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REYFIELD REDEVELOPMENT

CASE STUDIES

Municipal Project Initiatives

THE THORNHILL SECONDARY PLAN

Markham

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Thornhill Secondary Plan provides guidelines for new development and redevelopment of Markham's Thornhill district, including a partially defunct shopping mall site. Approved by the Town of Markham in 1991, the Secondary Plan was implemented in 1997, following approvals from the Region of York. The Plan was amended in 2002 to provide guidelines for the redevelopment of a failed shopping centre. Thornhill Secondary Plan policies have guided the redevelopment of this site into a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use neighbourhood and helped avert the use of the site for an automobile-dependent big-box store.

BACKGROUND

Located immediately north of Toronto, the Town of Markham is the largest of nine municipalities in York Region. Older portions of the Town are clearly designed around the automobile, with traditional suburban retail, commercial and business parks, and low-density residential neighbourhoods.

The Town, however, has experimented with pedestrian-oriented planning in a variety of new neighbourhoods including Cornell, one of the first developments in Canada to implement the New Urbanist ideas of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk in the U.S.

Markham is an amalgamation of smaller villages, including old Markham Village, Unionville, Thornhill and Milliken. Thornhill is a diverse, mostly built-out area bounded by Yonge Street on the west, the Parkway Belt (an area made up of parkland and Ontario Hydro services lands) on the north, Highway 404 on the east and Steeles Avenue (which separates Markham from the City of Toronto) on the south.

The Thornhill District is approximately 16 square kilometres and its population of 48,000 has been relatively stable over recent years, despite the rapid growth in other parts of Markham. Thornhill represents about 28 per cent of the Town's total population, but this proportion is expected to decline as stronger growth occurs elsewhere in Markham.

A number of community plans had been adopted for parts of the Thornhill District over the 1970s and 1980s. The Town of Markham approved the Thornhill Secondary Plan—the first plan that covered the entire community—in May 1991. The plan was not implemented until 1997, when the Region of York approved it after a lengthy review process.

The Thornhill District is Markham's most developed area. Land in the district is almost completely built up, and for the most part, land-use patterns are well established. There are no greenfield lands in Thornhill, unlike the rest of the municipality, where most development occurs on new sites. All new development in Thornhill therefore takes place through the intensification or redevelopment of existing sites.

The Thornhill District contains a diversity of land uses including commercial, industrial, institution (for example, place of worship), and residential. Thornhill also contains the most diverse housing stock in Markham. While the detached dwelling is the predominant residential type, there is a large proportion of multi-unit dwellings including townhouses and apartments as compared to the rest of the municipality.

The Thornhill Secondary Plan recognizes opportunities for redevelopment and intensification in the district, while at the same time striving to protect the established lower density residential areas. Housing affordability was identified as an issue that could be addressed through the provision of smaller, higher-density dwelling types. The plan also sought to encourage and expand upon the wide range of housing types found in Thornhill.

DESCRIPTION AND GOALS



Figure 1: Map showing the Thornhill Secondary Plan area

In Ontario, secondary plans provide detailed guidance to municipal officials, developers and other stakeholders on the desired direction of development in a given area. It is a policy document that forms part of the OP for the municipality.

The overall goal of the Thornhill Secondary Plan is to reflect the existing diversity of the area and to reinforce the desirable features of the community. The plan has several objectives, including revitalization of commercial and residential areas, enhancing the diversity of housing types, densification of existing residential areas where desirable, improving transportation (for example, local roads and public transportation), enhancing the pedestrian environment, and improving connectivity between neighbourhoods and amenities such as green spaces.

Of these objectives, commercial development and housing are the policies most relevant to greyfield redevelopment.

Commercial policies – The Thornhill district contains a wide variety of commercial uses including traditional street-oriented businesses, shopping centres of various sizes, and office uses. For the most part, the Secondary Plan reinforces existing commercial patterns, but also anticipates change to certain commercial designations.

The plan states that when redevelopment is proposed on lands within commercial designations, the project must respect:

- built form, massing and appearance
- building placement
- vehicular and pedestrian circulation
- connectivity and integration with existing properties and
- landscape and streetscape requirements

The plan designated several retail nodes as “Community Amenity Areas”. The intent of this commercial designation is to provide conveniently distributed zones where residents can meet daily shopping needs, and services and commercial outlets that meet the basic needs of the surrounding population. The Plan permits the use of Community Amenity Areas to be changed. Secondary Plan policies indicate that when considering any proposals for change of land use, improvements to street-orientation, pedestrian comfort and safety, and a high-quality urban design must be encouraged. Community Amenity Areas are also intended to serve as mixed-use centres; medium and high density residential uses are permitted without further amendments to the OP.

Housing policies – Thornhill contains the most diverse housing stock of any area in Markham. Although detached housing is the predominant form in Thornhill, there is proportionately more townhouses and apartments in the district than in the rest of the municipality. Secondary plan policies will reinforce this feature of the neighbourhood by encouraging the creation of a wide range of housing types throughout the planning area, and medium (approximately 35 dwelling units per hectare) and higher density (64 to 96 units per hectare) housing in specific locations.

As the district lacks greenfield land for new low-density housing construction, much of the new housing stock will be through intensification of already urbanized sites. The Town perceives residential intensification as an opportunity to increase housing diversity and to provide housing that is affordable to the range of incomes found in the community.

Residential intensification is intended to occur on a selective basis through the redevelopment of retail nodes (for example, lands designated “Community Amenity Area”) and the intensification of existing residential areas. As all new housing development is to

take the form of higher density infill or redevelopment projects, the plan has several policies related to integrating new projects into the existing urban fabric. The Secondary Plan requires that detailed studies for such areas be prepared, addressing issues such as land use and urban design, traffic and street pattern servicing infrastructure and community services. These considerations were addressed in the 2002 amendment discussed below.

POLICY PROCESS AND STAKEHOLDER RESPONSE

A consulting team worked on the Secondary Plan for two years, including background research, the public consultation process, and drafting of the plan. The team researched areas including urban design, transportation, and municipal servicing.

When the background studies and public consultation sessions were launched in the late 1980s, the Thornhill community was apprehensive about the Secondary Plan. The community perceived the development of a plan for the district as an indication that the neighbourhood would be significantly altered. Because Thornhill is a mostly built-up community, residents feared that growth would be accommodated by intensifying existing residential neighbourhoods. Through a series of public consultation meetings, the Town communicated to the public, with the help of graphics and information pamphlets, that the plan would reinforce the existing character of the neighbourhood, not replace it with a new form of development. After this, community acceptance of the Secondary Plan increased and very few appeals have come out of the plan.

The public was consulted on the development of the site-specific urban design principles that were adopted in 2002 as an amendment to the plan. The developer and Town staff met with the public to communicate the principles that would govern the redevelopment of a greyfield area, called the Olde Thornhill Village (see Section 5). Residents were shown images, including graphics of existing development from other cities that represented the Town's and the developer's vision for the site. The Town communicated design ideas to the public through the uses of graphics. Images illustrated the massing of the project, the provision of green space, and pedestrian access. The massing of new buildings was of particular concern to the public.

COMPLEMENTARY POLICIES

The Thornhill Secondary Plan must correspond to policies outlined in the OPs of Markham and the Region of York. Markham's OP has policies that are compatible with the Secondary Plan, including policies that promote a range of housing types for different age groups and lifestyles, mixed-use and higher density development, and making use of public transportation. The Region of York's OP has broad-brush policies that complement the Secondary Plan including policies that promote building inside existing urban areas, promoting a range of housing types, and concentrating development around public transportation routes.

IMPACTS

Thornhill Secondary Plan policies have guided the redevelopment of a 6.1-hectare site of a failed shopping centre. The project involves the creation of a large-scale infill project that integrates, commercial, office and residential uses. (Please refer to the case study on Thornhill Village for a detailed description.) The project was designated "Community Amenity Area" in the Secondary Plan, which allowed it to change its use from commercial to a mixed-use pedestrian-oriented development.

At the time the Secondary Plan was drafted (in the late 1980s), the shopping centre, located between John Street and Green Lane, was performing adequately. When the Secondary Plan was implemented in 1997, the site was designated "Community Amenity Area" commercial, which permits both commercial and medium- and high-density residential uses on the site. The shopping centre declined in the late 1990s and the Town received an application to redevelop the site as a large-format home improvement store in 2000. The municipality rejected the application because it did not fit the Town's vision for the district and the site. The Secondary Plan clearly stated that redevelopment of the site should respect street orientation, pedestrian comfort, and design qualities of the development, none of which the big-box proposal did. The applicant appealed to the OMB, but the OMB also dismissed the application. The OMB hearing required the Town to develop a clear set of urban design guidelines to direct the future redevelopment of the site.

These guidelines were expressed in the 2002 amendment to the Thornhill Secondary Plan. The purpose of this amendment was to incorporate site-specific urban design principles into the plan in order to explicitly identify the Town's objectives for mixed-use redevelopment of the property. Guidelines relate to human scale development, pedestrian comfort and safety, massing, and architectural integration of the site. For example, the Thornhill Village site must:

- provide a continuous linked system of pedestrian walkways in order to improve connections between new and existing uses on the site, strengthen pedestrian connections between the site and neighbouring properties and provide direct links to pedestrian sidewalks along the John Street and Green Land frontages of the property
- incorporate at least one appropriately scaled, pedestrian accessible landscaped open space area in a central location to serve as a focal element
- break up large expanses of surface parking with landscaping and pedestrian walkways
- use opportunities for redevelopment and intensification to minimize the visual impact and presence of the existing parking structure
- provide a seamless integration and harmonization of the new and existing built form through the use of high quality design, architectural detailing and materials

The main purposes of the guidelines are to ensure the project's compatibility with surrounding land uses and promote pedestrian connectivity between the project and other areas and amenities (for example, community centre, library, swimming pool) in the Thornhill district and the project vicinity.

FINANCIAL ISSUES

The principal costs involved in developing the Thornhill Secondary Plan were those associated with the consulting team that conducted the background studies and public consultation on the Secondary Plan. In current dollars, the municipality paid the team approximately \$150,000. Two members of Town staff

were heavily involved in the drafting and the review of the document. Other Town staff, for example, engineers, were consulted as needed. No costs were incurred by partners outside the municipal corporation in developing or implementing the Secondary Plan.

The Town of Markham does not provide financial incentives to facilitate the implementation of the Thornhill Secondary Plan. Therefore, there are no ongoing program costs to the municipality associated with the redevelopment of commercial areas in Thornhill.

EVALUATION

Thornhill Secondary Plan policies have been instrumental in the redevelopment of the Thornhill Village greyfield redevelopment project. Since its implementation in 1997, the plan has contained infill policies specific to commercial sites, and has generally encouraged residential intensification on appropriate sites.

The urban design guidelines that were adopted in the 2002 amendment to the Secondary Plan have provided the Town with additional policy tools, and clear design guidelines to guide the redevelopment of the Thornhill Village site.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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