

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

October 20, 2005

To: Planning and Transportation Committee
From: Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division
Subject: Design Review Panel Pilot Project

Purpose:

To recommend public consultation for the development of the Design Review Panel Pilot Project.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no financial implications resulting from this report. Staff will report on the financial implications of implementing the Pilot Project following consultation.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- (1) staff conduct a public consultation for the development of a Design Review Panel Pilot Project; and
- (2) staff report back to the Planning and Transportation Committee on final recommendations for such a Pilot Project in early 2006.

Background:

Policy Objectives:

The staff report on the Framework for the New Official Plan for Toronto adopted by Council on March 2, 3, 4, 1999 established 'our natural and built environment' as one of the three pillars of the City's quality of life. It laid the groundwork for a new direction for the amalgamated City which is expressed in The Built Environment section of the Official Plan. The Framework report stated:

“Reinvesting in the City’s liveability means more than promoting economic growth. A successful reinvestment plan must address priorities for improving the physical infrastructure of the City and reinvestment in the built environment through commitments to improving the quality of the place we live in. Every new development is an opportunity to enhance the City and create or contribute to a sense of place.”

The Official Plan recognizes that high quality design of the City’s built environment is an important public interest. It is fundamental to Toronto’s economic success and competitive advantage and the quality of life of its citizens. Official Plan policies mandate a reinvestment in the City’s built environment through setting out goals for new development. Goals include achieving high quality architecture, landscape architecture and urban design to create new development that fits well with, respects and improves its context and the City.

Design Review Panels:

The purpose of the Design Review Panel Pilot Project is to implement the goals of the Official Plan and City Council’s Beautiful City Initiative by ensuring that new buildings and public spaces demonstrate a high level of design and fit well within their context.

Design Review Panels are used successfully by many cities in Canada and internationally to improve the design quality of buildings and public spaces. They exist in the United States in cities such as Boston and Seattle, in England and across Europe. Canadian Design Review Panels include the National Capital Commission in Ottawa and those of the Cities of Vancouver and Montreal. In Ontario, Design Review Panels have been established in the City of Ottawa and Niagara Falls. In Toronto, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) has established a Design Review Panel to review the current redevelopment of the Regent Park neighbourhood. As well, the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC) has recently established a Design Review Panel to review the redevelopment of Toronto’s waterfront.

Design Review Panels provide professional, objective advice on matters of design that affect the public realm, including the design of proposed buildings, streets, parks and open spaces, in order to help achieve and uphold standards of design excellence. Design Review Panels make an important contribution to the development approvals process, but do not replace the process. Their input is integrated with development approvals to provide advice to City staff involved in development approvals. Panel members are design professionals who review development proposals based on publicly approved criteria such as secondary plans or design guidelines.

A Design Review Panel for Toronto:

To explore the feasibility of a Design Review Panel for Toronto, City Planning held a public symposium in June 2005 entitled “Design Review; Toward a Made in Toronto Solution”. Symposium speakers and panellists featured local stakeholder representatives as well as recognized national and international experts on design review, who are involved in the Design Review Panels of their respective jurisdictions. Local councillors, the public and stakeholders were invited to attend the symposium. Notice of the event was posted in a major newspaper, on public websites and broadcast on television. In addition, notice to specific stakeholders was

given through professional and industry bulletins and publications. The public event was well attended by over 300 members of the public and a portion of the proceedings was broadcast on live television. This event concluded City staff's ongoing evaluation of Design Review Panels in other jurisdictions. Lessons learned underscored the effectiveness of Design Review Panels for ensuring high quality design of the public realm in other cities and the applicability of a Design Review Panel in our local context. Through debate and discussion, the event demonstrated public interest in the implementation of this process for Toronto. Symposium proceedings were also posted on the City's website.

Public interest in a Design Review Panel for Toronto was also demonstrated through public consultation carried out by the Planning & Transportation Sub-Committee to Review the City's Planning Process. The Sub-Committee's September 29, 2005 report entitled Improving the Planning Process identified areas of improvement based on resident concerns and suggestions including the establishment of a Design Review Panel.

Comments:

Many cities have determined that the regulatory development approvals process does not adequately address the design quality of proposed development. This can often result in missed opportunities for design excellence in new buildings and public spaces and, in some cases, leads to development that does not contribute positively to, or detracts from its context. To address this challenge many jurisdictions in Canada and internationally use Design Review Panels to augment the development approvals process, with proven success. Symposium speaker Larry Beasley, Director of Planning for the City of Vancouver commented on the role of Vancouver's Design Review Panel in representing one of the significant factors of an effective development approvals process stating:

“We want a design based or biased commentary. The decision-makers later can try to balance all the other concerns, but we want the urban designers and the architects to give us a good crystal clear commentary about design.”

In Toronto two independent Design Review Panels have been established by the TCHC and TWRC. To address city-wide interests, it is recommended that public consultation be carried out to develop a Design Review Panel Pilot Project for the City of Toronto. The framework for the Pilot Project is based on an analysis of best practices of other jurisdictions with Design Review Panels. The Pilot Project is a proposal to test the feasibility of a city-wide Design Review Panel for Toronto by implementing a Panel for a trial period to review development proposals in selected areas in each District of the City. Pilot Area locations will be identified through public consultation to include areas which are undergoing significant development and where publicly approved criteria for review exist including current zoning, secondary plans, avenue studies and urban design guidelines. Types of projects to be reviewed will also be identified through public consultation and may include public projects such streetscapes, parks, public buildings as well as private development proposals.

An important aspect of the Pilot Project is the refinement of the Panel's process and evaluation of its feasibility for Toronto during the trial period. The trial period would be followed by

recommendations as to whether to continue to incorporate the Design Review Panel into the development approvals process and for any necessary changes.

Consultation with key stakeholders is necessary to develop the Pilot project, specifically to answer questions about:

Integration of the Design Review Panel into the City of Toronto development approvals processes;

Criteria for review and locations of pilot areas in each District of the City;

Types of projects to be reviewed;

Monitoring, process refinements and additional criteria;

Financial implications of implementing the Pilot Project; and

Length of Pilot Project trial period.

Key stakeholders identified for public consultation include:

Development Industry;

Design Professionals;

Residents;

Beautiful City Roundtable, City Processes sub-committee;

Works, Parks and Facilities and Real Estate City staff;

Existing Design Review Panels in the City of Toronto; and

Professional Associations including the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA), the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects (OALA) and the Ontario Professional Planning Institute (OPPI).

Conclusions:

The Design Review Panel Pilot Project for the City of Toronto is a proposal to test the feasibility for incorporating a Design Review Panel with the development approvals process to fulfill the goals and objectives of the Official Plan and City Council's Beautiful City Initiative.

In order to develop the Pilot Project staff recommends the approval of public consultation.

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