

## Edmonton's Intensification Audit

### Executive Summary

#### Introduction

Across North America, concern about the effects of urban growth is emerging. People are reacting to transportation, environmental and financial issues and linking them to patterns of urban growth. Governments at all levels are exploring new ways to manage urban growth strategically.

In adopting *Plan Edmonton*, City Council directed the Administration to prepare a “strategy for the intensification of land development”. The creation of the strategy will provide Council and the community with an opportunity to examine how land and infrastructure is used in Edmonton and alternatives that may provide positive choices to sustain Edmonton's quality of life.

Phase One of the Edmonton Urban Land Intensification Strategy concludes with *Edmonton's Intensification Audit*. The audit found that Edmonton has a higher net residential density than most of the American and Canadian cities surveyed. Other intensification indicators measuring aspects of land use and transportation have Edmonton in the middle of the pack when compared to the surveyed cities.

As in other places, Edmonton and its region are facing the challenges of economic and population growth. The City has fallen behind in its ability to finance and provide infrastructure and services. Our citizens are concerned that Edmonton's growth will reduce the quality of life they enjoy, and there is a growing list of transportation and environmental concerns they want the City to address. As Edmonton grows, smart choices can be made to help us sustain the quality of life we enjoy.

The audit shows that intensification, especially residential intensification, is occurring throughout Edmonton, in the suburbs, in mature areas and in the downtown. Intensification is supported by both the development industry and environmental groups, although for different reasons.

The audit also shows that community representatives are not convinced that intensification is, in itself, a good objective and they are suspicious that an intensification initiative will undermine the quality of life in their communities. People responsible for infrastructure are also concerned that existing systems cannot meet the needs of more intense development.

Both developers and community representatives express concerns that the process for approving development proposals in established communities is reactive, adversarial, disruptive, costly and time consuming. With an extended period of strong growth for Edmonton being forecast, it may be that the principal challenge of the intensification strategy is to facilitate the natural inclination of the development industry to intensify land use in ways and in places that are acceptable to the residents of Edmonton.

Two key findings from the audit will help to direct the project as it moves into Phase Two. First is the finding from the focus groups that the project name creates negative impressions and limited understanding. The second finding from the focus groups is that drawing or crafting a physical vision for Edmonton would aid the community in making choices for our future.

In effect, the focus groups said that urban land use intensification is only one aspect of a larger community interest in making smart choices about the future of Edmonton's physical environment – both natural and man made. Audit research shows that making and implementing smart choices requires leadership, community will and resources.

The audit found that Edmonton has many strengths to build on, such as light rail transit, development opportunities on serviced land, modern infrastructure, existing community facilities and strong business and residential communities.

The City of Edmonton and its taxpayers have invested in original infrastructure, housing and businesses. *Plan Edmonton* provides policy directions that support maintenance and re-investment in these original elements to retain value in Edmonton and allow for continued quality of life. The audit identified areas that could benefit from renovation, re-investment and infill that would fulfill *Plan Edmonton's* policies. These actions can bring investment and vitality, support existing business, use existing infrastructure and support existing facilities, like schools or arenas.

Phase Two of this project will involve consultation with the community, with the objective of making smart choices about growth and re-investment that will meet Edmonton's unique needs. In Phase Two a physical vision will be developed to identify growth opportunity areas; determine acceptable forms of growth; and, refine community processes to accommodate growth.

When completed, Phase Two will provide recommendations to City Council on strategies, programs and funding for smart choice initiatives.

## **Principles**

Council's economic, social and environmental vision statements will provide key direction to strategy development in Phase Two:

*"Providing a physical and human infrastructure that contributes to economic development and quality of life." (City Council's Vision for Economic Prosperity)*

*"A city where individuals, families, organizations, communities, business and governments together build a working, caring, safe and clean community." (City Council's Vision for Social Well-Being and Quality of Life)*

*"Edmontonians sustain and enhance their environment for present and future citizens, in harmony with the global community." (City Council's Environmental Vision)*

A discussion of our choices and intensification should address the financial challenges Edmonton and its citizens are facing. The City of Edmonton is dealing with increased construction, maintenance and service costs, increased operating expenses, a maintenance area that is growing steadily and a decline in provincial operating grants. Citizens are faced with tax increases to respond to Edmonton's increasing costs and shortfalls.



Preparation of a strategy will be based on the following principles:

- **maintaining or enhancing quality of life for Edmontonians through the provision of business and consumer choice and affordability, livable neighbourhoods and access to amenities;**
- **achieving municipal efficiencies to reduce corporate costs, by maximizing use of existing physical and human infrastructure or by maximizing the use of land; and**
- **increasing the mix of structures or activities on the land to maximize the use of land and increase citizen choice. An increase in the mix or number of structures or activities located on a given area of urban land will indicate successful intensification and re-investment.**

With intensification and re-investment, Edmonton's citizens may have more choices. Choices in the types and locations of housing available to them; in the distances they go to destinations; and

in the transportation choices they make. Intensification and re-investment may also achieve municipal efficiencies by making better use of land and existing physical and human infrastructure. Optimizing use is anticipated to reduce corporate costs and thereby reduce costs for citizens.

## **The Audit**

The audit was conducted to provide a basis for future discussion on the option of intensification. The audit was designed to:

- identify Edmonton's current situation;
- compare Edmonton with other municipalities;
- receive community thoughts on the topic of intensification;
- examine *Plan Edmonton's* intensification policies;
- discover what other places have done to intensify; and,
- outline opportunities for and deterrents to intensification in Edmonton.

## **Findings from the Audit**

Communities across North America have found that the cost of managing growing municipalities is far outstretching the property tax base that traditionally supports service demands. In Edmonton, there are similar concerns but Edmonton may already be moving towards intensification. Edmonton's residential areas are already relatively densely developed compared with other cities. In other respects, Edmonton's intensification indicators are in the middle of the pack compared with both Canadian and American cities and in some cases, Edmonton has a better ranking.

Edmontonians are willing to discuss efficiencies and growth, but are hesitant to use the term "intensification" as they feel it is too negative.

## ***Edmonton's Current Situation and Trends***

- Edmonton will continue to grow and intensification is occurring throughout the city. More residential, commercial, institutional, industrial and recreation development will occur. Public infrastructure will be required to support growth.
- Even with growth, Edmonton will lose some of its dominance in the region. Presently, more than 71% of the people in Edmonton's census metropolitan region (CMA) live in Edmonton, by 2025 only 68% of the CMA's population will live in Edmonton.
- Edmonton is experiencing financial strain as the City's growth adds pressure to add or expand services while revenues have declined due to inflation and the loss of provincial grants.

- Presently, 77.5% of Edmonton's labour force lives within Edmonton.
- The population in Edmonton's suburbs is growing as new residential development occurs.
- The number of households in Edmonton's older neighbourhoods is growing, but the population is declining. Over the past 20 years, Edmonton's mature neighbourhood population has fallen by nearly 75,000. Despite a population loss in the mature neighbourhoods, the number of households rose by nearly 1,800 over the past three years. The population in mature neighbourhoods is declining because the average household size has declined to 2.49 persons per unit.
- Edmonton may experience a demand for intensification, accessibility and smaller homes from its growing over 55 population and the growing "echo boom" group (born between 1977 and 1994).
- Edmonton has a balanced mix of multiple (47%) and single-family (53%) housing stock in comparison with other cities. The mix supports a healthy supply of housing types, sizes, options and price ranges while retaining a reasonably dense housing composition.
- 50% of the single-family houses built in the region are built in Edmonton, while 75% of the region's multi-family housing is built in Edmonton.
- Thirteen of Edmonton's neighbourhoods have residential densities of over 100 persons per net residential hectare. Of these, most are near the downtown or the university but also includes two mature neighbourhoods and two suburban neighbourhoods. Edmonton's two highest density neighbourhoods, Oliver and Garneau, are comparable in density to the inner city neighbourhoods of Stockholm, Brussels, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Zurich and London.
- Many of Edmonton's older neighbourhoods have experienced private re-investment in the form of renovations and new development, while the downtown has experienced both public and private re-investment. But other adjoining neighbourhoods are not receiving the same degree of re-investment.
- Edmontonians own 1.68 automobiles per household. Drivers' average trip time is 20 minutes per trip with an average trip length of 8.1 km., but some consumers may be willing to tradeoff a 50 minute drive to achieve the goal of purchasing a single family home. Although the number of vehicles is growing, emissions from automobiles are declining due to improved technology.

### ***Comparing Edmonton with Other Places***

- Intensification indicators were compared with 12 other municipalities - 6 across Canada, 3 in the U. S. and 3 in the region.

- Edmonton statistics show that land development is comparatively intense based on measurements of small single family lots, site coverage, the ratio of single family/multi-family housing, the number of multiple family building permits, and the transportation modal split.
- Edmonton is one of the more intense municipalities for the indicators of net density, the narrowest local road right of way, and average trip length.
- Edmonton has the most municipal parkland per 1000 population of all the cities surveyed.
- Edmonton has lower transit ridership than the other Canadian municipalities, but Edmonton's transit ridership is comparable to Portland's.
- Edmonton has lower car ownership than Atlanta, Denver, Portland, Vancouver and Calgary.
- Edmontonians drive fewer kilometres per capita than residents of Denver, Portland, Calgary and Vancouver.

### ***Community Thoughts on Intensification***

- Approximately 100 people attended 10 focused group discussions on intensification. Participants included citizens-at-large, members of business, development, community, and environmental organizations, government and institutional representatives and hard and soft service suppliers.
- The participants had mixed support for intensification.
- The participants had a negative reaction to the term "intensification". They felt it was a harsh phrase that would lead to negative impressions of the project's intentions. It was suggested that re-naming the project might lead to better initial understanding and avoid creating negative first impressions.
- The participants felt that the project should set out a long term vision for Edmonton; include clear goals and objectives; set out city policy; be based on an audit or assessment of the city's current situation; and include an action plan for implementation.

### ***Plan Edmonton's Intensification Policies***

- To determine *Plan Edmonton's* support and direction for intensification, an interdepartmental team assessed pertinent policies and strategies
- *Plan Edmonton* has 15 strategies that promote intensification of urban land use, but intensification is not a specific objective of the plan. Interpretations of how the *Plan* affects urban land use intensity differ.
- Concerns about the adequacy of the existing framework of *Plan Edmonton* are related to environmental conservation and the capacity of the City and other public organizations to provide infrastructure and services in a timely fashion. These areas could be addressed through programs developed under the umbrella of *Plan Edmonton*
- *Plan Edmonton* is now a three-year-old document. The audit raises the question "Have the needs and desires of Edmonton and its citizens changed sufficiently that a re-examination of the Plan's intensification policies is required or do the directions and intentions stated in the Plan still hold?"

### ***A Snapshot of Urban Planning Approaches***

- A literature and internet review of over 70 municipalities and programs indicates that communities across North America have found that the cost of managing growing municipalities is far outstretching the property tax base that traditionally supports service demands.
- Each community has designed unique responses to their growth problems. These responses may not transfer to a different community.
- The key elements required to address growth problems are:
  - ❑ a city's realization that being a better steward of its land and environment will cost less and offer a better quality of life for current and future generations;
  - ❑ leadership and a vision;
  - ❑ a program designed to fit the City and embraced by the community;
  - ❑ resources (innovative policy frameworks and financial commitments) to bring the vision to fruition; and
  - ❑ political and community will.

### ***Opportunities for and Deterrents to Intensification in Edmonton***

- A menu of intensification opportunities that may be feasible in Edmonton is provided to provoke discussion.

- Of the 62 suggested opportunities, 30 of them align with direction from *Plan Edmonton*. Of these 30 opportunities, ten are supported by an active municipal program.
- 32 of the suggested opportunities do not correspond with *Plan Edmonton* direction.
- Implementing the suggested opportunities will require community support and political will. Further discussion and refinement of these suggestions is essential.

## **Conclusion**

The audit indicates that Edmonton has taken some steps towards intensification and re-investment and highlights the fact that intensification is part of a larger community interest. Making smart choices about growth and re-investment will address this community interest. Phase Two will allow Council and the community to engage in a discussion to develop a physical vision for Edmonton and programs designed to meet Edmonton's unique needs, enhanced by political and community will, embraced by the community and supported by policy and financial resources.