

Re: Housing Now

Summary of Advice from the Planning Review Panel, June 15, 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: Housing Now

Planning Division staff visited the Panel to consult on the preliminary vision for the first four sites of the Housing Now affordable housing strategy. Staff asked the Panel for their reflections on whether current plans for one of the sites, Wilson Heights, strikes an appropriate balance between competing priorities, as well as what planning elements and public benefits the City should extend across all eleven Housing Now sites.

- The Panel largely approved of the current site plan for Wilson Heights and particularly appreciated the provision of green space and community space. They felt that a crucial priority is to maximize the amount of available affordable housing while still providing a functional, complete community with a mix of amenities. They also specifically noted the importance of exploring how to appropriately accommodate the site's current use as commuter parking, given the benefits of park-and-ride to the broader city.
 - However, the Panel acknowledged there are trade-offs in providing on-site amenities and maximizing the amount of affordable housing. They felt that further contextual analysis of the surrounding area would be required to be able to determine what amenities (such as parking) should be accommodated on site vs nearby.
 - Panelists also specifically noted the importance of ensuring flexibility in the design of the site to accommodate as-of-yet unknown future needs.
- Panelists agreed that connectivity, flexibility, and sustainability are key public benefits that should be maximized across all 11 Housing Now sites. They also suggested that while it may be outside of the immediate scope of this project team, that the City needs to consider how to move people along the housing spectrum when their ability to afford market rent changes, in order to maximize the benefits of these affordable units to as many people as possible.

Detailed Summary

Daniel Woolfson and Paul Farish from the City Planning Division presented to the Panel about Housing Now, the City's new housing strategy to build new mixed-income, mixed-use, transit-oriented residential communities on underutilized public lands with a focus on affordable housing and purpose-built rental.

The Housing Now team presented both the overall strategy as well as a detailed case study on one of the sites: Wilson Heights, located at Wilson and Allen Road. The site is currently a parking lot adjacent to Wilson Station and is used by commuters. The project team presented their proposed plans for the site, and used the case study to highlight some of the overall challenges and unanswered questions in the broader Housing Now project.

The Panel was asked to explore two questions related to Wilson Heights:

- Whether the current plans for Wilson Heights strike the right balance between competing priorities, and
- How the current plans for Wilson Heights could better balance between those competing priorities.

After exploring the Wilson Heights case study, the team also asked the Panel to discuss the Housing Now strategy more widely:

- Are there any public benefits that you agree are especially important for the City to achieve when designing and developing the 11 Housing Now sites?
- Are there any planning or design elements that you agree are especially important for the City to include when designing and developing each of the 11 Housing Now sites?

Discussion: Wilson Heights

The Panel generally agreed on the following recommendations regarding the Wilson Heights site:

1. **Panelists supported the proposal's balance of affordable housing, parkland, and a building dedicated to some kind of community space such as a rec centre or daycare, because they thought it would largely help to create a pleasant, functional, and complete community.** That said, the Panel noted they could not fully assess whether the proposed community would have the right balance of amenities, since they lacked information about necessities and amenities in the surrounding areas, such as schools and libraries.
2. **The Panel agreed that affordable housing be the number one priority of this site, though they** acknowledged there are trade-offs in providing on-site amenities and maximizing the amount of affordable housing. There was discussion about which amenities would appropriately subsidize the affordable housing on-site, as well as what amenities could possibly be sacrificed in order to provide more housing. However, Panelists didn't have enough context about the broader neighbourhood to be able to provide advice on these tradeoffs. There was, overall, an expressed need to consider the relative value of office space, retail, and owned spaces in comparison to making the space available for other amenities or community uses. They felt that further contextual analysis of the surrounding area would be required to be able to determine the right balance of priorities.
3. **Panelists agreed it is important to try to accommodate the current users of the site (commuters who are parking and riding the subway) while also prioritizing new local residents.** Panelists acknowledged they were working without full context on what might be

possible in the broader community in terms of providing new commuter parking for Wilson Station. They suggested exploring solutions that enable both commuters and current residents to park on the site. Some suggested the idea of an underground parking structure or an above-ground structure alongside or in place of the current TTC bus lane, and that it be located away from the residential parts of the neighbourhood. Some panelists felt that commuter parking should be accommodated entirely off-site, and residents given priority for parking.

- a. **Panelists were also concerned about traffic flow in the community, especially if commuter parking were to continue to be offered.** The current site plan only has one exit to the parkade, which will create a backup at rush hour and might lead to safety issues. Some Panelists suggested setting sidewalks further back from main streets, and making all the streets one-way.
 - b. Some Panelists also suggested that noise mitigation strategies be considered given the proximity to the TTC bus lane.
4. **Some Panelists also questioned the inclusion of condos on the site,** and wondered whether the money that might come from selling these units could be made elsewhere – such as rent from retail space – and which could be used to support more affordable units or even some deeply affordable units (which are otherwise not part of the plan at Wilson Heights).
 5. **Panelists discussed that the site should be built with the future in mind,** especially given that the City of Toronto’s leases on these sites is 99 years. Panelists discussed the importance of flexibility in the design so that the site could adapt to future needs.

In addition to this core advice, some Panelists had other reactions to the proposal at Wilson Heights which the Panel did not reach agreement on. This advice included:

6. Providing inventive, communal housing for those under 25 and seniors, as has been explored in some recent intergenerational home sharing programs;
7. Including specific eco-friendly measures, such as green rooftops to reduce energy costs;
8. Providing a large grocery store since the area seems to be a ‘food desert’;
9. Providing electric vehicle charging stations in whatever parking structure is constructed.

Discussion: 11 Housing Now Sites

Following the Wilson Heights conversation, the Panel discussed more broadly what public benefits and planning elements should be extended to all of the Housing Now sites.

Connectivity

The Panel agreed that each of the Housing Now developments should be well-connected to the rest of the city through public transit and active transportation infrastructure like cycling paths and walkways. The planners should also ensure that each community is well-connected to the immediate

surrounding neighbourhood so that the sites feel well-integrated and the public spaces and amenities are used widely to increase their benefit to the broader public.

Sustainability

Panelists agreed that each development should keep sustainability and environmental concerns at the forefront. Panelists identified design elements that might achieve this public benefit, including solar water heating, power and water filtration systems localized in and specific to each development, electric car charging stations, rooftop gardens, and energy-conserving windows.

Flexibility for the Future

There was a broad agreement that all sites need to be built with future use in mind. Discussions on this theme included mentions of forward-thinking, data-driven design elements that will allow for the community to adapt and change over time. Panelists mentioned modular building techniques that would allow the spaces to change for future use. The Panel also discussed the need for developers to make the neighbourhoods future-proof to allow for technological advances, while maintaining long-term overall affordability.

Units for Those in Need

Panelists emphasized the need for the City to introduce policies or guidelines that maximize the benefits of affordable housing to those most in need. This is specifically to address the issue of people continuing to live in affordable units after it might be possible for them to afford market rent. Panelists suggested that the units should be functional but not luxurious so that people who would be motivated to move along the housing spectrum if they are able. Some Panelists also proposed regular assessments of residents' continued eligibility for affordable units. Many Panelists were also cautious to note that they don't want to rush or push people out of affordable units without taking their circumstances into account.

Some Panelists also suggested creating requirements that prevent foreign buyers from purchasing units and leaving them vacant, and preventing owners or renters from using their units as short-term rentals.

Panelists also discussed additional ideas and general recommendations. Though the Panel did not reach agreement on any of these recommendations as being essential, additions included:

- Ensure affordable and market rental units are essentially indistinguishable to ensure that there is no stigmatization of the affordable units;
- Provide amenities nearby that allow for multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary exercise and recreation;
- Include some kind of outdoors space on all sites, though the type of space could be community-dependent; .
- Provide pet-friendly units and guidelines; and
- Design for accessibility, such as cross-walks with audible noise signals.