

Council earns an 'F' for bylaw dithering
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These past few weeks, I've been dealing with end-of-term projects, papers and exams. Interestingly, so has city council. However, not only are council members nowhere near an "A" grade, they're failing spectacularly.

Case in point is the proposed land use bylaw (or the awful abbreviation P-LUB). While few have heard of it, and fewer still have attempted to actually read this 698-page monster (my eyes started glazing over right around the illustration on "Building Height in Multi-Residential -- Medium Profile Support Commercial (M- X2) District"), it's probably the single most important thing this council has dealt with.

This document shapes the city and how we will grow and develop. It gives administrators and council members power to decide everything from how tall your house can be to whether a slaughterhouse can go in across your lane.

P-LUB has a lot of things wrong with it. At the highest level, it's an example of regulation gone wild. No one will disagree we need planning and standards. However, do we really need 48 separate land-use designations? Or bureaucrats deciding what percentage of the lawn in front of a commercial building needs to be at grade? Or any bylaw that's nearly 700 pages long?

More important, the bylaw is misguided in its philosophy. The very first "key change" in the city's summary document discusses the need to "recognize and protect the character of established neighbourhoods." But what the bylaw fails to recognize is that existing patterns of development in Calgary simply don't work.

My two favourite stats about Calgary are that about 80 per cent of all neighbourhoods lost population in 2005, despite the city's incredible growth that year. Similarly, although the school board claims the need for some 35 new schools, there are fewer students enrolled in the CBE now than there were in 2000.

The Dalhousies and Acadias and Whitehorns of the city need to be attractive places for young families to buy, to revitalize and rejuvenate the neighbourhoods, to keep the schools open and the buses full.

Why, then, does the proposed bylaw want to freeze these neighbourhoods in amber, instead of doing everything possible to ensure that young families want to move into these neighbourhoods, even if it means building a new deck on an older home?

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the new bylaw's approach to secondary suites. I've written in this space before about the need to normalize and regulate these suites, about how they are a major part of solving the affordable housing crisis. So, I was excited to hear that the proposed bylaw did in fact legalize these suites.

Then, I read it.

While the proposed bylaw allows for suites to be put in with a minimum of fuss into new neighbourhoods, it creates an insane system to legalize those suites in existing neighbourhoods. If you'd like your in-laws to have their own kitchen in the basement, or if you'd rather have a tenant with her own entrance than a roommate without one, you would have to go through a farcical process involving a public hearing of council and approval by the full city council.

Then, you'd have to apply for a permit, requiring several more meetings, circulation of information to all your neighbours, and potentially up in front of council again. Oh, and don't bother applying unless you meet a number of ridiculous conditions, including an off-street parking stall for the suite.

Surely, everyone reading this bylaw was in on the joke. Not one of the estimated 30,000 to 80,000 illegal suites (a vastly inflated number in my opinion, by the way) would have gone through this arduous process, and bylaw officers could still keep busy forcing people to remove stoves and kitchen cabinets from their basements.

Nonetheless, and to be fair, the proposed bylaw was a step in the right direction on this issue. A tiny step, a grudging step, a tentative step, a trembling step, but at least a step.

So, what did council members in an election year do? Did they tell administration to go back and examine how well the system in Vancouver, where every single home is zoned for a secondary suite, works? Did they say "Hey, in Toronto, 20 per cent of the rental market is made up of legal secondary suites, and the sky has yet to fall in?" Did they realize they could solve a big chunk of the housing crisis in Calgary with a stroke of the pen?

No, they abandoned any pretense of leadership and decreed there would be no secondary suites in existing neighbourhoods -- except for the illegal, unregulated ones, of course.

That's why they get an F on this end-of-term exam.

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