



Town of Hinton
STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING
Agenda
September 23, 2014 - 4:00 PM
Committee Room, Hinton Government Centre

TOWN COUNCIL MISSION
*Council serves the interests of our citizens
to enable our community to reach full
potential.*

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ORDER

1. Call to Order

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

1. Standing Committee Agenda - September 23, 2014

ACTION AND DISCUSSION ITEMS

- 2 - 4
1. Vacant Infill and Underdeveloped Land - Landowner feedback (45 mins)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. Urgent Matters from Council and Town Manager
2. Executive Assistant Logistics Information

IN CAMERA (if necessary)

1. Negotiation Matter (FOIP) (10 minutes)

ADJOURNMENT

1. Adjournment



TOWN OF HINTON DIRECTION REQUEST

DATE: September 15, 2014

TO: STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING OF SEPTEMBER 23, 2014

FROM: Mindi Petkau, Land Coordinator
REVIEWED BY: Denise Parent, Acting Director of Planning
APPROVED BY: Mike Schwartz, Acting Town Manager

RE: Vacant Infill and Underdeveloped (Substandard) Land

Purpose

This item is before Council for information in relation to Council's Strategic Plan Focus Area – Offsite Levy/Infill Policy.

Issue

Vacant infill and underdeveloped property owners have provided feedback to the Town in regard to the current and future status of their lands.

Administration Comments on Situation / Options

Administration circulated a survey and an invitation to a discussion meeting to all affected landowners of either vacant infill or underdeveloped properties. Some landowners responded to our request for feedback.

Vacant Infill Property

There are 89 vacant, subdivided parcels in Hinton that have the potential of being used on a more permanent basis. These lots are owned by 46 different landowners, 7 of which responded to the request for feedback (survey, attended the meeting etc.).

The lands are vacant for a variety of reasons; some common scenarios are:

- Used for additional yard space or parking lots in a semi-permanent way
- Currently for sale
- Being held for further subdivision and development
- Being held for the opportune economic environment for development or sale

Generally, the feedback received for vacant infill land was varied because the landowners use (or don't use) their land for different reasons. However one universal opinion is evident in that every survey respondent chose the following option: "I don't believe the Town should concern themselves with how long I own a vacant lot as long as I pay the taxes".

Given this response, it seems the landowners feel that the Town of Hinton should not change our current policies and practices when it comes to vacant infill land. At a basic level, the Town should leave landowners to determine when their property is developed.

Underdeveloped (substandard) Land

These lands are defined as a subdivided lot that is not up to current Minimum Engineering Design standards (i.e. no paved streets, no sidewalks, missing municipal water and sewer utilities, etc.). 177 landowners were contacted representing 240 lots. We received 16 surveys and 9 landowners attended the discussion meeting (3 of these owners completed a survey).

Administration also had several conversations with individual landowners consisting of information sharing, education and discussion around the landowners' position on the topic. There was a mix of landowners who shared further feedback via the survey or meeting, and those who chose not to.

From the feedback received, there are a few points that stand out:

- Individual opinions differ greatly and are often polar opposites even in the same neighbourhood
 - Some specific examples of why this is are:
 - hauling water vs a well
 - poor drainage for a small minority of the landowners on a street
 - intended to purchase an “unserved” lot (i.e. quieter, more like living out-of-town)
 - some owners have services from elsewhere and others do not
 - costs – some can afford to invest while others cannot
 - installed a new septic/well/cistern recently so the cost to upgrade would result in a “wasted” investment
 - different needs depending on the number of people in a household and their ages
 - different needs based on the type of business
- If any upgrading is to be completed, most landowners would prefer the Town pay for the upgrade
 - Some suggested we consider a split between owners and the Town (general taxpayer)
 - Some people consider the costs to be the complete responsibility of the landowners
- There seems to be a general misunderstanding about what property taxes are used for
 - Many landowners feel they have been paying taxes for substandard services and that the Town should install the services
- Of the 16 survey responses received, about 73% of people do not think their substandard services are a problem at all; 27% think it is a minor inconvenience that can be worked around
- The responses were essentially split on whether the Town should approve areas to remain substandard or start a construction program to upgrade substandard neighbourhoods at the cost of the general taxpayer

It is difficult to determine an overall feeling from the responses received because they are so varied. Generally, it seems landowners are not overly motivated or inclined to seek upgrades to their neighbourhood infrastructure, especially if they are responsible for the costs. It also appears that many owners feel their property taxes should pay for upgrades, at least in part.

There are some general misunderstandings or lack of knowledge about what is included in the price of a fully serviced lot versus a substandard lot, and what property taxes pay for. In many cases, explaining some of this background information helped to clarify the Town's current practices and the reasons why the Town has not upgraded these properties to date.

Administration's Conclusion / Proposed Direction

Considering the feedback received, it appears that although owners may not be completely satisfied with the infrastructure available to their property, most people do not find this to be a major concern. There are a few that would like to see upgrades and these people are faced with the challenge of convincing their neighbours to invest a sizeable amount of money to upgrade. This is because the Municipal Government Act requires that at least 2/3 of the affected landowners agree to a local improvement.

Although the current system is not ideal for every individual landowner, there was not definitive support to explore changes such as a Town-wide "upgrade plan", or for Council to specify certain areas as "permanently substandard".

Administration's recommendation based on the feedback received is to continue with current practices and policies for both vacant infill and underdeveloped lands.

Town Manager Comments

With a relatively small sampling of these landowners (%1.0), it is difficult to determine the true accuracy of the feedback. That said based on the information that has been received there is no appetite by their land owners to change current practices and policies regarding vacant infill and underdeveloped lands. One question that may needs to be considered by Council is 'what is the best thing for the community regarding these lands'?