

# Staff Report



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To	<b>City Council</b>
Service Area	Infrastructure, Development and Environment
Date	Tuesday, December 10, 2024
Subject	<b>Special meeting of Council to commence the Downtown Heights Study</b>

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## Recommendation

1. That Staff be directed to proceed with the Section 26 Official Plan update as outlined in the report titled **Special meeting of Council to commence the Downtown Building Heights Study dated December 10, 2024.**
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## Executive Summary

### Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to support a special meeting of Council as required by Section 26 of the Planning Act to provide the public with an opportunity to provide input into the Downtown Building Heights Study.

### Key Findings

Section 26 of the Planning Act requires that the City’s Official Plan (OP) be reviewed every five years (or ten years after the approval of a new OP) to, among other things, ensure that it conforms to Provincial legislation, policy, and plans. The last review of the OP started in November 2020 and culminated with Official Plan Amendment 80 (OPA 80), which is also known as the City’s Growth Management Strategy.

OPA 80 was adopted by Council in July 2022 and approved with modifications by the Minister of Municipal Affairs (Minister) in April 2023 and further approved with modifications by the Minister through Bill 162 (Get it Done Act, 2024). For a brief period during the Minister’s approval process from April 2023 through to February 2024, some of the [Ministers’ modifications](#) permitted increased building heights throughout Downtown. Those increased height permissions were subsequently deleted, and height permissions were modified back to what was [approved by Council in July 2022](#) (see Figure 1 below).

In December 2023, City Council directed that staff undertake a study for the Downtown area, which is also the Urban Growth Centre and Major Transit Station Area, to approve additional heights.

Working with a consultant, the purpose of this project is to undertake a review of permitted building heights in the Downtown Secondary Plan area and make recommendations for amendments to these permissions in the Official Plan, as well as develop built form standards for tall buildings city-wide.

The overall objective of the review is to identify areas in the Downtown Secondary Plan where additional heights can be considered and what actions (i.e., policy refinements, tools, and incentives), will best work to achieve the target of 150 people and jobs per hectare by 2031 and ultimately 200 people and jobs per hectare by 2051.

## **Strategic Plan Alignment**

The City's Official Plan aligns with the City Building, Environment and People and Economy priority areas of the Strategic Plan. The Official Plan provides policies to support the provision of a full range and mix of housing options and densities; the protection of the natural environment; to grow Guelph's economy; and support renewal of Downtown.

### **Future Guelph Theme**

City Building

### **Future Guelph Objectives**

City Building: Improve housing supply

## **Financial Implications**

The Downtown Heights Study and Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings is funded through the approved capital budget, Capital Account PL0078, for costs associated with consultant services and community engagement.

The Downtown heights study will identify areas in the Downtown Secondary Plan where additional heights can be considered to achieve the existing density targets for Downtown. This work is not intended to significantly increase the density target or number of residential units planned for Downtown, but rather will provide flexibility in how the existing density targets and units are achieved. So, while there are no anticipated fiscal impacts resulting from this study, staff will examine the results against the broader fiscal impact study that was done during the OP for the final report.

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# Report

## Background

The Downtown Secondary Plan, approved by Council in 2012 and the Ontario Municipal Board (now known as the Ontario Land Tribunal) in 2015, is comprised of multiple land use designations and a height schedule. The height schedule was established through modelling, land economic analysis and engagement resulting in the tallest buildings being situated at the periphery of Downtown.

Through OPA 80, heights were increased by 2 storeys where density bonusing previously applied. A detailed review of the height schedule was not completed through OPA 80 as the growth management analysis (including Land Needs Assessment, Housing Analysis, Residential Intensification Study and Employment Study) demonstrated that the height and density permissions as set out in OPA 80 provided sufficient capacity to meet the increased density target of 200 persons and jobs per hectare by 2051 (where the City was required to plan for a density target of 150 persons and jobs per hectare) and allowed for development over and above this target and planning horizon.

Notwithstanding the growth management analysis, the [Minister's decision on OPA 80 in April 2023](#) modified the height schedule for Downtown. With the exception of the Special Policy Area, the modified minimum height was 2 storeys and the modified maximum height was 23 storeys. Official Plan Policy 11.1.7.2.1 that sets out how the height schedule was established and how it recognizes the Basilica as a landmark and signature building was modified to delete these references. The policies stating that lower maximum heights may be established to maintain long views to the Basilica and within the Residential 1 Areas were deleted. However, the decision maintains the policy that establishes the protected views to the Basilica of Our Lady and maintains that all policies apply when considering maximum height.

The final approval of OPA 80, through Bill 162 (Get it Done Act, 2024), resulted in the building height permissions reverting back to what [Council approved in July 2022](#).

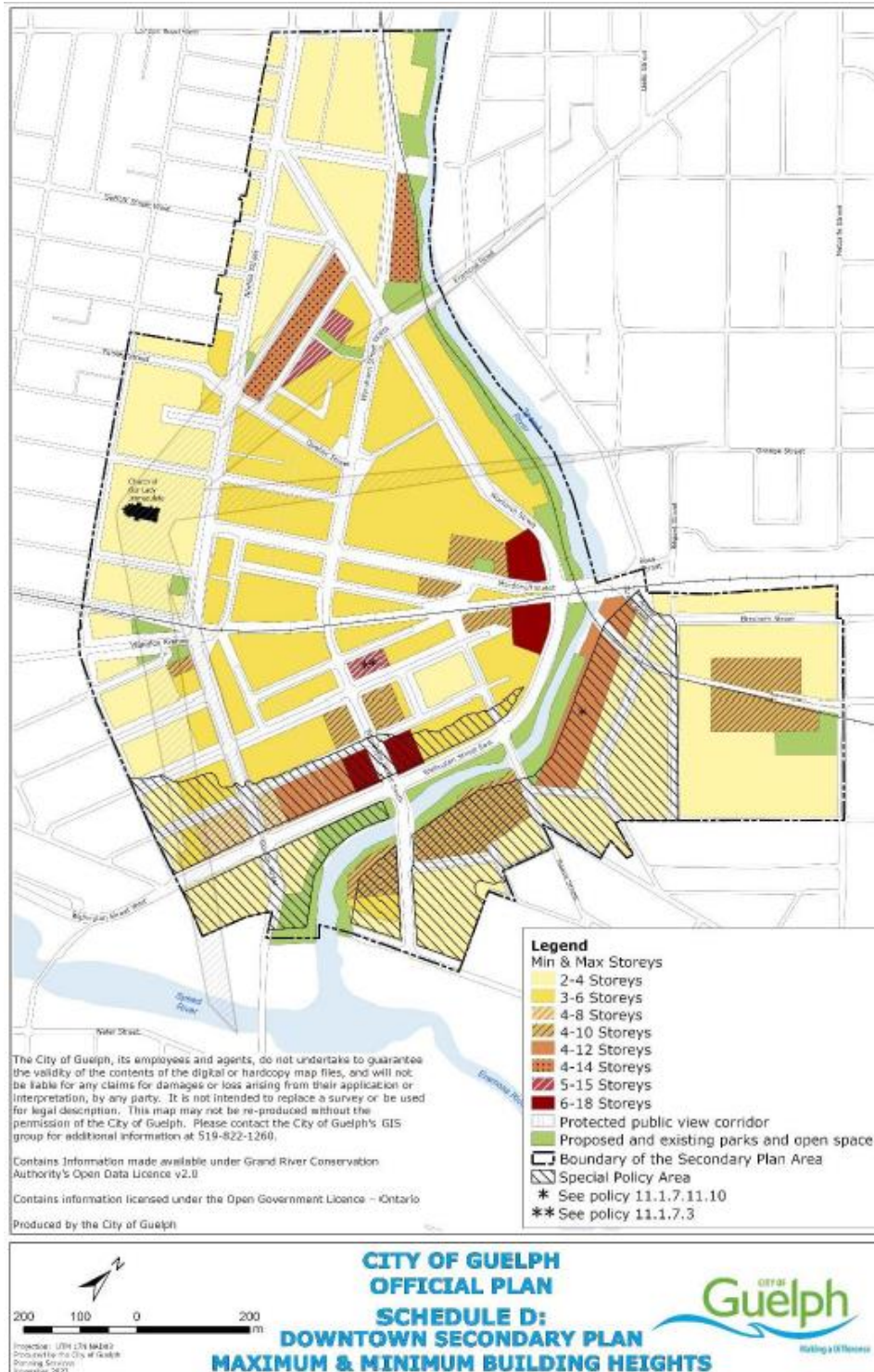
Staff reviewed potential for increases in height as a result of the Minister's April 2023 decision to support the Downtown Infrastructure Renewal Program and found that there are sites that could potentially be considered for additional height based on site characteristics, surrounding land uses and policy conformity. Generally, areas south of the rail line may have the opportunity for increased height outside of the protected view corridors and Special Policy Area. However, a design review and update to modelling should be brought forward to understand impacts of increased height.

Further discussions with Ministry staff have been and will be held to consider potential changes to the height schedule in appropriate areas of Downtown which will take into account infrastructure investments. Discussions have also occurred with respect to incorporating any identified modifications being implemented through the Minister's approval process.

In December 2023, City Council directed staff to undertake a study for the Downtown Secondary Plan area to approve additional building height.

Revisions to the Downtown height schedule are best addressed through a comprehensive review with consideration for the policy framework of the Downtown Secondary Plan, ongoing heritage conservation district studies (Downtown and Ward West), urban design guidelines and supporting studies. The current study will identify opportunities for taller buildings, adding more opportunities and flexibility in order for the Downtown density target to be achieved.

Figure 1: Existing Building Height Permissions as approved through OPA 80



# **Scope of the Downtown Heights Study and Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings**

This Study will result in two main deliverables: an Official Plan Amendment modifying permitted building heights for Downtown Guelph and Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings that apply city-wide.

## **Official Plan Amendment**

Through discussion with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, it has been agreed that the Official Plan Amendment with respect to Downtown building heights can be undertaken as part of the Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) under section 26 of the Planning Act. The Ministry has further advised that changes to the Official Plan within the Special Policy Area cannot be brought forward until that area has been reviewed comprehensively.

The overall objective of the Downtown heights study is to identify areas in the Downtown Secondary Plan where additional heights can be considered and what actions (i.e., policy refinements, tools, and incentives) can be used to achieve the target of 200 people and jobs per hectare by 2051 in the Downtown Secondary Plan and help the City meet its aspirational housing target of 18,000 units by 2031.

## **City-wide Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings**

In addition, the consultant will develop Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings for the entire city to provide design direction for private development of these types of buildings throughout the city. This document will provide sufficient direction to architects, developers and City staff to assist in the evaluation of urban design briefs, site-specific Zoning Bylaw amendments and planning applications.

## **Study Considerations**

As part of the Study, the following considerations will be addressed:

- What is Tall? – The definition of tall buildings within the Guelph context
- How are the following unique aspects of Guelph’s Downtown being considered?
  - Topography
  - Parcel size
  - Natural heritage (Speed and Eramosa Rivers)
  - Cultural heritage
  - Protected view corridors (Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate)
  - Key transit corridors and the Protected Major Transit Station Area (GO Transit and Guelph Central Station)

The Study will also be guided by the existing planning context, a scan of other municipalities, an updated land use assessment, as well as principles of good urban design such as:

- Sun/Shadow Impacts
- Wind Impacts

- Relationship with adjacent buildings
- Impacts on public spaces including gathering spaces and streets

As the City prepares to invest in Downtown Infrastructure Renewal, the impacts of additional building height on Market Square, St. George's Square, future public squares in the Baker District, the pedestrian areas of our streets and other public gathering spaces need to be understood for all seasons.

While the study will look at the entire Downtown Secondary Plan area, in particular, the following areas will be carefully considered for the approval of taller buildings:

- Areas south of the Metrolinx rail tracks
- Wider streets such as Norfolk/Gordon Street, Wyndham Street, Macdonell Street
- Larger parcels of land that can more easily facilitate transition
- Lower topographic areas

## **Study timeline and next steps**

December 10, 2024 – Special Meeting of Council to initiate the Section 26 Official Plan Amendment for the Downtown Building Heights Study

February 2025 – Public Open House (required by Planning Act)

February 2025 – Statutory Public Meeting (required by Planning Act)

April 2025 – Council Decision for the Official Plan Amendment and consideration of the Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings.

## **Financial Implications**

The Downtown Heights Study and Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings is funded through the approved capital budget, Capital Account PL0078, for costs associated with consultant services and community engagement.

The Downtown heights study will identify areas in the Downtown Secondary Plan where additional heights can be considered to achieve the existing density targets for Downtown. This work is not intended to significantly increase the density target or number of residential units planned for Downtown, but rather will provide flexibility in how the existing density targets and units are achieved. So, while there are no anticipated fiscal impacts resulting from this study, staff will examine the results against the broader fiscal impact study that was done during the OP for the final report.

## **Consultations and Engagement**

### **Special Council Meeting Notice**

The Planning Act requires that formal notice be provided for this special meeting of Council at least once a week in each of two separate weeks, and the last publication

shall take place at least 30 days before the date of the meeting. Accordingly, notice was published in Guelph Today on October 31, 2024 and November 7, 2024.

In addition to meeting the statutory requirements, notice was again provided in Guelph Today on November 28, 2024.

## **Internal Consultations and Engagement**

Internal consultations with staff from other City departments and service areas have taken place and will continue to occur throughout this process. An internal technical team has been established in order for this study to be informed by and integrated with other ongoing Downtown projects and servicing capacity work.

## **Other Consultations**

The Planning Advisory Committee, Heritage Guelph and the Guelph Economic Development Advisory Committee will be consulted during the study.

## **External Community Engagement**

Staff have started engaging with the community on the topic of Downtown building heights at several 'pop-up' and other engagement events including:

- October 2 – Public Open House for Downtown Infrastructure Renewal
- October 17 – HAS Open House
- October 22 – HAS Open House
- October 26 – Guelph Farmers Market
- November 19-22 – Focus Group Meetings (Downtown Guelph Business Association, Chamber of Commerce, development community representatives)
- December 9 – Downtown Renewal Open House

Formal Community Engagement summary documents will be prepared during the study, however, feedback to date has been varied and can generally be placed into 3 categories:

- Building heights should not be limited – the more density the better.
- Taller buildings should be permitted, however, maintain the protected view corridors to Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate.
- Do not change the existing permissions for building height – the Downtown Secondary Plan got it right.

Other comments that were raised include but are not limited to: build more affordable housing, consider low to mid-rise buildings throughout Downtown like Paris, protect the cultural heritage of Downtown, new development should provide parking, and the design of buildings is important.

## **Attachments**

Attachment-1 Staff Presentation Commencement of the Downtown Building Heights Study

## **Departmental Approval**

James Goodram, MCIP, RPP, General Manager, Economic Development and Tourism  
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