



Guelph planning officials better than the others

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Re:

From an architect's point of view, my experience says that approval processes in Guelph are quite straightforward and responses to inquiries are very prompt.

Lines of communication and service from the city's planning and building staff are courteous and their comments are clear and consistent.

I have worked in Guelph for over 37 years in this capacity on a host of building projects and seen a whole generation of staff changes, bylaw amendments and evolving provincial policies.

Much of my work however has taken me throughout Ontario, to over 200 municipalities in obtaining site approvals, minor variances, zoning changes and building permits on thousands of projects.

Believe me when I say that doing business in Guelph is a pleasure in comparison to many other places

To get the answers I need to design building projects in the municipalities in the greater Toronto area months, and costs my clients thousands in fees, carrying costs and delayed construction. There is over conflict between departments, understaffed offices and inexperienced technicians. I see attitude and inconsistency in applying unwritten policies. "Recommendations" are often interpreted as "requirements" by overzealous staff who hold up approvals until the developer bends. Attempts at negotiation, objections and appeals fall on deaf ears, cost plenty in time and money, and, in the end, are futile.

Frequently, we get only partial comments which we address only to find new additional requirements pop up out of nowhere when we are close to final approvals. Any developer will agree that the process is quite confusing and very frustrating.

Some approvals such as urban design are subjective and frequently no clear written policies are available. As professional architects who work on designs for months with a client, we can be at the whim of unequal and uninformed junior technicians to approve our plans based on their subjective opinions.

In Guelph, I deal with real people who are accessible at the counter and available for meetings and direct phone calls. They return phone calls and e-mails very promptly with straight answers. This past week, for example, I received clear answers to zoning inquiries the same afternoon for a non-profit proposed group home for special needs youth. Similar questions posed for a project in North York took four months and cost the client a \$1,500 application fee for a one-line answer.

Municipalities facing amalgamation have to apply conflicting bylaws, increased neighbourhood and community participation, and political agendas in reviewing development applications. There are many models of the approval process and Guelph would be wise to consult with others that are successful and apply them.

Ontario has imposed new provincial policy guidelines which are — often for good reasons — turning plans upside-down and require bylaws to be rewritten. This takes some time and understanding from the development community, and some rethinking of the way they're doing business. Proposed developments — for example a strip plaza currently proposed for the southwest corner Gordon and Wellington streets — have been developed in archaic ways that are not sustainable in our post peak-oil world or our walkable communities. Take a page from the Transition Town movement.

In an attempt to improve the process of approvals, the Guelph planning department consulted with the professionals, planners and key agencies and ended up with site plan design review meetings. I presented for Hospice Wellington and got immediate consensus approval of the concept with all city departments at the table within two weeks of submission of the design.

For sure, we have to continue to adjust our processes to address the changing times, but overall I love doing business in Guelph.

J. David McAuley

Guelph
