

City wants to make it easy for residents to build their lives around transit

OTTAWA — The city is about to move into high gear on redevelopment plans for the neighbourhoods around three stations in the eastern stretch of the planned light-rail line, with major rezonings to come at four more within a couple of years.

The mission is twofold: First, to more than double the density of jobs and homes around stations like St. Laurent, Cyrville and Train.

Like many Transitway stations outside the downtown core, they're surrounded by other roads and low-density stores and light industry, and if that doesn't change, the city's \$2.1-billion rail project won't be as busy as the city wants. The city wants to more than double the population around those stations in the next 20 years, ideally to make the neighbourhoods even denser than Centretown outside the core business district.

“Our drive is to ensure that to the best of our abilities, there will be the people that are going to drive ridership on the LRT,” says Councillor Peter Hume, who chairs city council's planning committee.

What's going on, he says, is a basic shift in the purpose of public transit, from a system that's mostly about getting commuters from the suburbs to downtown and back, to a system that serves distinct neighbourhoods built up around each station.

The second goal is to have a good idea what those distinct neighbourhoods will look like and how they'll fit into the neighbourhoods that are already there.

With LRT stations due to begin serving districts of parking lots and highway cloverleaves in 2018, the city doesn't have much time.

The goal isn't to have several million square feet of offices and condo towers built around the stations in the next seven years, but to be completely ready with neighbourhood plans for what can go where and city infrastructure — from bike paths to water mains — that's up to the job.

Hume says “transit-oriented development” has been a hot topic around city hall for years (city council approved design guidelines for it in 2007) but it's only been executed in a “tentative, fractured” way. Often, the language in the city's development rules is dangerously vague: Just this week, city council's planning committee backed a pair of residential towers at the north end of Roosevelt Avenue that are to be twice as tall as the zoning allows, in part because the property is so close to the Westboro and Dominion stations on the Transitway.

City wants to make it easy for residents to build their lives around transit

The city's official land-use plan calls for taller buildings close to the Transitway that will someday be a rail line, but the zoning, providing rules that are finer-grained, doesn't match up. Nearby residents, who are getting 14- and 16-storey buildings in their backyards, screamed. But to no avail.

"We're always responding to someone who's sensed an opportunity," says Hume, reacting when a developer wants to do one particular thing on one particular lot. When an application comes in that makes sense under one set of rules but not the other, "people say, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa! Shouldn't we do this comprehensively?' Well, we've learned that lesson."

St. Laurent, Cyrville and Train are first, with the city's planners having just finished mapping the areas they want to look at: anything within roughly an 800-metre walk of the stations. In the new year, says the city's top planning manager John Moser, they'll make contact with the landowners and begin to talk about the possibilities.

Around the Train station, for instance, the existing density is about 100 people a hectare, roughly 7,000 people, and just about all the people who count toward that figure are workers. The city wants to increase that to 200 to 300 a hectare, and have a mix of employment and residential uses. Centretown south of Gloucester Street, for comparison, has about 200 people a hectare today, with a plan to increase that to 250.

"We want to have these areas be site-plan and building-permit ready," says Moser. "And do we have the right pedestrian patterns to get to [the stations]? Do we have the right cycling routes to get to it?"

The first three plans should be done by the end of next summer. Over the following two years will come similar plans for Blair, Hurdman, Lees and Tunney's Pasture stations. They're supposed to govern development around the stations for about 20 years and be nearly impossible to overturn.

A very similar plan for the northern part of the O-Train corridor, between Bayview station and Carling Avenue, offers a glimpse of what all those neighbourhood plans might look like.

The area around the Bayview station includes a lot of unused publicly owned land; most of the rest is light industry or low-density commerce, like the self-storage business that took over the former bus barn on City Centre Avenue, and the currency-printing company that just announced it'll shut down next year. Those uses made a lot more sense when the O-Train line carried freight.

City wants to make it easy for residents to build their lives around transit

The latest draft of the Bayview plan calls for the storage place to be replaced with townhouses, new shopping and commercial towers going in several blocks to the northwest, all linked up via tree-lined plazas and cunningly connected pathways.

It imagines “point towers” – tall buildings with small bases – along the O-Train track north of Somerset and again overlooking Dowd’s Lake, surrounded by shorter buildings that step down to the houses and small apartments of Chinatown and Bayswater.

The O-Train corridor is in fairly tight quarters; the eastern rail stations give the city more room to work with.

South of the St. Laurent station, for instance, the federal Public Works department is planning an office complex on fallow ground once occupied by the provincial government. The city wants 80 per cent – four out of five people! – to get to work there using transit, Hume says.

“One thing that has to come out is parking,” he says. “The only way it’s going to work is if there’s very little parking and so what parking there is, is expensive. And so people will say, ‘I can pay \$400 to park my car, or I can spend \$100 on a transit pass,’ and they’ll do the thing that makes sense. To make that work, it’ll sure help if people arriving by transit can live close to stations somewhere else.”

In Vancouver, they’re working on a similar project with “upzoning” around stations along the Canada Line – the underground extension of the SkyTrain built before the 2010 Olympics to connect the Vancouver airport to downtown along Cambie Street. It’s been a major north-south artery forever, but long stretches of it are lined with single-family homes and Vancouver wants to replace them with taller mixed-use buildings.

That has created a land rush, crazy even by Vancouver standards. Houses along Cambie assessed at \$1.2 million went for \$3.4 million earlier this fall, once developers realized they’d eventually be able to knock them down for taller buildings.

Residents are getting tired of agents for would-be buyers pounding on their doors, but also fretting that if they don’t sell out, their homes will soon be surrounded by construction sites and then six storeys of neighbours peering down on them.

Ottawa intends to avoid that. Almost anywhere there’s an existing house, it’s being treated as off-limits.

City wants to make it easy for residents to build their lives around transit

“If I was a homeowner, and I was to look at it strictly from a value perspective ... I would want my land in the area,” Hume says. But most residents probably don’t want to move and including people’s homes in the redevelopment plans would be extremely disruptive.

“For those who [would] choose to stay, it has the potential to fundamentally change the character of the community,” he says. And it’d likely mean the planners would spend nearly all their time discussing changes in a relatively small part of the land that needs redeveloping. So, Hume says, they’re just staying away unless a community approaches the city en masse with the intention of selling.

There may be a sticky exception to the hands-off rule: At Tunney’s Pasture, single-family houses right across Scott Street from the station are just the sort of thing transit-oriented development doesn’t call for. The redevelopment plan there is barely a gleam in the planning department’s eye right now, somewhere on the to-do list for 2013 or 2014, but the planners will have to deal with it. Figuring out what to do there and how to involve residents will take a star urban designer, like Larry Beasley (credited with many of the successes of downtown Vancouver) or George Dark (behind the city’s downtown urban-design strategy and part of the panel overseeing design work at Lansdowne Park) to “engage the community and make sure that they’re fully represented and fully respected.”

Ultimately, the city hopes to solve two problems at once, by making it easy for people to build their lives around transit and dramatically reducing neighbourhood zoning fights, one neighbourhood at a time.

“We want to make it so that communities can know that density is going to happen here but it’s not going to happen here,” Hume says.

dreevely@ottawacitizen.com

ottawacitizen.com/greaterottawa

Article source: <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/City+wants+make+easy+residents+build+their+lives+around+transit/5927839/story.html>