

To: Members of the Planning Committee
April 10th, 2012

This letter is in response to the proposed Zoning By-law changes for R1, R2, R3 and R4 zones in the infill study area and the Urban Design Guidelines for Low Rise Infill Housing scheduled to be tabled on April 10th, 2012 at Planning Committee. The comments in this letter are given in specific regard to Sandy Hill.

Action Sandy Hill (ASH) is very pleased with the work of the City of Ottawa pertaining to the documents mentioned above and fully supports their immediate approval by the Planning Committee. ASH has only two key comments to submit: the concept of infill must be better defined in the guidelines to clarify their scope of application, and ASH notes that the bylaw changes and the guidelines do not apply to converted dwellings, even though these developments raise the same issues as infill. We submit that further study should be undertaken to have the bylaw changes and the guidelines apply to converted dwellings as well. Councillor Fleury's motion, requiring that the Site Plan Approval process apply to new constructions as well as conversions of three units and above in the infill study area, is a step in the right direction in ensuring that both infill and conversions are compatible with our neighbourhood. We also believe that there should be an ongoing effort to study the issue of infill and conversions in the context of Sandy Hill specifically, with a view to developing new tools.

Context

Sandy Hill is an inner city neighbourhood characterized by a broad mix of housing forms, including single family homes, duplex dwellings, town houses, small scale apartment buildings (and medium scale apartment buildings on main arteries), condominiums, and housing cooperatives. A large proportion of Sandy Hill is an R4 zone. A broad variety of uses is made of these buildings. Most of them are residential buildings with a mix of rental and owner occupied dwellings. Small businesses line portions of the main roads. A significant number of embassies and consulates are present in Sandy Hill. There are many parks, as well as several daycares and primary schools, a number of churches, and an active community centre. The neighbourhood also includes the University of Ottawa (student population of approximately 40 000) main campus buildings. There is a large heritage overlay in the northern portion of the neighbourhood, as well as many heritage designated buildings. Most original buildings were built circa 1900. The streets are typically lined with mature trees. The community is quite diverse and includes young families, young professionals, students, lower income residents, retirees and members of the diplomatic community. In addition to University of Ottawa activities during the school year, the area benefits from active community involvement. Numerous events take place every year, such as the Winter carnival, the Christmas craft sale, the park cleanup, Jane's walks given by residents, the Odyssey Theatre plays, the maintenance of the neighbourhood rink and Art in the Park.

Issues related to infill and converted dwellings

Although Sandy Hill is not a target area for intensification by the City, its proximity to the downtown area and, in particular, to the University of Ottawa creates a strong demand for rental properties and significant pressure for infill and intensification.

In the last decade, and as the University's student population has exploded, ASH and Sandy Hill residents have observed a significant increase in the number of infill projects and converted dwellings. The majority of these projects involve the development of residences into multi-unit dwellings intended for rental by a non-permanent population, particularly students. In light of the current zoning's limit of four storeys and four units per building, the trend has been for developers to include a higher number of bedrooms and smaller common living spaces using lower quality materials and poor craftsmanship. In addition, these converted dwellings and infill projects have generally not been in keeping with the overall neighbourhood character of Sandy Hill and display little consideration for design and compatibility. These projects have been characterized in large part by disproportionate mass and height, non-uniform set-backs, exaggerated encroachments, limited yard space, poor landscaping, and esthetically disappointing architecture built with cheap materials.

Of particular concern regarding this growing trend is the tendency of developers to convert dwellings rather than develop new properties, which requires them only to obtain building permits instead of having to submit a full Site Plan Application. In effect, developers are able to thereby avoid scrutiny by City staff for their projects in spite of the fact that many of these conversions are *de facto* infill projects (for example, a building that retains only a partial foundation is still considered a conversion and not a new construction).

Adverse impacts

This trend has had adverse impacts on the neighbourhood and its residents. The most notable impact has been an inappropriate density of development given the surrounding context. For instance, lots which were originally intended for single-family use may now have a density of 10 to 25 residents. Due to the configuration of the new units, with a high ratio of bedrooms in comparison to the available common living space, lack of amenities, relatively lower rent and proximity to the University (in effect mimicking the characteristics of university residences), these new units attract almost exclusively university students, many of which do not have roots in the community and do not feel accountable to their neighbours. As a result, the neighbourhood has seen a significant increase in the number of noise complaints, lower property standards, improperly stored garbage, anti-social behaviour by larger groups of students, and a general disregard for the community.

In addition, due to their disproportionate size and poor architectural design, these types of developments do not fit into the community context and their immediate streetscape. They do not reflect the historical characteristics of the surrounding buildings. These developments also tower neighbouring properties and dwarf their neighbours, are jarring to the eye, and diminish the aesthetic advantages of Sandy Hill. In addition to these concerns, these developments adversely impact their neighbours by blocking natural light and encroaching on their privacy, particularly when back additions extend into the backyard space immediately next to neighbouring properties. Some properties have suffered from being

boxed in on both sides by such developments with large back extensions, preventing the occupants from fully enjoying these properties, and notably, the backyard portions.

The combination of increased density and the many adverse impacts due to disproportionate bulk and poor design has had a notable effect on the overall balance and fabric of the Sandy Hill community. Indeed, long-term residents, including those who grew up and raised their children in Sandy Hill, have begun to reluctantly leave the neighbourhood. Given the ongoing stress and lack of resolution of these problems, they felt that they had no other option but to leave their neighbourhood, making their properties vulnerable to being converted into multi-unit dwellings and compounding the problem. Current residents continue to face these issues outlined above and are increasingly frustrated that the situation continues seemingly unaddressed. Sandy Hill will very soon find itself at a critical tipping point, where the current diverse balance of residents may shift to becoming a *de facto* extension of a university residence. A vibrant and historical neighbourhood may be condemned to disappear and become a full-blown student ghetto. One of the first urban planning principles is to maintain neighbourhood character and foster vibrant, diverse and livable neighbourhoods. At present, Sandy Hill risks becoming an urban planning failure.

Solutions

In our opinion, the Planning Act, the Official Plan, the Zoning Bylaw, and various urban design guidelines have not been effective in addressing the Sandy Hill issues described above. We need new innovative tools to help us achieve a balanced, welcoming and diverse community. The Zoning Bylaw changes and the new Urban Design Guidelines tabled today are a welcome first step in addressing the issues faced by the Sandy Hill community. The fact that these proposed tools do not apply to converted dwellings remains a gap. However, the motion tabled by Councillor Fleury requiring Site Plan Applications for both conversions and infill of three units and more, provides the City with more control over developments in the infill study area. We fully and enthusiastically support the Councillor's motion today. ASH is of the opinion that addressing these issues should be an ongoing effort and that we can only benefit from having more tools available to ensure the continued vibrancy and desirability of urban neighbourhoods. We therefore expect the City of Ottawa to continue supporting us in our efforts to explore all possible solutions. ASH is certainly not against infill and intensification, but wants to see it done properly, coherently, reasonably and in character with the neighbourhood so that all residents can live together respectfully.

Sincerely,

Sophie Beecher, Planning Committee Co-chair, ASH
Jane Gurr, Planning Committee Co-chair and Vice-President, ASH
Christopher Collmorgen, President, ASH