

Addressing Stormwater Management in the Minor Variance Process

Date: October 15, 2025
To: Planning and Housing Committee
From: General Manager, Toronto Water
Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of the City's stormwater management policies relevant to minor variances and the minor variance review process. It also identifies opportunities to strengthen the existing process and practice for stormwater management considerations, specifically through the upcoming procedural changes introduced as part of the broader Committee of Adjustment improvement initiative, which is led by City Planning and Development Review. This report was prepared in consultation with City Planning, Toronto Building, and Development Review.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Toronto Water, recommends that:

1. The Planning and Housing Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications resulting from the adoption of the recommendation contained in report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on July 15, 2025, the Planning and Housing Committee considered the report "PH23.7 - Committee of Adjustment KPMG Service Delivery Model Review and Recommendation Implementation Update", which included a workplan for advancing KPMG's recommendations as part of a broader Committee of Adjustment improvement initiative.

Link: <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.PH23.7>

At its meeting on February 5, 2025, City Council considered the report "EX20.12 - Reducing Stormwater Runoff and Mitigating Basement Flooding" and directed the General Manager, Toronto Water, in consultation with the Chief Building Official and Executive Director, Toronto Building, the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, and the Executive Director, Development Review to report back with a strategy to address stormwater management in the minor variance process.

Link: <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX20.12>

On June 5, 2023, the Infrastructure and Environment Committee considered the report "IE4.6 - 2023 Wet Weather Flow Master Plan Implementation Update", which provided a comprehensive update on progress made of Wet Weather Flow Master Plan initiatives.

Link: <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.IE4.6>

BACKGROUND

Stormwater Management and Relevant Policies

Stormwater refers to rain and melted snow. Stormwater runoff refers to stormwater that flows over land or impermeable surfaces. Examples of impermeable surfaces on private properties include concrete landscaping features, asphalt parking areas, and roofs. In urban areas like Toronto, extensive impermeable surface areas lead to more runoff entering the City's sewer system.

Adopted by City Council in 2003, the [Wet Weather Flow Master Plan](#) (WWFMP) guides many of the City's stormwater management planning and initiatives. The primary goal of the WWFMP is to reduce the quantity and improve the quality of stormwater runoff. The [Wet Weather Flow Management Guidelines](#) provide technical guidance on stormwater management requirements for new and re-development opportunities.

The WWFMP takes a hierarchical approach to stormwater management, prioritizing at-source controls, followed by conveyance and end-of-pipe controls. At-source controls minimize the amount of stormwater leaving the site and entering the sewer system. For example, the [Mandatory Downspout Disconnection Program](#) requires property owners to disconnect their property's downspouts from the City's sewer system. Similarly, and per the [Sewers By-law](#) (Municipal Code Chapter 681), property owners are not allowed to build a storm connection (i.e., a pipe that carries stormwater) from their property to the City's sewer system.

The City of Toronto Official Plan provides the overarching vision and policy direction for all types of development and planning activities in Toronto, including for minor variance applications. It also refers to the principles outlined in the WWFMP, stating that stormwater is most effectively managed on-site. The City-wide Zoning By-law primarily regulates soft landscaping through minimum percentage requirements. Provisions vary depending on the zone and type of development.

While the City is responsible to manage, operate and maintain its stormwater and sewer system, managing stormwater is a shared responsibility. Accordingly, property owners play a critical role in managing stormwater on their properties. This approach helps reduce stormwater runoff entering the City's sewer system, thereby helping preserve critical capacity in the City's sewer system and reducing the risk of flooding.

Committee of Adjustment and Minor Variances

The Committee of Adjustment (CofA) is an independent quasi-judicial administrative tribunal that makes decisions under the Planning Act on applications for minor variance, consent, and permissions to extend or enlarge legal non-conforming uses.

The Planning Act grants authority to Municipal Councils to appoint committees to approve minor variance applications. Section 45 of the Planning Act permits the Committee of Adjustment to make decisions on minor variances from the Zoning By-law and to grant permissions for altering or changing a lawful non-conforming use of land, buildings or structures. The Committee of Adjustment has no role in reviewing or approving development proposals that comply with the applicable zoning by-law(s).

When a project or proposal does not fully comply with all zoning regulations, the proponent may apply to the Committee of Adjustment for a minor variance. Most minor variance applications reflect a situation where a project generally meets zoning regulations, but has contextually minor deviations from specific standards. The large majority of minor variance applications are for small-scale residential projects in Toronto's neighbourhoods. The CofA reviews approximately 3,000 applications annually. The most common variances requested are with respect to floor area, side yard setbacks, main wall height, and lot coverage. Generally, fewer than 10% of these applications request variances impacting landscaping or soft landscaping.

Current Process for Reviewing Minor Variance Applications

The three main divisions involved in the coordination and review of minor variance applications are Toronto Building, City Planning and Development Review. City Planning oversees the overall administration and coordination of the CofA process. Toronto Building is responsible for the intake of all minor variance applications and prepares zoning reviews prior to most applications that determine the required variances. Development Review staff assess applications against relevant City policies, standards and guidelines, and Toronto Water is engaged if significant deviations or issues are identified.

COMMENTS

Future Improvements to the Committee of Adjustment Process

Staff recognize that there are opportunities to enhance and strengthen the minor variance application review process, such as through targeted education for CofA panel members and improved reviewing processes for staff. City Planning and Development Review are leading a broader initiative to improve CofA service delivery, which includes the development of a CofA application streaming model over the coming year. This application streaming model will help to outline review streams to expedite review on applications in consultation with City Divisions (including Toronto Water) and the general public and offers an opportunity to review existing application requirements and review processes.

Through this work, City Planning and Development Review will continue to collaborate with Toronto Water to implement any process and review improvements needed to ensure stormwater management policies are consistently addressed through the CofA process. Additionally, as part of the existing and on-going professional development program for CofA panel members, Toronto Water will participate in training sessions to provide an overview of stormwater management related policies and practices relevant to the minor variance review.

CONTACT

Eleanor McAteer, Director, Water Infrastructure Management, Toronto Water, 416-397-4631, Eleanor.McAteer@toronto.ca

Kurtis Elton, Manager, Policy Development, Toronto Water, 647-267-2832, Kurtis.Elton@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Lou Di Gironimo
General Manager, Toronto Water