit of two infill projects per block. As a result of industry feedback, any decision on the guidelines was held over for 60 days for additional conversation.

The following recommendations are based on feedback from The Chamber’s OurWinnipeg Review Task Force, other business associations involved in the development industry, and members of the city’s infill guidelines technical advisory committee.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chamber does support the creation of infill guidelines and recognizes the bulk of the draft document represents a reasonable compromise between the interests of the development community and the concerns of existing residents of established neighbourhoods. However, we do recommend the following changes are made before the guidelines are formally adopted:

1. Eliminate the ban on additional density on streets with gravel back lanes

Maintenance of gravel back lanes has been a longstanding issue, and it's fair to ask whether gravel lanes are an acceptable standard within an urban setting. However, that issue should remain separate from the infill housing discussion. If the City wants to improve gravel back lanes, then it should do so through some combination of infrastructure funding and local improvement charges. It may even consider setting aside a portion of net new revenue from infill development along blocks with gravel lanes to fund improvements to those lanes. However, this shouldn't be used to create a blanket ban on additional units, which would have a significant impact on infill development in St. Vital and St. Boniface in particular.

2. Eliminate the annual limit on infill projects per block

Concerns have been raised about construction activity along streets with infill projects, but generally these projects are small scale, and of short duration. If a "two infill projects per block" rule was implemented, it would effectively mean there could be one lot split and subsequent construction per year. This will make it challenging for the city to meet its own infill goals.

3. Reduce parking minimums

The draft guidelines limit the ability to build multi-unit infill projects due to requirements for parking spaces and limits on the amount of surface area that can be devoted to parking. A simple solution is to reduce or eliminate parking minimums for infill projects. It should be noted that Buffalo became the first major U.S. city to remove parking minimums in 2017, and Edmonton became the first Canadian city to do so in 2020. Several other North American cities are now considering a similar model.

4. Allow developments that follow the infill guidelines to occur "by right"

The primary benefit of the infill guidelines is that they provide a clear, consistent set of rules for infill development that industry and the city have both agreed upon in advance. Therefore, if a proposed development meets all the requirements of the guidelines, it should be allowed to proceed without going through public hearings and multiple decisions by council committees. That process should be reserved for proposals

that are requesting some modification to the guidelines, and those requests should be assessed very carefully.

CONCLUSION

The infill guidelines represent a tremendous opportunity for the City to encourage additional density and avoid some of the very contentious debates that have occurred around infill proposals over the past several years. With a few modifications we feel the guidelines will accomplish this goal and will be accepted by the development and planning community.