

Commentary in support of Growing Together

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Good evening members of the Planning and Strategic Initiatives Committee, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Mike Doherty, and I am a passionate advocate for responsible urban development. I'm a member of Waterloo Region YIMBY, so it should be no surprise that I'll be expressing support for the Growing Together plan.

First, I want to applaud the engagement on this. Staff did a great job with outreach and engagement, and the awards are well-deserved.

However I do have some constructive feedback on the report itself, which I think reveals a mindset that is fundamentally wrong for what should be a high growth region such as ours. Then, I'll speak to some policy changes that should've been made, and finally comment more generally on what Council should do next.

The report and the policy generally seem to be borne of a desire to limit and control growth, but this is fundamentally the wrong mindset for a region like ours which should be a high-growth region -- especially in the middle of a housing supply crisis that was substantially caused by municipal restrictions on housing production. Limiting and micromanaging growth is not in our long-term best interests, and while Growing Together proposes to loosen the grip a little, I worry that it is too little, too late.

As just one example, the report states there are no financial implications -- but there are, they're just positive implications. Denser development can be serviced more cheaply, making our tax dollars go further. This is a good thing, and one of the key benefits we can unlock with intensification. The report also contains hand-wringing about "livability" and so on, but livability for who? Adding a large tower may mean a family gets to move out of precarious housing, or a homeless person can move off the streets, or a young couple can move out of a parent's basement. These all improve "livability" -- but the report only seems to consider the people who are already comfortably housed, and how they feel about shade or whatever.

Next, while this policy proposal is good, it obviously applies only to PMTSAs -- but the whole city deserves and needs this kind of intensification treatment. Hamilton put 90% of their growth into intensification/infill last year. Our regional draft OP is uninspired by comparison, aiming for only a shift to 61% intensification by 2051. We can do it, we just have to decide to be ambitious, commit to doing it, and follow through. It worries me that such a small change to policies in PMTSAs took so much time and effort and outreach and so on. How will we ever get the other, larger, policy changes that we're going to need, done?

I don't think Growing Together proposes to reduce or eliminate development charges or other similar fees, but they should be. Again, this is just a wrong-headed policy. Your job in the middle of a housing crisis that this council has in part created, is to enable growth, particularly mid-density intensification. DCs just pile taxes on the people who are suffering most from the housing supply shortage this council has overseen -- young people, newcomers to the country, renters, etc These people shouldn't have to subsidize the wealthy existing homeowners who have only grown more wealthy as this crisis has snowballed.

Staff have asserted that there are no angular planes in the proposal. But the setbacks in high-density zones will have a substantially similar effect. Kitchener may be making "wedding cake" towers instead of ziggurats like in Toronto, but either way, it makes development less viable, by increasing the design cost, decreasing the volume of the building, increasing water intrusion, degrading the thermal envelope, and it also just looks really stupid. I don't expect my aesthetic preferences to be made into law, but I do expect

other's aesthetic preferences to not be made into law. I implore the committee to thoroughly review and, if necessary, revise any provisions that may inadvertently hinder the economic viability of high-density projects. They reflect a hesitancy to embrace progressive urban development, and we risk perpetuating the stagnation that has contributed to our current housing shortage.

Next, in the context of major transit station areas, the inclusion of low-density SGA-1 seems counterintuitive. There shouldn't be low-density zoning in the PMTSAs in the first place, and adding extra height restrictions on SGA-2 when it abuts SGA-1 is even worse, undermining the potential benefits of mid- to high-density development near transit. I strongly urge the committee to reconsider the presence of low-density zoning in these critical zones and eliminate any spill-over restrictions that may impede the efficient use of adjacent SGA-2/3 lots.

The mixed-use zoning is good, and all Kitchener's residential zones should be liberalized in this way. But the details reflect more unnecessary micromanaging: commercial uses still require parking, and brewpubs and restaurants are only permitted on corner lots -- both are unnecessary restrictions that prevent some of the best improvements a neighbourhood could see. Just let people do things!

It is crucial to recognize that past policy decisions from both planning staff and Council have played a significant role in creating our housing challenges. It is commendable that the committee is working towards rectifying this through the Growing Together plan. However, I urge you to carefully scrutinize and remove any elements that could inadvertently perpetuate the mistakes of the past. Let us not repeat the errors that have led to the current housing shortage, but rather, let us embrace a vision that fosters a dynamic and inclusive city that builds according to demand, unleashing our full economic potential.

My request for the committee is to remove such "poison pills" from the Growing Together plan before referring it to council. By doing so, we can ensure that our city moves forward with a robust and forward-thinking urban development strategy that benefits all residents.

Next, this committee should pursue systemic fixes to the planning system itself. How is it that Conestoga College was able to bring so many international students without the region's housing system planning to accommodate that? There are surely many factors explaining how it is that this council allowed the gap between demand and supply to get so huge for so long -- and systemic fixes to the system should be next on your docket, to ensure that a catastrophic failure of the planning system is impossible in the future. While Growing Together is a step in the right direction, it is by no means a complete solution.