



# Toronto Planning Review Panel

## Summary of Results from the Toronto Planning Review Panel

Meeting held September 10, 2016

Topic Reviewed: The Neighbourhood Design Guidelines Project

### Background: About the Toronto Planning Review Panel

The Planning Review Panel is a representative group of Torontonians, made up of 28 randomly selected panelists. Panelists have been asked by the Chief Planner, Jennifer Keesmaat, to work together over the course of two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on major planning initiatives. Panelists are tasked with helping to ensure that initiatives are well-aligned with the values and priorities of all Torontonians.

In the fall of 2015, 12,000 randomly selected Toronto households received a letter in the mail from the City Planning Division inviting them to volunteer to become a Panelist. Over 500 Torontonians applied, and 28 were randomly selected to represent the city. Panelists were selected using a civic lottery, a made-in-Toronto method that is used to convene Citizen Panels. This method offers strong demographic diversity and ensures broad representation of the population as a whole. In this case, the civic lottery ensured proportionate representation of Toronto with regard to geography, age, gender, household tenure, and visible minority status, and guaranteed the inclusion of at least one Aboriginal member.

During the fall of 2015, Panel members each dedicated 40 hours to an orientation program that was held over the course of four Saturdays. During that time, they heard from seventeen guest speakers who introduced them not only to the tools of City Planning, but also to the trends shaping Toronto's economy, housing stock, demographics, built form, public realm, transportation system, parkland, and natural environment. They also penned their "Guiding Document" – a report that covers their recommended principles and priorities for planning the city.

Over the course of their two year term, members will meet 12 times to provide input to the Planning Division with regards to specific initiatives and decisions:

- In January, 2016, members published recommendations on City Planning's draft townhouse and low-rise apartment guidelines;
- In April, 2016, members published recommendations on The City's Complete Streets Guidelines & the engagement strategy for Phase 2 of the TOCore Study;
- In May, 2016, members published recommendations on the Parks and Recreation Division's Facilities Master Plan, and City Planning's 'Growing Up' Study.

Reports and additional information about the Planning Review Panel can be found at: [www.toronto.ca/planning/tprp](http://www.toronto.ca/planning/tprp)



## About the September 10, 2016, Meeting of the Planning Review Panel

On September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the Panel met to provide input on the Neighbourhood Urban Design Guidelines Project, which is producing a template and “how to” manual so that residents can develop Neighbourhood Urban Design Guidelines (NUDGs) specific to their neighbourhoods.

Members also heard a short presentation and offered brief remarks concerning the City’s Ravine Strategy

All learning materials shared with the Panel can be accessed by visiting [www.toronto.ca/planning/tp rp](http://www.toronto.ca/planning/tp rp), and clicking on “Learn with the Panel”.

Members began the day hearing presentations on the Neighbourhood Urban Design Guidelines Project from Shawna Bowen, Urban Designer with Toronto City Planning, and Shonda Wang, Lead Urban Designer at SvN Planning and Architecture Consultants, the consultant team working with City staff. Geoff Kettel, Co-Chair of the Federation of North Toronto Residents’ Associations (FoNTRA) was also invited to share his perspectives with the members of the Panel. Before beginning their deliberations, members were able to ask all three speakers questions about the NUDG Project. All of the learning materials shared with the Panel are available at [www.toronto.ca/planning/tp rp](http://www.toronto.ca/planning/tp rp) under “Learn with the Panel”.

Members of the Panel were asked to complete two activities.

**Activity 1** focused on the elements of building and landscape that were to be included in the NUDGs. First, members were asked to examine draft text from the most recent version of the guideline manual. The text included descriptions of each of the 17 elements of building and landscape design that staff had identified as important to the physical character of Toronto’s neighbourhoods. The text also provided a City-wide intent for each element of building and landscape design — a general design intent for that element that would apply to all neighbourhoods. Members were asked to work in small groups to answer:

- whether each description was clear and accessible for non-specialists;
- whether each intent appropriately described the importance of that element to Toronto’s various neighbourhoods, and;
- to identify any missing elements of building and landscape design that were important to the physical character of Toronto’s neighbourhoods.

A plenary discussion then helped identify common conclusions from this first activity.



## Toronto Planning Review Panel

**Activity 2** focused on the process through which Guidelines were to be developed. Members were asked:

“The NUDG template is meant to be used by interested groups of local residents to develop urban design guidelines for their neighbourhood. How would you suggest local residents involve fellow community members in this process? Consider who should be involved, how that should occur, and how differences of opinion can potentially be resolved.”

Members worked in small groups and then in plenary to identify a common response to this question.

To end the day, members welcomed Jane Welsh, Project Manager from Toronto City Planning, and Wendy Strickland, Natural Environment Specialist, Parks Forestry & Recreation, who provided an update on the Toronto Ravine Strategy. Members provided Jane and Wendy with brief feedback regarding the Ravine Strategy before they adjourned.

The logo for the Toronto Planning Review Panel features a series of overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of blue, green, and yellow. The text "Toronto Planning Review Panel" is centered over these shapes in a dark, sans-serif font.

# Toronto Planning Review Panel



## Summary of Results

The results of the Panel's discussion are summarized below. Following the meeting, this summary was drafted by the Panel's support staff based on documentation from the meeting and circulated to panelists for edits and to approve that this summary reflects the broad consensus that the Panel was able to achieve during their meeting. Panelists were also welcome to submit additional, individual commentary for inclusion in this summary – this individual commentary is included, under the names of individual panel panelists, in the subsequent section.

## Clarity of Descriptions of Elements of Building and Landscape Design in the Draft NUDGs

When the Panel examined the draft descriptions of each element, they broadly agreed that:

- Most descriptions were not sufficiently clear to be generally accessible to Toronto residents. They could be understood with some effort, but risked being misinterpreted or creating an unnecessary impediment to resident understanding of the Design Guideline Manual.
- Descriptions included too much jargon and technical language used, which lead to confusion and that it was often possible to replace technical terms with simple, common language.
- Many definitions contained sentences that were too long and shorter sentences could be used. A more consistent structure of sentences should be used for all descriptions, for ease of review.
- Definitions from the zoning bylaw should not be used as the central component of the description. This technical language, though precise and accurate, often makes simple concepts confusing for the lay reader. For example, the definition of "building depth" was taken directly from the planning bylaw and was one of the most unclear element descriptions. Some panelists suggested that relevant zoning bylaws be placed in a callout box under each definition to allow users to access the bylaw language if needed.
- Some technical terms might need to be used, if they were repeated frequently across building elements. If so, one or more "Common Terms" glossaries should be provided in each introductory section in order to help users familiarize themselves with these essential technical terms. However, even with the addition of a glossary, technical language should be used sparingly, and only when absolutely necessary.

# Toronto Planning Review Panel

- Staff are correct and should be encouraged to include images and diagrams with each definition, but as a complement, not a replacement for, clear and simple language.
- Staff should include lists of common examples of that element where appropriate to help explain concepts. Examples were often seen as more helpful than abstract definitions, and might therefore be better placed at the beginning of descriptions before moving to abstract, precise definitions.
- Some members suggested important aspects of these design elements were missing from the descriptions:
  - a. Some members suggested that the description of “Trees” should include reference to environmental benefits for the neighbourhood, such as supporting birds and cleaning the air, as an aspect of neighbourhood physical character.
  - b. Some members suggested that the description of “Parking and Driveways” should include reference to paving materials as an aspect of neighbourhood physical character, and reference the bylaw concerning allowable parking.
  - c. Some members suggested that the description of “Windows” should include reference to the size of windows as an aspect of neighbourhood physical character.
  - d. Some members suggested that the description “Front-yard Landscape” should include reference to fencing; front yard seating; lawns, street-grade curbs, and gardens as aspects of neighbourhood physical character.

## **Additional Elements of Building and Landscape Design that should be included in the NUDGs**

When the Panel examined whether there were additional building and landscape elements that they considered important to the character of Toronto neighbourhoods but were not included in the 17 they were presented, they suggested that:

- The physical character of some neighbourhoods is influenced significantly by how properties interact with shared public laneways;
- The physical character of some neighbourhoods is influenced significantly by rear porches and rear entrance grade, especially as it affects shared backyard experience;
- The physical character of some neighbourhoods is influenced significantly by seasonal and storage structures in front and back yards.

# Toronto Planning Review Panel

## Review of citywide Intents for each Element of Building and Landscape Design in the Draft NUDGs

When the Panel examined the citywide intent for each element, they broadly agreed that:

- Overall, the language used in the intents was clearer than the definitions. In fact, they sometimes did a better job describing the element than the descriptions themselves;
- A blanket focus on preserving the physical character of neighbourhoods may sometimes be problematic. Efforts to 'preserve physical character' might be a way for residents to discourage changes that may ultimately improve the neighbourhood and the city. Four examples were brought forward:
  - Some members worried that long-time residents might use 'preserving physical character' as a way to discourage new residents from other cultures from expressing their identities through changes to physical character that better reflect the neighbourhood's present. Panelists generally felt this sort of evolution was a hallmark of Toronto that should be allowed for, while still respecting the local cultural history.
  - A few members noted that the Indigenous history of neighbourhoods is not well-reflected in current physical character but deserves to be reflected to a greater extent. NUDGs should not create limitations on such efforts.
  - Many members noted the importance of having houses and landscapes designed with environmental impact in mind, and that these improvements (solar panels, for example) may not be in keeping with the physical character of the neighbourhood. Members suggested that it is important for NUDGs not to end up discouraging environmental improvements.
  - A few members noted that 'preserving physical character' could lead to new houses simply being designed to resemble old ones, which would prevent architecture from progressing in ways that are beneficial for the neighbourhood and the city.
- Intent descriptions frequently included reference to 'compatibility' and 'harmony' with the existing neighbourhood; more should be included about what 'compatibility' and 'harmony' meant in practice for these elements – these words were seen as open to differing interpretations.
- Intents should seek to describe how the elements impact how people are able to interact with or feel about the shared public space. Words like 'safe', 'intimate', 'private', 'public', 'accessible', 'shared', 'diverse', 'open', 'visible' and 'connected' were encouraged as ways to more explicitly reference the human

# Toronto Planning Review Panel

- experience of neighbourhoods.
- Certain intents were felt by some members to be missing important components:
    - i. Some members suggested the intent for “Building Depth” include reference to its contribution to the neighbour’s backyard experience
    - ii. Some members suggested the intent for “Trees” include reference to their contribution to safety; to ecosystem health through the diversity of trees; and to shade & cooling.
    - iii. Some members suggested the intent for “Front yard Landscape” & “Parking and Driveways” include reference to how they contribute to safety and crime prevention through environmental design and to storm-water management.
    - iv. Some members suggested the intents for “Height” & “Setbacks” include reference to how they contribute to the preservation of views of historical and natural settings.
    - v. Some members suggested the intent for “Materiality” should include reference to how materials will age over time, not just how they will look in the near future.
    - vi. Some members suggested the intents for various elements should provide greater flexibility for environmental upgrades (for example, allowing solar panels, greywater systems, etc.).
    - vii. Some members felt the intent for ‘architectural styles’ was confusing. Many agreed that a diversity of complementary architecture in neighbourhoods is beneficial, and so were unclear as to why there was a need to reference style, when the other elements provide opportunity to encourage high quality, complementary design.

## **Suggestions regarding how local residents should involve fellow community members in developing NUDGs.**

When the panel considered the process by which NUDGs should be developed, they broadly agreed that:

- The NUDG process needs to make clear that NUDGs are not meant to reflect how people *want* their community to change, since disagreements are likely. Instead, NUDGs should reflect those elements of established character for a neighbourhood that are widely seen as worth preserving.
- The role and impact of NUDGs must be clarified to ensure those who invest time in creating them are not disappointed by their ultimate impact; community education on the NUDGs process and contents is very important before any deliberation process begins in order to minimize conflict.

# Toronto Planning Review Panel

- A broad range of voices must be included during NUDGs consultations. This could be achieved by:
  - Distributing information about NUDGs and related meetings in different languages and in different locations;
  - Providing regular updates throughout the NUDGs consultation process for those unable to attend meetings;
  - Going to where groups and gatherings already exist to spread information about NUDGs and gather perspectives;
  - Panelists expressed concern about ensuring the marginalised and less powerful are included in NUDGs consultations. Some panelists suggested using a neutral third party to facilitate the engagement process to help ensure representation of marginalised populations.
- The manual should include tools and advice about how to collect information and hold consultations, and a list of free services that can help a neighbourhood with NUDGs creation.
- Panelists generally agreed that neighbourhoods need additional guidance during the NUDGs process, and suggested that access to technical design expertise and process expertise should be facilitated by City staff. Funding grants for communities without the resources to fund NUDG development should be considered.
- Regular reviews of all NUDGs should be mandated.

Panelists did not find consensus concerning a number of items:

- Though they agreed that the role of City Councillors in the NUDGs process should be defined, consensus could not be reached regarding the exact role Councillors should fill. Some panelists suggest councillors be heavily involved in the process while others suggested Councillors not be involved at all.
- Panelists did not come to a clear conclusion on which groups should be involved in leading the NUDG process in a community. Some panelists suggested Councillors or Neighbourhood Associations could lead the NUDGs process. Some Panelists were concerned that if a particular group led the NUDGs process, the process may over-represent certain perspectives.
- Panelists did not reach a consensus about how short-term renters, people who reside outside of the neighbourhood, or homebuilders should be able to participate in the NUDGs process. Some panelists saw an outside voice as helpful in identifying welcoming and unwelcoming aspects of the neighbourhood, or for providing expert information that could be valuable for deliberations. Other Panelists felt these voices may introduce special-interest biases to the process.

# Toronto Planning Review Panel

## QUICK CONSULTATION: RAVINE STRATEGY

After the presentation from City Staff, members shared the following feedback in plenary:

- Information about ravines and natural spaces in the city should be promoted more, with the goal of making them common knowledge.
- Children should be educated about the importance of ravines, potentially through stronger bonds between City staff and educational institutions. This is an straightforward and immediate opportunity to help young people understand the important benefits of the natural places; the damage that the natural world is experiencing due to human activity, and their role in protecting these environments.
- The Tree Guide Book handed out by presenters was both useful and interesting, and the City should share it widely.
- The needs of people with different abilities should be addressed in the Ravine Strategy.
- Rules surrounding littering and dogs in ravines should be displayed more prominently and enforced more vigorously. Staff should also coordinate with police and others to address public safety issues that arise in the ravines.

## Additional Individual Commentary from Members

After reviewing and approving the Panel's summary of input, members had the option to submit additional, individual commentary for inclusion in this summary.

### Al Eslami

I'd like to add four points:

- I believe demographic changes (especially the arrival of new immigrant groups) in a neighbourhood can be used to guide whether changes to physical characteristics are 'compatible' with the neighbourhood's "character." In other words, demographic change can be used to get a measure of how much change is acceptable. This helps to clarify the issue of "stability versus stasis" – stability to the existing population may feel like stasis to the new population, and vice versa. Also, the motto of "stable but not static" should not be interpreted so broadly, in the name of economic dynamism and fighting stasis, as to exclude the things that disadvantaged and disenfranchised strata want to protect about their neighbourhoods.
- It is possible to interpret "compatibility with physical character" as being about compatibility with the socioeconomic class character of a neighbourhood. There are "poor" neighbourhoods, lower-middle-class neighbourhoods, and so

## Toronto Planning Review Panel

on. When people say a change is incompatible with the character of a neighbourhood, a part of what they may mean is that it clashes with its socioeconomic class character. So, the criterion of “compatibility” can have a reactionary nature – it can be used to preserve a neighbourhood’s position within the city’s class hierarchy. This is problematic and therefore ‘compatibility’ should be questioned and not so easily taken for granted as a commonsensical and purely “scientific” standard.

- When a community seeks advice about a proposed change in the neighbourhood, it should have access to advisers from the same socioeconomic class as itself. An adviser from a higher socioeconomic class might be more interested, perhaps unconsciously, in keeping the community “in its place” than in helping it raise itself up.
- The question of how to manage the process of development of new neighbourhoods is also a thorny issue. I am referring to development of areas that were industrial in the past and are now gradually becoming new neighbourhoods. Who decides, and on the basis of what criteria, what characteristics those new neighbourhoods should have? Will they have characteristics of their own, or will developers have a free hand to develop them as they wish? Specifically, will the criterion of affordability govern those developments? The slogan of “quality improvement” should not lead to development of unaffordable housing projects. Based on the reading material that was made available to the Panel, it appears that those areas might simply be treated as extensions of existing neighbourhoods, and at the same time developers might be allowed to decide what they want to do with them. So, there may be a need to empower members of the existing neighbourhood to play a larger role in such developments.