

## Residents need to discuss ahead of time how their communities will evolve

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With the decision to maintain a firm urban boundary, Hamilton has finally decided to grow more sustainably and within its means, instead of continuing the unaffordable pattern of sprawl that has been the development blueprint for the past few decades.

Growth within the current boundary can come in many forms ranging from new towers, to townhouses to the creation of a secondary unit in existing homes. While the scale of growth can differ, the common fact is that change, in one form or another, is coming to neighbourhoods. Understandably, a number of communities are cautious and concerned about what this change will mean. You can see this reaction all around the city, from Stoney Creek to the Mountain, from the downtown to Westdale and Ancaster. Typically, this concern is written off as NIMBYism (Not-In-My-Back-Yard), but that labelling obscures some legitimate fundamental points.

In many cases, neighbourhood push-back is a result of a lack of proactive community planning. Residents are in the position of reacting to new development proposals that seem out of step with their current neighbourhood. What we need are more community discussions ahead of time about what residents want in their neighbourhoods, understanding that change is going to happen. These conversations are usually done when neighbourhood, or secondary, plans are developed. Public input is key to this process, but how residents are engaged differs across communities. The traditional method involves a distinct line between the planner and the public with the latter having opportunities to be heard at sporadic moments in the process. More progressive cities are embracing participatory planning where residents have a more hands-on role in shaping the vision for a neighbourhood and can even help prioritize infrastructure investment to make it a reality.

What can this type of hands-on planning look like? One example is for residents to play a more active role in understanding the building blocks that make up their community. As part of the planning process, they walk the streets of their neighbourhoods learning about and taking stock of what already exists: the buildings, their form and height, heritage structures, parks, public amenities, the street design.

This first-hand knowledge gives a valuable perspective on their neighbourhoods and can help inform discussions on what new infill can look like. Working with planners, residents can prioritize what parts of their neighbourhood design are working, and what can be improved. This all leads to building a community vision that sets the context for future new development.

Instead of being told they need to accept change, residents are part of the process of defining what change means. Whenever we have conducted this type of planning, the outcomes have been positive and tend to transform NIMBYism into a more effective discussion on how to manage change.

Whatever the method of engagement, public input is a fundamental part of these plans and the time and effort of residents should be respected by sticking to the outcomes once they are finalized. When there are clear rules and policies around development, change and intensification within these bounds are less likely to receive widespread opposition.

In contrast, when it seems like the rules around heights and massing of new buildings are guidelines up for negotiation, resident opposition can swell, no matter what the neighbourhood.

At the end of the day, this is about being successful with our goal of sustainable urban growth. If we are to accommodate a significant number of people within existing communities, the creation of more updated neighbourhood plans, some of which are over 20 years old, will need to be a priority. This all starts by defining a common vision with residents for their communities and then sticking to the plans.

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