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THE DON DISTRICT GUIDE PLAN: AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

A fresh tack in the preparation of Part II Official Plans for areas of the City of Toronto has emerged recently with the issuance of the Don District Guide Plan, South of St. James Town, by the Planning Staff on September 28, 1971. This Guide Plan differs from previous preparatory studies for Part II Plans not only in the range of factors considered -- social and economic as well as physical -- but also in its sharp insistence on the involvement of all groups (including the City as a whole) affected by projected redevelopment in South of St. James Town in the process of discussion and planning for the area.

The sensitivity of the Guide Plan's treatment of the neighbourhood as an integrated unit in both its present and potential redeveloped forms and its strong proposals for dialogue have had substantial impact on the sequence of events related to planning in the area. Redevelopment forms, other than the one being presented by the major land holder in the area, The Meridian Development Group, are being considered in order to protect the neighbourhood's identity. And since the Guide Plan strongly recommended participation of all groups affected by redevelopment in the planning process, a special Ad Hoc Committee is at present sponsoring meetings in the area of all groups affected by redevelopment for joint participation in the planning process. Certainly, there has been far more at work to bring about these developments than simply the force of the Guide Plan influence. But the existence of the Guide Plan has been an important factor.

Background

The Guide Plan deals with the development of a small Toronto neighbourhood bounded by Sherbourne, Parliament, Carlton and Wellesley Streets, commonly known as the South of St. James Town. The Meridian Development Group has assembled approximately one-half of the 400 housing units in the neighbourhood and as early as 1968 expressed an intent to redevelop the area at highest permissible density. The area is presently almost entirely comprised of low-density town-housing.

In 1969, the Part I Official Plan indicated that the City may consider applications for rezoning in the neighbourhood up to maximum permissible residential density, 4.375 times floor space. On September 18, 1971, Meridian applied for rezoning to this density from 1.0 on a 3 acre site between Bleecker and Ontario Streets in order to be able to construct

three 28-storey apartment buildings. A report on the area, released by the Planning Board in 1968 and adopted by the Council in early 1970, the Review of the Don District Appraisal, recommended rezoning to R.4 Z.5, or 2.5 times floor space. The Review also commissioned the preparation of the Don District Guide Plan as a background study for the Part II Official Plan statement for the area, and provided for participation of those affected by redevelopment in the preparation of the Guide Plan. The Staff responsible for the preparation of the Guide Plan was thus planning in an uncertain and highly flexible area with respect to zoning.

The uncertainty of official prescriptions for the area and the need for a public policy for the area has been highlighted by political events in the neighbourhood last Summer and Fall. Tenants of 20 Meridian-owned houses were issued eviction notices in Summer 1971 and application for demolition of 14 units was made by Meridian. Tenants, who constitute 85% of the area population, became alarmed by the immediate prospect of high-rise redevelopment in their townhouse neighbourhood. The tenants began to make frequent representations at City Hall in support of rescinding eviction notices, retaining existing housing, and providing housing for low-income people in the area. (All eviction action was eventually postponed until June 1972). A substantial number of homeowners, desirous of selling their properties at the higher price they could command if the redevelopment plans proceeded, began pressuring City Hall for the high-rise redevelopment called for in the Official Plan. Area businessmen were also in favour of redevelopment, feeling it would boost their business. Convictions on both sides were deeply held and the conflict became extremely heated. On October 6, 1971, the Executive Committee of Council approved the formation of a Committee to be chaired by Alderman David Crombie to discuss housing and planning in the area. The decision came just eight days after the release of the Guide Plan.

The Guide Plan

Released in a situation of actively conflicting interests, the Guide Plan's overriding concern is for continuity and integration in the area and its recommendations are geared to a smooth transition from the existing neighbourhood to a redeveloped one. It is divided into three main sections, The Existing Situation, Analysis, and Approaching A Plan, all of which emphasize the same elements of "people of the area", "neighbourhood facilities", "open space", "traffic patterns", "present housing stock and needs", "density", and "neighbourhood identity".

The Existing Situation section divides the 45 acre neighbourhood into five north-south environmental study areas consisting of strips of institutional, residential, and commercial areas, with the Winchester School in the centre serving as a focal point. A Summer 1971 survey showed 62% of all buildings definitely worthy of rehabilitation, with a cumulative of 88% able to be rehabilitated at replacement cost; only 30% were worthy of rehabilitation in the Bleeker-Ontario block. There is an adequate district park, but only one-third of the area residents are served by a local park and there is no regional park available; the Official Plan calls for all three. Area educational facilities are presently adequate.

In summary, the area design and low-density form is predominantly residential, adequate for the needs of the present population. The neighbourhood is suffering some deterioration, however, and the form the improvement takes will reflect pressures for change from the City outside its boundaries.

The Analysis section of the Plan asks how well the existing situation works and how it may be improved in the light of needs of the present population and of area interest groups. The framework in which the analysis is done, is most innovative. The policy guides it uses are not only the 1969 Official Part I Plan map density designations, but also a number of policy statements for the City in general from the Part I Plan and for the neighbourhood in particular from the 1968 City Council-adopted Review of the Don District Appraisal. This framework is most important in that textual policy statements are often overlooked in the rush to achieve maximum zoning density feasible under the Part I Plan. Objective analysis inputs, such as the Patterson Housing Market Survey, are also used. Each of the ten policy directive areas, from which major objectives are drawn for the neighbourhood -- people, housing needs, relocation, neighbourhood identity, density, open space, shopping, neighbourhood facilities, traffic patterns, and community -- is anticipated in the Existing Situation section and is later incorporated into the suggestions in Approaching A Plan.

The findings for the area and resultant objectives of the Plan follow:

(1) Participation of all people affected by redevelopment in the planning process is called for.

(2) It is suggested that roughly 14% of all units be 3-4 bedroom, about 30% 2 bedroom, 30% 1 bedroom and 16% bachelor/studio, with special consideration for the low-income lodger in the last category; this combination will accommodate the needs of area residents, the City and the Developer.

(3) A wide range of housing types is encouraged, and relocation of displaced residents within the area itself is recommended as a component of redevelopment since this kind of relocation is most desirable to residents, and since it would preclude addition to existing low-income housing waiting lists.

(4) Neighbourhood identity should be maintained by the use of transitional architectural forms from low to high density.

(5) Density designations should be mixed in order to keep neighbourhood identity. The proposal is to use the western part of the area as high density and the eastern as low, on the basis of existing building conditions. The Guide Plan recognized that present zoning and bonus regulations may hamper the creative development of mixed densities and recommended that the current zoning and bonus systems be reviewed.

(6) An objective of 0.9 acres of local public park per 1,000 residents is set; fulfillment of this objective may allow for some flexibility in requirements for landscaped open space on each private

lot.

(7) To enact the objective of using a population increase to improve business, the Plan suggests, in agreement with the Official Plan, that a District Commerce Centre in the Southeastern part of the neighbourhood should be encouraged.

(8) The objective of providing adequate schools and other facilities for present and future populations is set. Secondary schools may have to be expanded.

(9) A carry-over in redevelopment of present movement patterns in the neighbourhood, which tend to limit vehicular access and lend the neighbourhood an intimate character, is recommended.

(10) A sense of community among all area interests should be a target of the actual formulation of the Part II Plan.

Throughout the analysis, it is stressed that specific resource allocation suggestions are only suggestions; the objectives in each policy area are the most important results of the analysis.

The resource allocation suggestions and objective are interwoven quite well and incorporated into the Approaching A Plan section, which recognizes that the needs of all groups should be taken into account in architectural form. The Approach is remarkably integrated and consistent. Although there is no suggestion that nothing in the Guide Plan can be modified, there is considerable insistence that the final redevelopment scheme have the same tight unity and comprehensive integration as does the Approach.

Approaching A Plan presents a lively and flexible plan for redevelopment. The neighbourhood can incorporate change by the designation of the western portion of the neighbourhood as an Intensive Change Area and of the eastern portion as a Limited Change Area. The Intensive Change Area, with its quickly deteriorating housing stock, will undergo more high-density redevelopment; the Limited Change Area will retain more of its largely sound housing stock but undergo up to 20% redevelopment at higher density than present, possible at 2.0 or 2.5 in contrast to present 1.0. The Areas are not to be treated as separate entities but as generally flexible areas, with transition elements between areas and integration of the elements of each Area into the other. (For instance, some retention of low-density housing might be feasible in the Intensive Change Area). The major public open space will be in a 4 to 6 acre site at the centre of the neighbourhood, around the school. Not only a passive focal point, it will extend a drawing influence in all directions and integrate the two major Change Areas. Transition elements at the edges of the two Change Areas include sitting out spaces behind a Home for the Aged, benches, a cafe, greenery, a market, and the discouragement of local vehicular traffic.

A total population increase of between 3,000 and 4,900 is projected. A variety of architectural forms for the added housing stock is recommended, with a high degree of adaptability to special needs of people such as lodgers. New neighbourhood facilities would be near the central park.

Since the Approaching A Plan Section and the Objectives necessitate so many diverse actions and adjustments, the section on implementation of the Approach process advises extensive discussions with various government agencies for financial help to build and rehabilitate, reconsideration of zoning and bonus systems, inclusion of low-income housing, and designation as a Neighbourhood Improvement Program. Again, it invites participation of all area groups in discussion. A group of final recommendations in Section 5 suggests that the Objectives and Approaching A Plan act as a basis for public discussion, with the Approach as a basis for an official Part II Plan; that Council form a committee of those affected by redevelopment for discussion; that the Chief Planner investigate other agencies' opinions of the plan and solicit financial support; and that rezoning and demolition take place in accord with the Objectives and Approach.

Since as has been explained, the Guide Plan deals with an extremely flexible and changing planning situation, it is difficult both to precisely define the issues involved and to make general policy recommendations. Nonetheless, the Bureau believes that the participatory planning situation in South of St. James Town may well be one of the forerunners of a number of participatory planning situations and that the answers to the question-issues posed in the COMMENT for Don District Guide Plan will have implications for other planning situations in the City. The questions are: (1) What effect does the lack of reaction of the Planning Board to the Guide Plan have on the success of the Guide Plan? (2) How has the structuring of public discussions through the Ad Hoc Committee worked so far and what are the obstacles to its success? And (3) What is the role of the Guide Plan in the participatory planning process?

The Planning Board

It is unfortunate that the Guide Plan has been released prior to a decision for or against it by the City Planning Board. At the special Board meeting of November 9 called to deal with the Guide Plan alone, discussion was postponed until the Board received input from the Ad Hoc Committee and interests represented, but the Planning Board has yet to discuss the Guide Plan. Releasing the Guide Plan without endorsement has generally weakened the Guide Plan's credibility in the Crombie Committee discussions and has created an ambivalent situation. Proponents of the Plan and its objectives may base all of their arguments on the Plan as a given; and the opponents of the Plan may point out that it is not official and refer to the most recent official document which mentions the area, the Part I Plan, which designates the entire area as potential core residential.

To date, the official decisions about the Guide Plan by the Board involve the approval of specific objectives of the Guide Plan. At the City Planning Board meeting of October 19, for instance, recommendations were made that Objectives 1, 5, 6 and 8 of the Guide Plan be approved. While these objectives merited quicker implementation than other objectives in the Plan, since they dealt with curtailing demolition, investigating government financial involvement possibilities, and investigating the reaction of the public and government agencies to the Plan, it can be argued that discussion of the whole should quickly follow individual recommendations; indeed, should quickly follow initial release of the Plan. The Plan was released on September 28; until now no Planning Board meeting has been devoted to examining on a comprehensive basis the merits of the Plan. A hint of the frustrations of the Planning Staff, who prepared the Report, over the deadlock of decision-making on the part of the Planning Board was given by the Chief Planner at the September 28 meeting of the Planning Board.

Mr. Barker stated that the Planning Staff have reached the point where unless there is a firm political commitment to this kind of planning then it is difficult to know how the planning process is to continue in the City.¹

At the same meeting a member of the Planning Board highlighted the ambiguity of the intended public discussion in the absence of Planning Board consensus. "He felt that unless the Board could agree on the objectives, then they could not expect input from the community."

The Bureau suggests that the Planning Board has an important role to play in providing a favourable environment for the discussions in the community. Future use of the technique should certainly be preceded by a statement of Planning Board support for the method.

Structuring Public Discussion

There can be little doubt that sponsoring public discussions of the type presently being held in South of St. James Town is in the best interest of good planning in the area, since it promotes a consensus on future community forms and increases community cohesion. There has been some confusion in this particular case, however, about who would be the sponsoring agents - the Planners or the Politicians?

The initiative for sponsoring public discussions was taken by Alderman Crombie at the Council Executive Committee meeting of October 6, at which time he proposed to set up a Committee to discuss housing and planning in the area, with the Guide Plan in mind as the basis for the discussion. The Executive Committee, anxious to lessen the hostility of area interest groups, agreed to the establishment of the Committee.

1. Both references from this meeting to Item 6 (a) as reported in the Minutes of the Meeting.

At the time, the Planning Board had not debated the Guide Plan, having postponed discussion on September 28 until a meeting of October 19. At the October 19 meeting the Board adopted four Objectives of the Guide Plan, and called for a special meeting of the Planning Board with the Guide Plan as the only matter on the agenda. It was at this special November 9 meeting that conflicts over overlapping jurisdictions surfaced. Some members of the Planning Board called for an additional committee sponsored by Planners to hold public discussion of the Guide Plan in the area, alongside the Ad Hoc Crombie Committee; while Alderman Crombie insisted that there should be only one committee in the area to avoid confusion and suggested that his Committee might withdraw from the area if a Planning Board committee were set up. The resolution of the situation was that three Planning Board members would participate on the Ad Hoc Committee and that the Planning Board would support the efforts of the Ad Hoc Committee, which had been enlarged to five Aldermen and three Planning Board members. That the Committee is accomplishing its missions with a high degree of success is the most important fact in the matter. An agreed upon mechanism to structure the discussion that would take into account the roles of Council and the Planning Board should be developed if this planning technique is to be used in the future.

For the initial three months of its existence the Ad Hoc Committee functioned mostly in secret as ambassador-at-large among all of the area interest groups -- the developer, the tenants, the homeowners, and the businessmen. Progress was made in reviving relationships among the groups; guarantees were received from Meridian not to evict tenants until at least June of 1972 and not to demolish any buildings at present. The Committee itself never met in full; most of the Committee initiative was taken by two of the aldermen who had been active in neighbourhood planning discussions elsewhere in the ward. The pace of progress towards consensus among area interest groups has accelerated even further with the initiation of a series of public open discussions on housing and planning on January 13, 1972. The initial meetings developed a formula for representation (two members apiece from the eight interest groups in the area) and for neighbourhood planning (block by block, with one block per meeting as the subject matter).

The Committee has at least until June, when the tenants' eviction reprieve runs out, to reach agreement on the redevelopment plan.

The amount of time available to reach agreement is extremely important if the plan for the neighbourhood is to evolve in a way that permits several points of view to be thoroughly explored. More important than time is the question of the availability of federal, provincial and municipal funds. The amount and type of funds determine the degree of innovation possible in the area. The federal government has undertaken major reviews of its urban renewal and low-income housing programs. The extent to which programs resulting from these reviews are directed toward the provision of neighbourhood improvement funds will have a considerable bearing on the potential successes of this and other neighbourhood

redevelopment/rehabilitation planning efforts. In the meantime, the interim status of federal proposals should not prevent an active consideration of the possibilities of federal financial assistance to the South of St. James Town area.

Role of the Guide Plan

During the present planning discussions in South of St. James Town under the auspices of the Crombie Committee, analysis of the role of the Guide Plan is eclipsed by the need for success in the discussions. Yet the role of the Guide Plan in this process raises interesting questions for future planning.

The Guide Plan was intended to be a Part II Study for the neighbourhood, but it has not received the endorsement of the Planning Board as such. The Part II Study is a normal part of the planning process, it is an in-depth analysis of an area of the City for which redevelopment is contemplated. It follows the general Part I Planning Statement and precedes a Part II Official Plan which contains detailed recommendations for the development of a particular district or area of the City. According to Part I Official Plan's Section 8.2 on implementation, which sees the framing of the Official Plan as a set of integral steps, none of which can be viewed in isolation from the others,

It is the policy of Council that this Plan will be in two parts. Part I, which constitutes this document, outlines the general plan of development and policies for the City as a whole. Part II will, as a result of district appraisals, area studies and studies of individual issues, establish the appropriate policies on a district or area basis.

The Part II Study includes a description of the area; incorporates density designations; and has now begun to apply to the specific area the general policy statements from the Part I Official Plan which set forth a general framework for development of the City.

The Part II study has evolved from "appraisals" (before the 1969 Part I Plan) which were little more than statements of what development was feasible, in light of existing "planning Standards" such as zoning regulations, bonus system incentives, and open space requirements; to the more sophisticated and comprehensive statements (such as the Central Harbour background study and the Don District Guide Plan) of what is desirable in the light of area analysis, area issues and area environment. As in the Don District Guide Plan, standards are in some cases considered constrictive and recommendations for amending them are made. Consequently, a much more active and creative planning role is adopted; architectural forms are proposed, housing types are discussed, techniques for involving residents are suggested. Social issues and variables in the area are considered equal to all other issues and variables. The Bureau considers this evolution is good and that the presentation of detailed proposals backed by sound research, as in the Guide Plan is useful for setting forth specific considerations for the Part II Plan.

The most valuable contribution of the Guide Plan is its insistence on a unified approach to development, for true unity -- physical and social -- is the most important criterion for successful development. If either physical or social unity is neglected, fragmentation of the urban fabric may result, leading the way to social problems not yet experienced on a large scale in Toronto.

A second valuable contribution of the Guide Plan is its insistence on active participation by all concerned interests. Such a document can provide a valuable springboard for public discussion and participation in the planning process. One problem with the Don District Guide Plan as a stimulus for public discussion, however, is that it is very detailed and technical. Given time and money constraints -- as well as limited public understanding of the subtleties of planning analysis and language -- the planners in future may be well advised to issue only a summary statement that highlights proposals, issues, and implications for public discussion; and then a detailed plan which would reflect the outcome of the public discussions. This would both avoid the possibility of having to prepare two detailed plans; and also prevent the pre-public discussion plan from possibly limiting the scope and content of the public discussions.