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Johnson: Yes, speed up housing development – but ensure an informed public can weigh in

Strict timelines may reduce the chances of meaningful input from residents. This is a slippery slope for Ottawa. Here's how we can resolve it.

Author of the article:

[Laine Johnson](#)

The Ontario government's Bill 109 (The More Homes for Everyone Act) will come into effect on July 1. In the interest in speeding up the decision-making process for development applications, Bill 109 introduces strict timelines and financial penalties to non-compliant municipalities.

I welcome many of the changes. I do want more homes built faster. I want City of Ottawa staff to streamline their internal processes and challenge their status quo. However, implementing strict timelines may also potentially reduce the opportunities for meaningful public input. For me, that is a slippery slope for any city.

People deserve to participate in the evolution of their city. That is an important part of our municipal democracy, and in the instance of land-use planning, I have often seen examples of the public's comments resulting in improved developments. But sometimes comments miss the mark, too. People need the right information and the right avenue to participate meaningfully. Too often, we get caught up in planning arguments that are less relevant in planning policy: increased street parking, the potential for noise and garbage. These comments are more often representative of resistance to change than anything else, and usually do not impact an application's success or failure.

But this is not a reason to erode the avenues for participation. It is an argument for giving the public more knowledge, skills and connections to make sure that when we do have something impactful to say, we know how and when to use our voices so that they count.

We are fortunate that the City of Ottawa has, since 2014, included some community voices in a pre-consultation planning process, a process that will be expanded to respond to Bill 109. These voices are those of our community associations. I moved a motion at Planning and Housing Committee this past week that ensures council will

know whether those community associations have the skills, education and training they need to represent their communities effectively and efficiently.

We no longer have time to meander. If there is a valid planning argument to offer, or a historical nuance to land use that the community can bring, we need our community members to be incisive, clear and concise. And I want everyone to know, when they see a placard go up in the neighbourhood, that they should reach out and join together with their neighbours to learn more. This could be a great nudge for all municipalities to build out their civic education and community constellations to respond together to this new challenge of building liveable cities for all.

However, community associations are already facing obstacles to doing the “fun” parts of their jobs. There are grant applications to submit and insurance to provide. They are being called into emergency management, events planning, and climate-change actions. I am concerned about their capacity, and I am concerned that residents without representation by a community association do not have a means to engage in the process.

Provincial law prevents us from bringing pre-applications to the public. Councillors’ offices will also not be privileged to know what is said in the pre-consultation phase and might not know about a planned development until the clock starts ticking.

My motion will serve to bring forward how the city will explore expanding the pre-application process both to all wards, but I hope also to include voices beyond community associations. The community associations I work with in College ward recognize they have a gap in representing diverse voices. First Nations, Indigenous people, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+ and new Canadians are typically not well-represented and deserve investments in civic education and equal access to participation.

With better support, training and plain-language resources, community associations and residents will have the tools to speak the same language as planners and developers. Communities will understand the goals and ambitions of the City’s Official Plan. This is essential if we want our city’s growth to be relevant and attractive to all communities — those who already live here and those who will live here in the future. Our residents have lived experience, but they need more support in order to keep up. Some neighbourhoods see very few developments, but others can see dozens a year.

My motion aims to ensure our dedicated volunteers and the public are confident that their input is well-informed, well-intentioned, and processes are critically examined so that participation is meaningful and not performative.

While Bill 109 has created obstacles for public input on planning applications, I am confident that we can turn this into an opportunity for better-informed, relevant public engagement. City staff are tuning up their processes; councillors’ offices will have to tune up theirs too. The public deserves the same attention and investment as an important stakeholder here as it does with other city building initiatives. But we need to

empower people to contribute meaningfully and constructively to the province and city's aims to build more homes, faster.

We still have carrots even if many of the sticks have been removed. Applicants often reach out to our office in good faith to discuss applications before they happen. Likewise, in good faith, we must give the public the tools to appropriately engage in consultation opportunities.

***Laine Johnson** is the city councillor for College ward, and a member of the city's planning and housing committee.*

- **Amendment:**

Motion No. PHC-ARAC2023-01-01

Moved by L. Johnson

WHEREAS the City of Ottawa is committed to public participation in the planning and development process; and

WHEREAS the City initiated in 2014 a development application pre-application consultation program with community associations, with the objective to increase transparency to the City's development review process, and to allow for early input by the community into the development proposal; and

WHEREAS any public participant from the 6 participating Wards must attend training and sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement acknowledging their understanding of confidentiality requirement under the Planning Act; and

WHEREAS the Province's Bill 109 introduced tight timelines for development applications to be considered during Official Review; and

WHEREAS Bill 109 Implementation Phase 2 report introduces a multi-phased pre-consultation process for development applications, which introduces three phases to allow the applicant to discuss their idea to obtain preliminary feedback, present their refined idea and any draft studies for comment, and finally, submit their final proposal for the study review to ensure the studies are complete, consistent with one another, and contain enough information to allow a proper application processing during the provincially timed review; and

WHEREAS there is opportunity to build upon the existing pre-consultation engagement with community associations in the context of Bill 109's multi-phased pre-consultation process;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that Staff be directed to undertake a fulsome review of the pre-application consultation program that involves community associations to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the current process, examine potential expansion of the Pre-application consultation program with Community Associations, and undertake an education, training and awareness initiative in relation to the program; and that the result of this review be reported back to Council within 18 months at the latest.

Carried