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September 9, 2020

TO: Chair Jan Harder and Members of Planning Committee

RE: R4 Zoning Review

Comments on provisions affecting the streetscape that were changed after the consultation.

I served on the City’s Technical Advisory Committee for the R4 study. Over the course of the TAC meetings, it was repeatedly emphasized by staff that the impact of the proposed zoning changes would be mitigated by measures intended to mandate a minimum level of design of the front facades that would maintain compatibility with established streetscapes.

The Hintonburg Community Association also held an Open House in February, with well over 100 attendees, at which City staff presented on the proposed R4 revisions. There, again, they emphasized that measures to ensure adequate design would be part of the changes to the Zoning Bylaw.

These measures were already quite minimal.

First, it was to be required that 20% of the front façade must be recessed 1.5 meters, to provide some articulation and prevent flat facades with no architectural interest.

Second, balconies were to be required on the front above the first floor.

We are disappointed, although not surprised, to find that, in the final version of the Bylaw revisions that are to be considered, even these minimal measures are gone. Apparently lobbying by the building industry has been successful at removing even the most modest requirements for architectural interest for the low-rise apartments that will be permitted.

The 1.5 meter recess has been reduced to 0.6 meters, which would be barely visible (this is less than 2 feet). No recessed façade at all is proposed to be required if there is a balcony.

Balconies are no longer required in the front at all.

In the past, we have been plagued with badly-designed 3- and 4-unit buildings that are essentially boxes built to the maximum permitted envelope with little or no attention to design. We expect that there will now be even more pressure to do this when trying to fit 8 or 12 units onto lots where this number of units can be barely accommodated. A box is also the cheapest structure to build.

This is also not just a theoretical possibility. We have already seen several proposals for low-rise apartment buildings in Hintonburg through rezoning applications whose first iteration was a plain box. Only through negotiations during the rezoning process have some of these been able to be improved through articulation of the façade and adding balconies. Once this form is as-of-right, there will be no recourse and therefore, poor design.

We simply ask that the minimal set of standards that had been proposed throughout this process, from the TAC through public consultations, be restored, and that 1.5 meter articulation of the front façade and balconies on the front be again required. This is the least that should be done to ensure compatibility of this new built form in neighbourhoods where the predominant buildings are articulated and have porches, such as most of the R4 zone in Hintonburg. While buildings with increased numbers of units may be necessary, there is no reason they have to look bad.

Jay Baltz

Co-chair, Hintonburg Community Association Zoning Committee