

Through a Housing-Friendly Lens: A Review of Development Policy in Huron County

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Executive Summary

As the needs of County residents evolve, so too must our development policy; the purpose of this document is to ensure that the planning framework for residential development is designed to reflect current standards and to deliver the types of housing units our community needs, now and in the years to come.

Official Plans and Zoning By-laws largely guide residential development and have significant impact in terms of the type of development which is permitted and built. In Huron, the planning framework has primarily facilitated the development of single detached dwellings; it does this in several ways:

- 1) All residential areas are zoned for low and medium density uses save for those properties where an apartment or other high density use already exists;
- 2) Zone provisions, when compared to existing lot fabrics, lend themselves to single detached and thus they become the 'as of right' option on many lots;
- 3) Zoning frameworks require amendments to accommodate higher density uses; the amendment process can be unpredictable in terms of timeline, costs and expectations of neighbouring landowners.

As of 2016, 82% of all dwellings in Huron County were single detached; while single detached dwellings meet the needs of some, there are many within our community for whom this type of housing is not desirable or attainable. The goal, moving forward, is to integrate more units within our communities and further, units that range in size, tenure, affordability and meet a range of physical and social needs. To meet this goal, planning documents have been reviewed with a lens that includes the following guiding principles:

- Respond to housing demand;
- Facilitate choice;
- Compatible development;
- Sensitive intensification;
- Inclusivity;
- Cooperative efforts; and
- Efficient use of land and services.

This document outlines a series of recommended options for different planning contexts across the County; these options are best considered at the local municipal level where communities have an opportunity to respond to specific realities of land availability, servicing and other factors.

Table of Contents

1. Planning Framework

- Provincial Direction
- County of Huron Official Plan
- Local Official Plan Policy
- Zoning Provisions

2. Housing Friendly Options for Different Contexts

- A. Agricultural
- B. Urban
 - i. Fully Serviced
 - ii. Partially & Privately Serviced
- C. Lakeshore Settlement Area
- D. Downtowns

3. Housing Friendly Options for Planning Approvals Process

Planning Framework

Housing built in Huron County must comply with a framework of planning policy and provisions. This section outlines the current planning direction for housing in Ontario and the County.

Provincial Direction

The Province has an interest in ensuring a sufficient supply of housing to meet current and future residents. Direction is provided through the Planning Act, Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), various pieces of legislation including the More Homes, More Choice Act (2019) and guidance documents such as “Adding a Second Unit in an Existing House’.

The Provincial Policy Statement (2020) provides clear direction for housing: Municipalities are required to maintain sufficient land base to accommodate future residential development, allocate where growth occurs, and to “provide for an appropriate range and mix of housing options and densities to meet projected market-based and affordable housing needs of current and future residents”. To meet the latter target, the Province directs several actions including:

- permitting and facilitating all housing options required to meet social, health, economic and well being requirements of its residents;
- permitting all types of residential intensification;
- directing new housing towards locations where appropriate levels of infrastructure and public services facilities are available;
- promoting densities for new housing which efficiently use land, resources, infrastructure and public facilities; and,
- establishing development standards for residential intensification, redevelopment and new development which minimize the cost of housing and facilitate compact form while maintaining public health and safety.

The Province defines “housing options” as a range of housing types such as, but not limited to single detached, semi-detached, rowhouses, townhouses, stacked townhouses, multiplexes, additional residential units, tiny homes, multi residential buildings. The term can also refer to a variety of housing arrangements and forms such as, but not limited to life lease housing, coownership housing, co-operative housing, community land trusts, land lease community homes, affordable housing, housing for people with special needs, and housing related to employment, institutional or educational uses.

County of Huron Official Plan

The County Official Plan is undergoing a Five Year Review process. Consultation with the public noted significant concern with the lack of housing options. In response, a housing-friendly lens was applied and several amendments to the Plan are being considered by County Council including:

- defining the term 'attainable housing';
- outlining the economic impacts of the housing shortage;
- recognition of community support for wide variety of housing types and forms;
- permitting the reallocation of settlement area designations to respond to housing demands;
- promoting higher density development, often referred to as intensification, than exists in present day neighbourhoods; and,
- support for a wider range of housing options including tiny home villages and land lease communities.

Local Official Plan Policy

Local Official Plans range with respect to housing policy as each responds to local conditions: Goderich's Plan is oriented more to density and compact forms while other Plans focus on stability for existing neighbourhoods. Official Plans are the guiding documents for future residential development whether a greenfield site on the edge of a Town or a redevelopment site near the downtown. This review does not seek to implement identical policies in each Official Plan but rather to outline a series of policy directions that should be found within each Official Plan, tailored to respond to the local context.

The integration of the following policy concepts is recommended for all local Official Plans:

- Support for development of full range of housing options including size, type, tenure, affordability, special needs, etc;
- Support for intensification and the integration of new forms of housing through sensitive design;
- Promote intensification by redefining what type of development is characterized as low, medium and high;
- Permit high density residential developments in Arterial locations (formerly referred to as Highway Commercial);

- Clarify that with respect to residential development, 'compatible' means development or redevelopment which may not necessarily be the same as or similar to the existing development in the vicinity, but shall enhance the character of the community, while not creating undue, adverse impacts on adjacent properties.
- Replace maximum density concept with minimum density requirement (e.g. given area may require overall minimum density of fifteen (15) units per hectare).
- Remove requirements for Master Plans and Secondary Plans which are not conceived of in next Five Year Review;
- Include rental conversion policy;
- Include community design criteria for newly developing areas;
- Permit exterior design control through Site Plan Approval.
- Promote pre-zoning sites for high density residential uses (including in Downtown, Arterial, greenfield and redevelopment sites)

It is also recommended that local municipalities undertake a review of the supply of lands which are designated for future residential development and consider the amount, location, and relationship to available servicing and other growth planning factors.

Local Zoning By-laws

Each municipality has its own Comprehensive Zoning By-law and while they are similar, different standards have evolved over time and this presents an opportunity to reevaluate different requirements.

The zoning framework arguably has the greatest impact on whether or not a given type of housing is built; each specific provision must be complied with in order for a building permit to be issued and the process of obtaining planning approvals to build outside of the current requirements can be unpredictable.

The following changes are recommended for all local Zoning By-laws:

- Amend housing-related definitions to create increased flexibility and clarify intent;
- Amend General Provisions as follows:
 - o Reduce minimum parking requirements for residential uses in all contexts;
 - o Amend accessory building provisions to permit habitable units in select zones;
 - o Permit home occupations in secondary units.

- Redefine what is permitted in Low, Medium and High Density Zones;
- Permit Additional Residential Units in all zones where servicing allows;
- Permit 'residential care facility' in all zones (includes group home, shelter for victims of abuse, hospice, supportive housing, transitional housing, crisis beds, homeless shelter, assisted living for seniors, etc).
- Remove all minimum unit size requirements and any other metrics which are stipulated in the Ontario Building Code.

Housing Options for Different Contexts

In Huron, different planning contexts require different housing options to best meet the needs of residents and to respond to development factors such as the availability of full services. This section outlines options in five (5) contexts: Urban – Fully Serviced, Urban – Partially or Privately Serviced, Downtowns, Lakeshore and Agricultural.

Urban

Urban Settlement Areas in the County range widely: from population size, to original lot fabric design, to services - both hard and soft. Each of these factors influence the type of housing that is appropriate in different urban areas. More dense forms of housing are best accommodated on fully serviced sites and the options reflect that reality.

Options for Fully Serviced Urban Areas

- Restructure densities
 - o Low Density: up to 4 units per building;
 - o Medium Density: up to 20 units per building or 3 storeys;
 - o High Density: over 20 units per building or above 3 storeys;
- Reduce minimum lot requirements to promote more compact form, including modular home parks;
 - o Remove lot depth requirement entirely (rely on combination of minimum frontage and area);
 - o Reduce minimum interior side yards to 1.5 metres;
 - o Reduce rear yard depths from 10 to 8 metres for multiple attached units;
 - o Reduce minimum front yard setback and introduce maximum front yard setback in newly developing area;

- Increase maximum lot coverage, with bonus for denser forms of housing (e.g. R1 for single detached permits lot coverage of 40% but R1 for semi-detached permits lot coverage of 45%);
- Introduce minimum landscaped open space requirement in front yards to reduce impact of wide parking aprons.
- Promote location of parking in rear yards of medium and high density residential developments to enhance connection between public and private realm (parking areas with more than 4 spaces recommended to be subject to Site Plan Control).
- Introduce new 'multiple unit residential building' definition which can take many forms (i.e. apartment, stacked townhouse, back to back townhouse, etc).
- Refine amenity area requirements for multi-unit developments by requiring minimum area per dwelling unit but allow flexibility for that space to be indoor, outdoor, private or communal.
- Remove requirement for balconies and at grade patios for apartments.
- Consider the connection between municipal parkland inventory and the requirement for on-site, outdoor amenity space requirements. In many cases, it may be appropriate to remove the play area requirement for apartments.
- Permit Additional Residential Unit(s) in detached structure in addition to within main building, for following unit types:
 - Single
 - Semi
 - Multiple attached
 - Converted Dwelling
- Remove all references to minimum square footages as mandated by the Ontario Building Code.
- Zone specific areas for the development of modular Residential Parks (on full services) in an effort to deliver more affordable housing units.

It is also recommended that municipalities review zone maps and identify sites that could be pre-zoned for high density residential development. This process would occur during an update to the Zoning By-law, involve consultation with the owner and follow a similar process to zoning amendments in that notification of the change would be circulated to neighbours. Should study requirements be noted, a Holding Zone would be applied, ensuring that the appropriate studies were completed in advance of development. It is recommended that the rezoning process focus on redevelopment

sites, sites with potential for intensification and sites near Downtown Cores. In certain circumstances, there may be opportunity to use this approach in greenfield situations.

Options for Partially and Privately Serviced Urban Areas

Current By-laws permit 1 or 2 dwelling units on existing lots provided servicing can be met.

- For new lot creation, lots are based on conventional system and the minimum lot size is as required by nitrate study or 1650 – 1850 square metres in size.
- To zone areas for higher density options, a nitrate study must be completed to inform the lot size based on the local hydrogeological conditions.
- It is recommended that the requirement for contingency bed when sizing new lots be removed.

Downtowns

Downtowns are the ‘people places’ of Huron County and are ideal locations for higher density residential development. The goal is to enhance opportunities for residential development through increased flexibility.

- Continue to direct units above, below, and behind commercial storefronts;
- Permit residential on the ground floor in areas close to Core but outside of traditional shopping district (e.g. Goderich C5 model);
- Consider pre-zoning select sites within Downtown for high density residential (e.g. Commercial Hotel, Seaforth).
- Permit residential care facilities (e.g. group home, hospice, supportive housing, shelter, nursing home, etc.) in/near Downtown Core.
- Consider incentivizing redevelopment of vacant sites in the Core through a Community Improvement Plan.

Lakeshore Settlement Area

Historically, lakeshore residential areas were characterized by modest cottages which were used on a seasonal basis. In recent years, many lakeshore areas have transitioned to permanent dwellings, occupied year round. The Lakeshore is not a targeted area for increased density as the areas are primarily serviced by septic systems, are not mixed-use and development must respond to shoreline hazards. That said, some opportunities remain for residential developments in this area.

- Permit single detached or modular units;
- Permit unserviced 'bunkies' rather than Additional Residential Units;
- Transition from seasonal to permanent, year round dwellings in appropriate areas;
- Permit modular residential parks with appropriate servicing strategy (e.g. Meneset on the Lake, land lease community);

Agricultural Area

Agricultural areas must be protected for agricultural uses, recognizing that housing for people involved in agriculture is part of the agricultural fabric.

It is proposed that the County consider permitting a second, permanent dwelling on parcels zoned AG1 of 50 acres and greater. The second dwelling would be required to locate within a set distance of the building cluster and to share a common entrance in an effort to ward off any future pressure for severance.

This shift has been made in neighbouring Counties including Bruce and Wellington and is recommended for Huron with the following rationale:

- Aids in farm succession planning by allowing multiple generations to live on the farm at one time in separate households;
- Helps to address housing shortage in Anabaptist community;
- Allows for hired labour to be accommodated in a permanent dwelling.

The specific zone provisions can respond to local factors but generally are recommended as follows:

- Second dwelling is free standing, either stick built or pre-fabricated;
- Second dwelling can be attached to main dwelling if desired;
- Second dwelling can be attached to accessory building (e.g. Shed/house or 'shouse' concept);
- No agreement is required and no person is named;
- No requirement for services (well and septic) to be shared;
- Shared access.

It is not anticipated that this permission would lead to an increase in dwellings being used as short term rentals (e.g. AirBnBs); municipalities may want to be explicit within short term rental bylaws to discourage this type of use.

Another shift for Agricultural areas involves modifying Official Plan policy and Zoning provisions regarding accommodation for farm labour, specifically temporary farm workers. These structures have typically been required to be one, large building and to be utilized on a seasonal basis.

It is recommended that accommodation for farm labour, permanent or temporary, permit a wider range of building forms including a cluster of small, independent dwellings. The provisions will seek to achieve the highest level of flexibility while resisting opportunities for severance.

For Agriculture Small Holdings (AG4), it is recommended that an Additional Residential Unit be permitted attached to the main building; this would allow for the construction of an additional suite to accommodate a family member or as a rental unit. Should the Additional Residential Unit be detached, it would be permitted on a temporary basis and follow the current garden suite requirements (agreement, person named, etc).

The rationale for this recommendation is that further intensification of small parcels in agricultural areas could have negative implications for farming, directs investment away from serviced settlement areas, and there is increased likelihood that the additional units may be used for commercial purposes.

Planning Approvals

The aim of this review is to reduce the number of zoning by-law amendments and minor variances which are required for residential developments, whether low, medium or high density. This shift will reduce the number of planning applications and allow for public input to be implemented at the policy level. To ensure developments meet the goal of sensitive integration, the recently approved Residential Intensification Guideline will be applied through the Site Plan Process; this process will be critical to the successful transition to more compact forms of housing.

To streamline the Site Plan Process, staff recommend:

- Mandatory Pre-consultation Meeting By-laws;
- Amended Site Plan By-laws to cover a wider range of forms (including parking lots with greater than 4 spaces);
- Delegation of Site Plan Approval to the CAO to reduce timelines.

In the event that planning approvals are required, enhanced notices of planning applications will be used to better communicate the process to neighbours and other members of the community.

Summary

This document outlines a series of recommended options that will help to reduce barriers and create more flexibility for housing developments in various contexts across the County. This is not a 'one size fits all' approach – each local Council and community will be consulted to direct which options will respond most appropriately to their circumstance. The shared goal is to ensure the policy framework is designed to deliver the number of units and the range of units that will meet the needs of Huron County residents, now and into the future.