



Report to: Development Services Committee

Report Date: September 9, 2014

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**SUBJECT:** Markham Design Review Panel Pilot Project

**PREPARED BY:** Ronji Borooah, City Architect ext. 8340

**REVIEWED BY:** Rino Mostacci MCIP, RPP  
Director of Planning and Urban Design ext. 4713

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

- 1) That the September 9, 2014 report entitled "Markham Design Review Panel Pilot Project" be received;
- 2) That the City of Markham undertake a Pilot Project to implement a Design Review Panel for a period of 2 years, addressing higher density development (mid-rise and high-rise) in key locations in Regional Centres, Key Development Areas, Local Centres and Corridors, and including higher density development that may be identified in other locations by the City;
- 3) That Council authorize a maximum annual budget of \$10,000 (for each of the two years of the Pilot Project) to be included in the Planning and Urban Design Department 2015 (&2016) Operating Budget for the Design Review Panel, to be funded from development application fees;
- 4) That, at the conclusion of the first and second year of the Pilot Project, Staff evaluate the outcome of the project, and provide an interim status report, and a final report, respectively, on its conclusions and recommendations to this Committee;
- 5) And 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 recommend the establishment of a Design Review Panel as a Pilot Project to assist Planning and Urban Design staff in the design review of complex applications during the development approval process. The recommendation arises from the Official Plan, which identifies the Design Review Panel as one of several approaches to achieve design excellence in new buildings and the public realm.

**BACKGROUND:**

The Markham Official Plan contains policies that identify “design excellence in buildings, streets, parks and open spaces” as a key component in creating attractive and welcoming neighbourhoods. The new approach to growth through redevelopment and infill in designated intensification areas requires an increasing focus on how buildings and the public realm are designed, how they integrate both visually and functionally with their surrounding neighbourhoods, and how good design can contribute to the attractiveness of the City. Design excellence has come to the forefront in matters of community development. Accordingly, the City of Markham should establish a Design Review Panel as a Pilot Project to assist City staff in reviewing the design of complex projects through the development approval process.

**What is a Design Review Panel**

A Design Review Panel is an independent body that provides objective professional advice to the municipality on development applications with the goal of improving the design of buildings and elements of the public realm. The Panel is comprised of volunteer design professionals including architects, landscape architects, urban designers and planners. The Panel, through its review of development applications, can help raise the standard of design in the community and make new development more compatible with its surroundings. The Panel’s recommendations can be a powerful addition to the development approval process with respect to achieving greater design quality.

**Role of a Design Review Panel**

The Panel is a technical advisory body under the authority of the Director of Planning and Urban Design; it does not have statutory decision – making powers. It does not replace any part of the formal development approval process, nor the roles and functions of staff, stakeholders and Council within that process. The development approval process typically includes input from various interests, including technical advice from staff, community comments and Council direction. The addition of a Design Review Panel serves to provide more comprehensive design input by including an independent professional voice to enhance the design of buildings and the public realm. The Design Review Panel’s recommendations are incorporated as appropriate into staff reports for Council consideration.

**OPTIONS/ DISCUSSION:****A Design Review Panel for Markham**

It is recommended that a Design Review Panel be established in Markham as a Pilot Project to assist City staff with the design review of complex development applications. The Panel will function as an advisory body, operating within the existing planning framework of the City, in accordance with the Terms of Reference attached as Appendix I to this report. The Pilot Project will be for a 2 year period. Panel members will be Senior professionals who are well recognized within the design community. Panel members will be volunteers but will be reimbursed for travel expenses incurred for attending meetings. The Panel will be supported by Planning and Urban Design Staff in organizing design review meetings and recording minutes of meetings.

**Design Review Panel Pilot Project Principles**

The following principles will guide the Design Review Panel during the Pilot Project:

- Respect the timelines for the processing of development applications;
- Provide for consistency and objectivity in the design review process;
- Respect the existing legislative and regulatory framework;
- Recognize the Panel's supporting role within the existing departmental structure, and
- Provide for the seamless integration of design review within the development review and approval process.

**Pilot Areas**

The areas selected for the Design Review Panel Pilot Project include the intensification areas identified in the Official Plan, Map 3, Land Use. These include the two Regional Centres of Langstaff and Markham Centre, along with Key Development Areas, Centres and Corridors such as Leitchcroft, Milliken, Highway 7, Highway 48, Cornell Centre and Yonge Street. The Director of Planning and Urban Design may add specific projects in other areas to the Pilot Project at his discretion.

**Project Selection**

Projects selected for design review in the Pilot Areas by the Panel will consist of large and/or complex applications that involve any combination of Official Plan Amendments, Secondary Plans (in the case of large scale applications), Re-Zonings and Site Plan Agreements. In general, projects will consist of medium to high density development applications and will be based on project thresholds including size, scale, location, prominence, and visibility of the proposed development. The Director of Planning and Urban Design may add other projects to the design review process at his discretion during the Pilot Project phase.

**Panel Make-up**

The Panel will consist of volunteer design professionals, with a minimum of seven members, allowing four members to constitute quorum. Of the seven members, at least four should be architects, along with at least two landscape architects and one urban designer/planner. The Director of Planning and Urban Design may add more members from the design profession (eg. engineers) during the Pilot Project at his discretion if it is felt that additional members will improve the capacity and function of the Panel. Panel members will serve for the entire two year period of the Pilot Project.

**Review Considerations**

The Panel's review and comments will have regard for Council approved policies including the Official Plan, Secondary Plans, Zoning By-laws and urban design guidelines. Issues regarding amendments to the existing regulatory framework will be the responsibility of City staff as per current practice. The Panel will be guided by staff interpretation and comments of policies (including proposed amendments) in the design review of specific sites and projects. The Panel will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a project and point out areas of concern that need to be resolved with regard to an appropriate contextual response, good fit and transition, high design quality and contribution to the public realm.

**Integration with the Development Approvals Process**

The Design Review Panel Pilot Project will be integrated into the existing development approval process by following the Pre Consultation and Formal Application phases of the process. This will be done by having a two stage design review of development applications. An analysis of Design Review Panels in other municipalities has shown that the best opportunity for the improvement of design proposals is for the Panel to review projects at an early conceptual design stage, and review them again at the formal application stage to ensure that revisions have been made to the application. The two design review meetings of the Panel will be scheduled within the circulation period in each phase in order to maintain the timelines of the development approval process.

**Schedule**

The Panel will meet on a monthly basis to ensure that it allows the timelines of the current schedule of the development approval process to be maintained. The Panel meeting schedule will be monitored during the Pilot Project and adjusted if necessary.

**Length of the Project**

The Design Review Panel Pilot Project is scheduled to run for two years, from January 2015 to December 2016. The two year period will provide a sufficient length of time to review a range of development applications in various intensification areas in order to judge its effectiveness and value to the City. The two year period will also allow for adjustments to the project over time as necessary, based on feedback from staff, proponents and Panel members.

**Monitoring Program**

It is important that the Design Review Panel is monitored during the Pilot Project trial period in order to refine its process and evaluate its role, effectiveness and feasibility for the development approval process in Markham. Monitoring will include collecting feedback from applicants and design consultants whose projects are reviewed by the Design Review Panel, as well as feedback from City Staff and Panel members themselves. Consultation will be carried out on a regular basis to evaluate any changes necessary to improve the procedures of the Panel during the trial period. Staff will provide an interim status report to Council at the end of the first year, and a final report at the end of the second year of the Project, with conclusions and recommendations on the outcome of the Design Review Panel Pilot Project.

**Consultation with Development Industry Stakeholders**

Staff have consulted with stakeholders of the development industry in Markham who have had experience in dealing with design review panels in other municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area, including Mississauga, Toronto and Vaughan. Stakeholders consulted have included both developers and their design consultants. In general, they have found that design review panels are a positive addition to the municipal approval process in terms of improving the design quality of projects.

Their recommendations for creating a successful design review panel include: selecting panelists who have experience in the dynamics of the development industry and the municipal approvals process, so that they can provide a balanced view; clearly defining the scope of the panel to focus on design issues and not planning matters (e.g. OPA and ZBA items); involving the design review panel early in the approvals process, i.e. at the concept design or pre-consultation stage, for greater effect; and ensuring that the design review panel's activities and schedules do not delay the current municipal approvals process. These recommendations will be incorporated into the Pilot Project.

**Alignments with Strategic Priorities**

The Design Review Panel could support a number of the City's Strategic Priorities, including:

- Growth Management
- Transportation/Transit
- Environment
- Economic Development

**FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TEMPLATE: ([external link](#))**

While members of the Design Review Panel will serve on a voluntary basis, there will be costs associated with the administration of the Panel. Voluntary Panel members will need to be reimbursed for travel costs; there will be costs associated with the receipt and distribution of background material from applicants and city staff to Panel members; there will be costs associated with the meetings themselves, including refreshments, and printing; and further costs for the printing and distribution of minutes of meetings. It is recommended that an annual budget of \$10,000 be established for each of the two years of operation of the Design Review Panel Pilot Project. Funds for the Project will be allocated from the 2015 and 2016 Planning and Urban Design Department Operating Budget, and incorporated into the application fee by-law.

**HUMAN RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS**

The administration of the Panel will require coordination by Planning and Urban Design staff. This will include ensuring that specific applications stay on track; co-coordinating agendas, notices and schedules as necessary; taking minutes and obtaining approval for them prior to distribution; and general administration of the Panel. Any necessary staffing costs, such as possible part-time contract, will be considered as part of the budget review process.

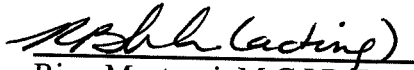
**ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:**

The project is in line with the BMFT Strategic focus of Growth Management as it will help to improve the design standard of buildings and the public realm.

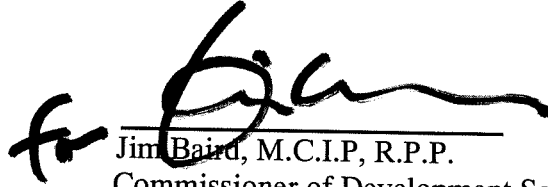
**BUSINESS UNITS CONSULTED AND AFFECTED:**

The Finance Department has reviewed the report and their comments have been incorporated.

**RECOMMENDED BY:**



Rino Mostacci, M.C.I.P., R.P.P.  
Director of Planning and Urban Design



Jim Baird, M.C.I.P., R.P.P.  
Commissioner of Development Services