

Planning Review Panel

Re: Missing Middle

Summary of Advice from the Planning Review Panel, December 7, 2019

Executive Summary

The Planning Review Panel is a representative group of 32 randomly selected Torontonians that help the City Planning Division guide growth and change in Toronto. They have been asked by the Chief Planner to work together over the course of two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on major planning initiatives. Members are tasked, in particular, with helping to ensure that these initiatives are aligned with the values and priorities of all Torontonians.

Advice re: Missing Middle

Chief Planner Gregg Lintern presented to the Panel about a recent City Council motion instructing the City Planning Division to explore options to increase housing options and grant more planning permissions in areas of Toronto designated as 'Neighbourhoods' in the Official Plan. The City Planning Division was seeking the Panel's preliminary feedback on how to appropriately increase forms of 'gentle density' in areas of Toronto currently designated for lower-scale residential uses, as well as any concerns or issues from residents which may need to be addressed as a result.

Panelists supported increasing 'missing middle' housing options in areas designated as Neighbourhoods, with most Panelists arguing for closer to a 50/50 split between detached houses and other types of slightly denser housing like duplexes, triplexes, townhouses and small apartments. Panelists supported the increase because they felt it would provide a greater variety of affordable housing for more types of families and income levels, assuming that it was also built to be appropriate to the neighbourhood scale and character.

Panelists also advised the City on how to address any possible negative side-effects on current residents of these areas. Panelists suggested producing design guidelines that manage the look and feel of 'missing middle' type homes to ensure they fit with the character of the neighbourhood, ensuring that growth is accompanied by increased amenities and infrastructure (or focused on areas that can already handle a population increase), and providing better information to the public about how property values may be impacted by this proposal.

Detailed Summary

Gregg Lintern, Chief Planner for the City of Toronto, presented to the Panel about a City Council motion instructing the City Planning Division to explore options to increase housing options and grant more planning permissions in areas of Toronto designated as Neighbourhoods in the Official Plan. He explained how the City's Official Plan and current zoning determine the types of housing that can be built in Toronto's neighbourhoods and showed how much of Toronto's total area is zoned for detached houses versus other forms of housing. The City would like to explore changing permissions to enable the building of more forms of 'gentle density' in Neighbourhoods, including duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, and small walk-up apartments, with the goal of increasing the quantity and diversity of the City's housing stock while helping to improve housing affordability.

The Division is in the early stages of studying the issue and developing options, and visited the Panel to gather preliminary feedback from a broader city-wide perspective on the appropriate proportion of 'missing middle' type housing in the areas designated as Neighbourhoods, as well as what concerns or issues may need to be addressed as a result.

Discussion

Panelists were organized into four groups, and each group was assigned to one planning district of Toronto: Etobicoke York, North York, Scarborough, and Toronto and East York. The Panel then discussed the following in small groups:

1. Discuss and develop a group recommendation about what you think the ideal mix of homes should be for a neighbourhood in this district between single detached and 'missing middle' types. Explain why your table recommends this mix.
2. What actions should the City take to offset possible negative side-effects from changing the mix of homes in this area?

Overall, Panelists supported increasing the amount of 'gentle density' in areas of Toronto currently designated for lower-scale residential uses in the Official Plan. While the exact split varied from table to table, most Panelists suggested something closer to a 50/50 split between detached houses and forms of 'missing middle' housing like duplexes, triplexes, walk-up apartments, and townhouses in Neighbourhoods. Panelists tended to suggest a higher ratio of medium to low density homes in Toronto and East York and Scarborough (roughly 2/3 missing middle and 1/3 detached houses for these areas), while proposing closer to a 50/50 split for Etobicoke and North York.

Panelists were broadly sympathetic to the idea that a better balance needs to be struck between the needs of people living in detached houses and Torontonians who are struggling to find secure housing.

A few Panelists disagreed with the majority of the Panel and argued that detached houses add character and are better for families, and that the housing mix should therefore stay largely as is.

Panelists rationalized their support for increasing the amount of available 'missing middle' housing in Neighbourhoods for the following reasons:

- Population trends in Toronto necessitate more housing supply, as well as a greater diversity of housing types that are appropriate for all family sizes and income levels;

- An increase in the density of areas designated as Neighbourhoods will help improve housing supply, which many suggested could improve affordability. This would also enable people of different income levels to live in more parts of Toronto;
- A greater supply of more housing types would allow more people to enter the housing market as buyers;
- Increasing density is more sustainable and climate-friendly than developing more detached houses on new land;
- The types of housing the City is considering permitting in these areas would be appropriate in scale.

Panelists also noted many possible concerns and issues that the City might need to work on off-setting. These included:

- **Impacts to character.** Most Panelists acknowledged the worry of homeowners about impacts to neighbourhood character. However, they felt that these concerns could be alleviated by ensuring that the City provides clear design guidelines on how new 'missing middle' homes would look and feel. These guidelines would focus on ensuring that the new homes 'fit' with the surrounding neighbourhood.
- **Impacts to local amenities and infrastructure.** Most Panelists noted that one of the obvious consequences of increasing density would be more demand on existing neighbourhood services (like emergency services, schools, etc) and infrastructure (such as roads, sewage, and electrical systems). Several Panelists also cited impacts on parking and transit as major issues to consider. A few Panelists suggested that initial development could take place where the neighbourhood is already well-suited to handling more people.
 - A few Panelists noted the possibility that increasing the density and subsequently the infrastructure and amenities in the area could lead to these neighbourhoods becoming more desirable, and thus more expensive.
- **Impacts to property values.** Several Panelists expressed concern about the possible impacts of this change on property values. A few Panelists suggested that more research be done and published on the likely impacts to property values to allow the City to address or alleviate homeowner concerns.
- **Impacts to accessibility.** Several Panelists emphasized the importance of ensuring that these new housing options are accessible for people with physical disabilities (i.e., that they are not solely walk-up).
- **Impacts to sunlight and sightlines.** A few Panelists noted the possibility of increased shadow and blocked views from building slightly higher and denser communities.

A few Panelists mentioned the risk of new units going on the market for short-term rentals, however, this may be mitigated by the recent (November 2019) ruling of the Local Planning and Appeals Tribunal, which allows the City to regulate short-term rentals like AirBnB more strictly.

A few Panelists suggested the City could help address the above concerns by going out into the community and talking to residents about their worries. One Panelist suggested that in doing so, the City should emphasize the ways this proposal will contribute to building stronger communities, and

communicate that these forms of housing will help provide more housing while still enabling greater interaction between neighbours than other, denser forms of housing like high-rise apartments would allow.