

Staff Report



To	City Council
Service Area	Infrastructure, Development and Environment
Date	Tuesday, April 8, 2025
Subject	Statutory Public Meeting and Decision Downtown Heights Study Official Plan Amendment

Recommendation

1. That the report titled **Statutory Public Meeting and Decision Downtown Heights Study Official Plan Amendment** from Infrastructure, Development and Environment dated April 8 2025 be received.
 2. That the City-initiated Official Plan Amendment to modify the permitted building heights in the Downtown Secondary Plan area be approved, as shown in Attachment-1 of Report 2025-141 dated April 8, 2025.
 3. That in accordance with Section 34 (17) of the Planning Act, City Council has determined that no further public notice is required related to the minor modifications to the proposed Official Plan Amendment modifying the permitted building heights in the Downtown Secondary Plan area.
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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide updated information about the proposed City-initiated Official Plan Amendment (OPA) for the Downtown Heights Study since the statutory public meeting on February 11, 2025. This report also provides a staff recommendation to approve the City-initiated Official Plan Amendment to modify the permitted building heights in the Downtown Secondary Plan area.

Key Findings

The recommended OPA for the Downtown Heights Study:

- is informed by modelling, an updated land assessment and community engagement and provides additional flexibility in order for the current density target of 200 persons and jobs per hectare to be achieved.
- aims to allow taller buildings in locations where it will limit their direct impact on existing neighbourhoods and public spaces. Mid-rise and taller buildings are proposed to be permitted strategically throughout the Downtown so that new, context-sensitive higher-density development will be permitted while ensuring the protection of significant existing cultural heritage resources.
- balances opportunities for short-, medium- and long-term intensification, making efficient use of the planned infrastructure investment in our Downtown.

- recognizes that the Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate is a landmark and a signature building within the city. The recommended OPA ensures that it will continue to maintain visual prominence and its protected public view corridors, however, buildings will be permitted to exceed its height.
- conforms to the Provincial Planning Statement and assists the City in achieving its Housing Pledge.

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.

As the current Downtown Secondary Plan area density target of 200 people and jobs per hectare by 2051 is not being revised as part of this study, there are no anticipated fiscal impacts resulting from this study. However, the increased flexibility to achieve the current density targets may result in longer-term financial impacts beyond 2051 that will be further examined through future official plan reviews.

Report

Project Background

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. Staff undertook some background work throughout 2024 in order to inform the project and ensure that it would be fully integrated with other Downtown Renewal projects. In December 2024, Council formally directed staff to commence the Official Plan Amendment (OPA) portion of the Downtown Building Heights Study.

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 policy refinements will assist in achieving the target of 150 people and jobs per hectare by 2031 and ultimately 200 people and jobs per hectare by 2051.

In February 2025, an Open House and the Statutory Public Meeting were held to hear feedback on the first draft OPA, which was released on January 16, 2025. Since February, the project team has been working on refining the OPA to respond to the comments received.

Location

The proposed Official Plan Amendment applies to the Downtown Secondary Plan area, which is also the City's Urban Growth Centre and Major Transit Station Area.

Proposed Official Plan Amendment

Existing Official Plan Policies

The Downtown Secondary Plan was approved by Council in 2012 and subsequently approved by the Ontario Municipal Board (now known as the Ontario Land Tribunal) in 2015. It is comprised of multiple land use designations and a height schedule. The height schedule was established through modelling, land economic analysis and community engagement resulting in the tallest buildings, up to 18 storeys, being situated at the periphery of Downtown.

Through the City's most recent Official Plan update – Official Plan Amendment 80 (OPA 80), heights were increased by 2 storeys where density bonusing previously applied.

Draft Official Plan Amendment – January 2025

The draft OPA released in January and presented to Council in February proposed a peak height of tall buildings (up to 20 storeys) in the area south of the Metrolinx tracks; and at a few other strategic locations on the periphery of the Downtown. The peak height of 20 storeys was proposed with the understanding that the City will be developing a Community Planning Permit By-law for Downtown which could potentially allow for additional height.

Modifications to the draft Official Plan Amendment

In response to feedback that was received on the draft OPA, the project team has increased the proposed peak height to 24 storeys and broadened the areas where this applies, as well as generally increasing permitted building heights, most notably in the area south of the Metrolinx tracks. The proposed building height permissions were also reduced in a few key locations as well, most notably along Norfolk Street/Woolwich Street to London Road.

Recommended Official Plan Amendment and Planning Analysis

The recommended Official Plan Amendment (OPA) is included as Attachment-1 and identifies areas with the Downtown Secondary Plan area where additional building height can be considered to provide additional flexibility in order for the current density target of 200 persons and jobs per hectare to be achieved.

The proposed OPA is informed by modelling, an updated land assessment and community engagement. Based on the feedback received throughout this project, the project team developed the following guiding principles:

- Respect the scale of existing retail streets and cultural landmarks
- Create a visually appealing skyline with a strong street-level experience
- Ensure appropriate transition to taller buildings
- Shadow impact considerations

- Regard for protected public view corridors

The project team also conducted an analysis of the existing conditions within the Downtown in order to develop an informed conceptual approach to height and density. The analysis considered the following key factors:

- Topography
- Views
- Existing parcels and land assembly
- Natural buffers

Urban Amphitheatre Conceptual Approach

The guiding principles and analysis of existing conditions outlined above reflect both the aspiration and practicality of preserving Downtown Guelph's urban character while identifying opportunities for strategic infill and intensification. The emphasis on maintaining the existing character has informed the development of an 'Urban Amphitheatre' approach to building heights. This concept envisions a tiered, structured skyline that frames the Downtown core while respecting key heritage assets, public spaces, and view corridors.

This approach allows for:

- The future development of taller buildings to frame the core with strategic massing. Taller buildings are positioned further from the core, creating a stepped effect that visually encloses the space while maintaining openness. The railway track, Wyndham St., and Norfolk St. form natural edges that reinforce the amphitheatre's structure;
- The preservation of sightlines and views. Key view corridors towards the Basilica are maintained, ensuring that new development does not obstruct significant vistas. Placement of taller buildings considers topographical changes to minimize visual impact on historic areas.
- The recognition of a central civic core. The open space in front of City Hall, framed by surrounding streets and buildings, acts as the focal point. This space serves as a public gathering area, reinforcing its role as a civic and cultural hub.
- Gateway locations to be emphasized. Key entry points, such as Macdonell Street, offer opportunities for iconic mid-to-high-rise buildings that define the Downtown skyline while respecting the amphitheatre's layered height approach. These buildings act as visual anchors, marking important transition zones into Downtown
- Tiered building heights for a gradual transition. Buildings closest to the civic core and heritage areas maintain mid-rise heights (4-6 storeys) to preserve the intimate pedestrian scale and protect historic character. Moving outward, heights gradually increase, allowing for taller buildings south of the railway track and at key gateway locations, such as along Macdonell Street and near the Speed River.

Description of Recommended Official Plan Amendment

In order to achieve the urban amphitheater approach to building height, modifications have been made to Schedule D of the Downtown Secondary Plan to set out maximum building height permissions. In addition, the minimum building height requirements have been removed from the schedule and the protected public view corridors have been refined to focus on the most prominent public views

to the Basilica. A comparison of the existing draft and recommended Schedule D can be found in Attachment-2.

The vision statement for the Downtown Secondary Plan is proposed to be modified to reflect that mid-rise and tall buildings will be strategically located throughout the Downtown to allow for new, context-sensitive higher density development.

The recommended OPA continues to recognize that Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate is a landmark and a signature building within the City. The Basilica should continue to maintain visual prominence from public viewpoints; however, it is proposed that buildings will be permitted to exceed the height of the Basilica, provided that identified public view corridors are protected.

Policy refinements are also proposed to in order to achieve the conceptual approach to height outlined above. Generally, the policy refinements increase flexibility within the Official Plan and Downtown Secondary Plan with respect to taller buildings, allowing for the future Built Form Standards to provide guidance where necessary.

A new policy is proposed to allow for the future Community Planning Permit System to establish a framework for implementing the maximum buildings heights.

Policy Analysis – Provincial Planning Statement and the City’s Housing Pledge

The Provincial Planning Statement (PPS) 2024 provides policy direction on matters of provincial interest related to land use planning and development in the province, setting the foundation for regulating the development and use of land. The PPS replaces both the Provincial Policy Statement (2020) and the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2019). The PPS provides several overarching policies regarding housing, infrastructure, and the development of healthy communities. Core to these policies are the principles of promoting efficient development patterns and accommodating an appropriate mix of residential typologies. The PPS directs municipalities to permit all types of residential intensification. The recommended OPA conforms to the PPS.

The province has set a goal of getting at least 1.5 million homes built by 2031 in order to substantially increase the supply and mix of housing options and address the full range of housing affordability needs.

Through Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022, the City was assigned a housing target of 18,000 units by 2031. Since committing to the City’s Housing Pledge in 2023, City staff have been working to remove barriers to increasing housing supply. The recommended OPA is one project of many that works towards this goal.

Background Report

Additional background information and analysis can be found in the [Downtown Heights Study and Built Form Standards Report](#) on the City’s Have Your Say webpage.

Next Steps

Following approval of the OPA, the project team will continue developing Built Form Standards for tall buildings in order to update the current Downtown Guelph Built Form Standards. Work will also re-commence on the Community Planning Permit System for Downtown.

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.

As the current Downtown Secondary Plan area density target of 200 people and jobs per hectare by 2051 is not being revised as part of this study, there are no anticipated fiscal impacts resulting from this study. However, the increased flexibility to achieve the current density targets may result in longer-term financial impacts beyond 2051 that will be further examined through future official plan reviews.

Consultations and Engagement

Staff have engaged 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 26 – Guelph Farmers Market
- November 19-22 – Focus Group Meetings (Downtown Guelph Business Association, Chamber of Commerce, development community representatives)
- December 9, 2024 – Downtown Renewal Open House
- February 4, 2025 – Statutory Open House
- February 6, 2025 – Heritage Guelph
- February 19, 2025 – Planning Advisory Committee

A Community Engagement Summary can be found on the City's Have Your Say page at haveyoursay.guelph.ca/downtown-heights. Responses to comments received since the summary was published are included in Attachment-3.

Open House and Statutory Public Meeting – February 2025

The first draft of the OPA was released in mid-January for review and comment. We received comments online, at an Open House and at the Statutory Public Meeting. Key messages that we heard include the following:

- There was generally a mixed reaction to the draft OPA and building heights schedule – some felt that even greater building heights should be introduced, while others felt that the changes should be scaled back.
- There were similarly varied responses in regard to whether buildings should be permitted to exceed the height of the Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate. Some suggestions included considering whether heights should increase incrementally as the distance from the Basilica increases, to help preserve visual prominence in the immediate area.
- For those who felt that greater heights should be introduced, it was suggested that a height peak within a 20-30 storey height range would be appropriate.
- Many participants voiced support for more mid-rise buildings (i.e., buildings in the 4 to 8 storey range) to be developed, with opportunities to deliver increased density within a moderate scale. Some comments recognized the need to increase housing supply in Guelph.
- Participants were generally supportive of the proposed realignment of the Grange Street and Stuart Street protected view corridor to align with Macdonell Street instead.

- A number of comments were received about the appropriateness of proposed height permissions for specific properties. Some of these raised concerns about how greater height permissions would impact local safety, parking and traffic conditions.
- Some comments on the draft building heights schedule pointed out that height categories sometimes cut across parcel boundaries, resulting in confusion about the correct and applicable permissions. It was suggested that the project team revise the schedule to ensure that height categories align with existing parcel boundaries.
- Other suggestions from participants included recommendations for simplifying the height categories and a 'less surgical' approach to height distribution.

The recommended OPA considered the comments received through public engagement, as well as the updated land assessment and modelling, the guiding principles and analysis of existing conditions. The proposed height permissions were increased in some areas and decreased in other areas in order to balance the protection of the historic core area of Downtown, with the desire to meet the density target of 200 persons and jobs per hectare by 2051.

Notice for Statutory Public Meeting and Decision

The Notice of Statutory Public Meeting and Decision was advertised in CityNews on March 13, 2025. The recommended Official Plan Amendment was released on the City's website and circulated to interested parties and agencies on March 18, 2025. Information on this project continues to be updated on the City's website, guelph.ca.

Attachments

Attachment-1 Recommended Official Plan Amendment

Attachment-2 Schedule D Comparisons (existing, draft, recommended)

Attachment-3 Summary of Input and Responses since the Public Meeting

Attachment-4 Downtown Building Heights Study Staff Presentation

Departmental Approval

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