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Achieving Urban Intensification in Winnipeg

After two years of research and analysis, the City of Winnipeg has recently released its new official plan, *Our Winnipeg*. The 20-year growth strategy identifies several corridors and centres which (due to transit, location, and other factors) are ripe for intensification. However, the document, although visionary, has yet to identify specific policy and planning tools with which to encourage and implement this intensification strategy. Moreover, although there has been much written about intensification (the development of a property, site, or area at a higher density than currently exists, typically to increase population densities) in larger urban centres in Canada (such as Vancouver and Toronto), very little has been written about mid-sized, slower growth cities like Winnipeg. This paper looks at specific policy and planning tools which will enable the intensification vision to be implemented. First, it briefly touches on the benefits of urban intensification, the advantages Winnipeg has, and the challenges it faces. Second, it outlines a list of short and long term initiatives that can help Winnipeg meet its urban intensification objectives.

The Benefits of Urban Intensification

Urban intensification has several benefits related to the three branches of sustainability. Environmentally, farmland is preserved and contaminated brownfield sites can be adaptively reused. The walkability and transit

efficiency that intensification promotes can also play a significant role in lowering greenhouse gas emissions. Economically, governments can increase their property tax base without having to extend new infrastructure. Furthermore, the critical mass that increasing population density creates ensures that local retail, schools and community facilities remain viable. And socially, the walkability that increased density enables can enhance mobility and improve health outcomes. Moreover, safety is increased because more “eyes on the street” at all hours help deter would-be criminals.

Current Incentives, Advantages and Potential Locations

There are currently several incentives in place that promote urban intensification, particularly in the downtown. These include tax increment financing grants to downtown residential developers, infill tax credits, a secondary suite program, and various heritage redevelopment grants and loans. Besides these incentives, there are several other factors which bode well for intensification in Winnipeg. Economically, we’ve seen rising home prices (making multi-family buildings more competitive), and the steady growth of our diverse economy. Demographically, we’ve experienced renewed population growth (primarily through immigration), and shifting preferences – students, young professionals and empty

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nesters are finding the “condo lifestyle” more appealing. And physically, Winnipeg is blessed with existing town centres (due to our amalgamation history) and an abundance of redevelopable heritage properties. Moreover, we were fortunate that our major arterials were untouched by freeway development, leaving potential corridors and nodes ripe for intensification.

Intensification should be targeted for areas where it is appropriate and feasible, which generally include nodes, corridors and centres. Nodes are hubs of activity, which often feature a mix of uses, several transit options, and higher densities. Examples of nodes with potential for intensification include the intersection of Dakota and St. Mary’s, as well as Confusion Corner. Corridors ripe for intensification are generally found along our major arterials – imagine Selkirk, Ellice or St. Anne’s becoming as vibrant as Osborne or Corydon in a few decades. Finally, major regional centres (like Garden City Shopping Centre or St Vital Mall) have plenty of potential for intensification – they are well served by transit, have a variety of uses within close proximity, and have plenty of developable land (temporarily being used as surface parking, of course).

What are the Challenges and Barriers to Intensification?

Despite the aforementioned advantages in Winnipeg, there are still several challenges and barriers to urban intensification in slower-growing, mid-sized cities. Economically, developers often find intensification projects less profitable – they’re riskier, harder to finance, and more expensive (due to land assembly costs and higher land prices). Housing prices are still relatively cheap, making condos or rentals less appealing to many. In terms of policy and planning, greenfield developments on the city’s fringe (where much land has been opened up for development) are almost always easier build than infill. Moreover, regulations and standards regarding street widths, turning radii, and building setbacks can also prove challenging for intensification projects in mature neighbourhoods. Politically, intensification almost always faces opposition from existing residents. Popular NIMBY worries include an increase of traffic and crime, and a decrease in property values, parking spaces, and open space. City councillors are invariably in a tough position – will they vote for a project that they personally support, but risk angering vocal residents (and voters)? Lastly, there are some physical barriers. Short commute times negate the impetus to live closer to the core; there is an abundance of developable land in every quadrant

of the city; and, many Winnipeggers will always refuse to walk or bus in our extreme climate.

What are the Potential Implementation Tools?

The following section lays out potential tools that the City (and to a lesser extent, the Province) can use to promote urban intensification. These implementation tools were developed through extensive policy and literature reviews, case study analysis, and interviews with key informants (including planners, developers, politicians, and professors).

Set Clear Intensification Targets

The language of *Our Winnipeg* is very idealistic: It proposes to support urban design principles, encourage mixed-use development, and promote sustainability. However, these commendable goals are very vague, and lack clear implementation strategies and targets. The City should establish a set of clear targets, in terms of how and when they will meet these objectives. In Ontario, the *Places to Grow Plan* (the growth plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe) is very specific in its targets – for example, it mandates that 40% of all new development must be within the built-up area by 2015. Likewise, Calgary’s Municipal Development Plan not only has specific targets (in regards to density, transit mode split, and land-use mix), but also has a system of metrics to measure and monitor progress.

Proactively Zone for Higher Densities along Corridors

Proactive zoning is the act of rezoning an existing area in terms of what is desired, rather than what exists now. Winnipeg’s planning department may find success by up-zoning along corridors and targeted centres. For example, along certain segments of major thoroughfares like Pembina Highway (the site of a future rapid transit corridor), zoning currently permits primarily low-storey buildings, strip malls with ample surface parking, and various other low density uses. If the zoning were to allow mixed-use, mid-rise residential as-of-right, a gradual transformation of the corridor could eventually take place. Developers would appreciate the certainty, as well as the time and money saved, due to the fact that they would be spared lengthy public hearings or costly rezoning processes. The concept has seen success along Edmonton’s 109th Street corridor.

Implement a System of Development Charges

Development charges are typically collected by municipalities (from developers) to help cover the offsite capital costs necessitated by the new development. Levied in various ways (e.g. per lot, per housing unit, per acreage), they often cover soft infrastructure costs as well, including community centres, libraries, parks, and fire stations. While Winnipeg does institute a system of development and servicing agreements (which are negotiated between developers and the city), they are used specifically to cover hard costs, such as on-site sewers, water and roads. However, these do not account for the full costs of extending infrastructure (especially on greenfield sites), nor the long-term costs associated with maintenance. The City of Winnipeg could implement area-specific development charges in order to promote higher density development within existing areas. On lower density developments with higher per-capita infrastructure costs, the City could require higher development charges. On intensification type developments, with higher densities, these charges could be lowered or even waived outright. The goal is not to punish developers, who play a crucial role in growth of our city, but to help level the playing field between greenfield and infill development.

Institute Parking Reforms

First, the City (through its zoning bylaw) could relax parking requirements in areas targeted for intensification (namely the centres and corridors outlined in *Our Winnipeg*). This approach has already been successful in the historic Exchange District, where most parking requirements have been removed (as an abundance of surface and on-street parking already exists). Second, in areas where multiple projects are proposed, the City could develop district parking structures. Prominent in Calgary, district parking features a single garage (or other parking structure) which is shared by multiple nearby buildings, thus creating economies of scale. Lastly, for major corridors and centres, the City should relegate parking to the back of buildings, rather than adjacent to the sidewalk (where it is often prominently featured). This strategy would enable buildings to front the sidewalk, which is consistent with the pedestrian friendly principles outlined in Winnipeg's *Transit Oriented Development Handbook*. However, until rapid transit provides a viable alternative to the automobile, parking will remain a major factor in most intensification projects.

Establish a Regional Growth Management Plan

The idea of a growth boundary is very controversial in Winnipeg for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most important being that there is no consensus on whether or not one exists. Some argue that there is no true growth boundary, and that greenfield development faces little resistance from the City and its planning department. Others have stated that Winnipeg has a very stringent growth boundary, and that developers wanting to open up new lands face a lengthy process. Opponents of a growth boundary argue that greenfield development is what the majority of buyers want, and by limiting the market, development would flee to the municipalities that border Winnipeg. Then, not only would the city have lost development, but the tax revenues that come with it. Proponents, however, argue that low density developments on the fringes are unsustainable, due to the higher costs of servicing and infrastructure. Moreover, they create increased congestion, due to the reliance on the automobile (as the critical mass necessary for efficient transit is not present). Finally, encouraging intensification can be very challenging when an abundance of developable land is available on the fringes.

A solution would be for the Province to take on a greater role in Capital Region planning. As an example, the Province of Ontario takes an active role in regional planning, to ensure appropriate growth patterns. If there was the political will, a provincially mandated regional growth management plan would prevent leapfrog development in Winnipeg's Capital Region. Moreover, the City could simply stop extending services and infrastructure to the fringes (or at least charge developers the true cost of these extensions), which would limit sprawl right away. In that case, what may be needed is an accompanying infrastructure strategy, where the city helps manage and guide growth through strategic capital budget investments (i.e. rapid transit corridors or sewer upgrades on infill parcels).

Mount a Public Education and Engagement Campaign

Community opposition has been almost universally stated as the main barrier to intensification projects. Therefore, a City-led campaign to engage and educate the public is crucial, in order to build consensus about where, how, and to what extent intensification should take place in Winnipeg's communities. Winnipeg could offer a "Planning Academy" similar to Edmonton's, whereby residents learn how to engage with the planning process. The City may also want to

develop a Residential Intensification Guide like that used in Hamilton, which provides “residents with general information about residential intensification, insight into how intensification projects are reviewed, and the design considerations that help to successfully incorporate intensification projects into neighbourhoods”. And while it is unreasonable to expect all residents to get behind intensification, the guide would help Winnipeggers understand the importance of intensification, give examples of different densities, and contain many visuals to dispel misconceptions. Lastly, the City of Winnipeg could engage the community at the outset of any intensification project. Rather than residents feeling alienated by “done deals”, they would work with developers and city staff to come up with appropriate proposals. Residents learn about the economic realities that projects face, while developers learn about community aspirations.

Conclusion

After examining the arguments put forth in this paper, several things should be clear. First, intensification is indeed a feasible strategy to manage Winnipeg’s continued growth. Second, Winnipeg does have several policies, planning tools, and economic incentives to promote urban intensification, although there are still several economic, policy, socio-political, and physical barriers to intensification, which must be overcome. Finally, there are several implementation tools which should be enacted in concert to achieve the maximum impact in terms of intensification. As Winnipeg continues its steady growth, intensification has the potential to play a significant role in making our city attractive, vibrant, and most importantly, sustainable.

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