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It's uncomfortable to find oneself on both sides of the same issue, in this case refereeing a struggle between my younger and older selves to find some wisdom that likely lies in between.

This month, City Planning staff released a draft policy encouraging multiplex (duplex, triplex and fourplex) housing throughout every neighbourhood. The issue under discussion is how far the City should go to open up neighbourhoods to new types of housing.

My younger self would say, "Not at all. Draw a solid line between main street intensification and neighbourhood status quo." That was, in fact, what the City promised residents when it introduced the new Official Plan some 20 years ago.

My current thinking is that change is both necessary and desirable – we absolutely need to provide more street-level ownership and rental options. But I believe this should be driven by pragmatism rather than ideology. A good example might be the way I have already introduced this in part of the new Yonge North Secondary Plan, creating a designated area allowing multiple units within housing that looks similar to what's now on the street.

My struggle arises from a belief that City Planning is moving ahead with a downtown-centric view that is blind to the potentially dramatic change and unintended consequences in places like Willowdale. We want to create more affordable housing options rather than trigger more land speculation which does the opposite. Nor should we lose control over the size of what somebody can build next to you – on every street in Willowdale.

Change has been brewing for several years, starting as a push mostly from downtown housing advocates to get rid of "yellow belt" restrictions, the colour on the zoning map for the neighbourhoods that make up most of North York, Scarborough and Etobicoke. But what began as a divide between Toronto's downtown and its former suburbs is increasingly less about



geography than differences in age and income, reflecting a housing affordability crisis that makes it difficult for most young people to buy or even rent in Toronto.

Willowdale is composed mainly of neighbourhoods in which new construction is limited to two-storey homes (with a second unit, typically in the basement). Earlier this year, Council added backyard "Garden Suites," allowing a third unit as a separate building. Anything more than that is mostly limited to main streets.

As a member of the Planning Committee, I was involved in requiring new housing to reflect the "prevailing" character of the surrounding neighbourhood. Only last week did I learn that staff have proposed turning that upside down, nullifying wording that preserves the existing character by adding the option to reflect the "planned" multiplex character. On every local street.

Before the City embarked on the current multiplex policy review, I sought – and received – assurances from the Chief Planner that the intention was not to make big changes *everywhere* in neighbourhoods. That assurance doesn't reflect what's now being proposed. Earlier this year I got a commitment from the planner in charge of the file to tour Willowdale with me, to talk about unintended consequences. That never happened.

Staff have said their intention is to keep the same zoning restrictions as currently exist – e.g. two storeys. I see that as intentionally naïve. In a Committee of Adjustment challenge, how do you hold an applicant to two storeys when the Official Plan contemplates up to four and major change is encouraged?

For that matter, how would you stop someone from completely subverting the intent of the change by trying to build a single four-storey home, arguing that the impact on the neighbours was less than if it had four units?

So where does that leave us?

This policy has the potential to bring about a level of change in Willowdale equivalent to highrise development near Yonge or the replacement of small post-war bungalows with much larger homes. I see both of those as part of a natural evolution of the area but also ones that needed to be carefully regulated. This change is much the same.

My main purpose in writing about this today is to make you aware of it, so that you can do your own research, form your own opinion, and weigh in on the debate. You can comment by clicking [here](#).

There are valid points of view on all sides of this. Perhaps you can help me reconcile mine.

-John