

**SUBJECT:** **RECOMMENDATION REPORT**  
Evaluation of Markham Design Review Panel Pilot Project

**PREPARED BY:** Ronji Borooah, FRAIC, MCIP, OAA, OPPI, City Architect

**REVIEWED BY:** Ron Blake, MCIP, RPP, Acting Director of Planning and Urban Design

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

- 1) That the report titled "Evaluation of Markham Design Review Panel Pilot Project" be received;
- 2) That Council authorize the permanent establishment of a Markham Design Review Panel to act as an advisory body to assist City staff in design matters during the development approval process of large and complex higher density development in key locations in Regional Centres, Key Development Areas, Local Centres and Corridors, and including higher density development applications that may be identified in other locations by the Director of Planning and Urban Design;
- 3) That Council authorize a maximum annual budget of \$10,000, to be included in the Planning and Urban Design Department Operating Budget for the Design Review Panel, to be funded from development application fees; and further
- 4) That staff be authorized and directed to do all things necessary to give effect to this resolution

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

Not applicable

**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this report is to provide an evaluation of the Markham Design Review Panel Pilot Project, which received Council authorization in Sept 2014, and to provide recommendations to make the Design Review Panel a permanent addition as an advisory component to the development approval process.

**BACKGROUND:****Role of Design Review Panel**

A Design Review Panel (DRP) is an independent body of senior experienced design professionals, acting in an advisory capacity, providing advice to City staff on design matters regarding complex development applications during the Site Plan Approval process. The DRP reports to the Director of Planning and Urban Design (Director).

The DRP does not have any statutory powers. It does not replace any part of the current development approval process, nor the roles of City staff or other stakeholders. Council has the ultimate authority regarding the Site Plan Approval process.

DRPs can help raise the design standard of new development, make new development more compatible with its surroundings and improve the quality of the public realm.

DRPs can be a powerful addition to the development approval process. Their effectiveness is illustrated by the numbers of Ontario municipalities that have established DRPs: Burlington, Hamilton, London, Mississauga, Niagara Falls, Ottawa, Richmond Hill, Toronto, and Vaughan. Brampton is starting a pilot project, and Markham has completed its pilot project.

### **Scope and Operations of Design Review Panel Pilot Project**

The DRP's scope was limited to comments and recommendations on design aspects of development applications for Site Plan Approval only, not for Official Plan or Zoning By-law Amendments. Typically, City staff reviewed major applications, prepared comments and questions for DRP members' consideration, and discussed these with DRP members in a pre-meeting. During the DRP meetings, the applicants presented their designs and entered into a discussion with the DRP, and the DRP Chair summarized the Panel's comments and recommendations to the applicants. The DRP recommendations provided added support to staff in their negotiations with applicants during the development approvals process. The DRP meetings were scheduled to be within the existing approval timelines for applications.

The areas for design review included applications in the intensification areas identified in the Official Plan such Regional and Local Centres and Corridors, and Key Development Areas. Projects included high density and/or high rise projects, and others as identified by the Director of Planning and Urban Design.

The DRP for the Pilot Project Consisted of 7-8 senior experienced design professionals from the fields of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Urban Design and Engineering. DRP members elected a chair and vice chair, who helped in arranging meetings, chairing meetings, and editing meeting notes to be circulated to applicants and City staff. DRP members worked on a volunteer basis, with expenses paid. The DRP met every month or as required, based on applications received. The proceedings of the DRP were supported by an annual budget of \$10,000 for each of the pilot project years of 2016 & 2017 for expenses and disbursements.

### **EVALUATION OF DESIGN REVIEW PANEL PILOT PROJECT**

#### **Summary of DRP Pilot Project Activity: 2016-2017**

The DRP held 12 meetings during 2016 and 2017, with 8 in 2016 and 4 in 2017. All the projects were high density, high rise applications in intensification areas. Most of them were in Markham Centre, with the rest located in the West and East districts. There were only 7 development firms and 5 architects involved in the projects submitted to the DRP during the Pilot Project.

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**Impact of DRP Comments and Recommendations**

The comments and recommendations from the DRP process have been very effective in improving the design quality of the development applications. These improvements have occurred in a range of fields, including Architectural Design, Urban Design and Built Form, Open Space and Landscape Design, and the Public Realm, reflecting the diverse professional background of the DRP members. DRP comments have given City Staff support in their subsequent discussions with applicants during the development approval process, and have helped the City achieve a higher level of design in these projects. The DRP process has also increased the level and quality of communication between City Staff, applicants and their consultants. Applicants have also commented favourably about the positive impact of the DRP process in refining and improving the design of their developments.

**Stakeholder Consultation and Results**

Since the number of submissions, applicants and consultants was small during the two year pilot project, consultation with the development industry was limited to a simple survey mailed to individual applicants and consultants, asking for feedback. DRP members were also asked for feedback, which was provided through a meeting between City staff and the Chair and Vice Chair of the DRP. Comments from the various stakeholder groups named above have been summarized below.

Feedback from the developers and applicants has been largely positive. At the start of the pilot project, applicants were not sure about the role of the Panel and the additional requirements for drawing submissions. Both items were resolved through subsequent meetings and discussions as staff clarified the role of the Panel, and of the additional drawings to explain the context of the proposal to Panel members.

The presence of developers in the DRP meetings has helped them to appreciate the reasons for the DRP comments and recommendations, and has helped City staff in their discussions with the applicants regarding design items, and has improved dialogue between applicants and staff.

The design professionals submitting applications to the DRP process have been involved in other DRPs in the GTA, and have accepted it as an essential component of the development approval process. Their comments have been positive. Feedback from them stressed the importance of seeking the DRP's advice as early as possible in their own design process in order to maximize the benefit from the DRP's insights and recommendations. As a result, applications to the DRP are being encouraged by City Staff as early as possible so that the development process becomes more of a collaborative exercise.

The two year Markham Design Review Panel Pilot Project has proven the benefit of having the DRP as an extremely helpful addition to the development approval process in design matters for large and complex development applications. The DRP has proven its worth in areas which are experiencing pressure to address issues of high density development, built form and height, contextual fit and quality and challenges of integrating new development into existing urban contexts.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that the Markham Design Review Panel continue as an advisory component of the development approval process on a permanent basis. It is also recommended that the scope of the DRP's review remain in intensification areas as identified in the Official Plan, or as indicated by the Director of Planning and Urban Design.

It is further recommended that an annual budget of \$10,000 be allocated to cover expenses and disbursements incurred in the operation of the Design Review Panel. Instead of the time spent preparing and processing individual monthly expenses by and for voluntary Panel members and City Staff, it is recommended that an honorarium of \$100/meeting be paid to Panel members and \$125/meeting be paid to the Chair and Vice Chair, payable on a semi-annual basis.

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Not applicable

## **HUMAN RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS**

Not applicable, current staffing can handle workload.

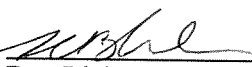
## **ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:**

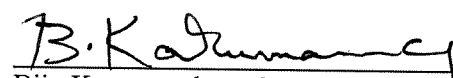
The recommendations align with Growth Management and Municipal Services

## **BUSINESS UNITS CONSULTED AND AFFECTED:**

Not applicable

## **RECOMMENDED BY:**

  
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Ron Blake, M.C.I.P., R.P.P.  
Director of Planning & Urban Design  
(Acting)

  
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Biju Karumanchery, M.C.I.P., R.P.P.  
Commissioner of Development Services  
(Acting)