

Upzoning Would Ruin What Makes Garneau a Special Neighbourhood

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If you blink, you might miss it.

Edmonton is changing at an incredible pace. Last year, 55,000 people moved here. More than double that are expected by 2026. In less than three years, our population will have grown by 15 per cent. That's faster than any oil boom in living memory.

To manage a huge change in a short time, we need a plan. Sprawling out is easy but comes with greater long-term service and maintenance costs. We're already facing cost increases and aging infrastructure. If city council is not strategic, generations could be saddled with deeper cuts and steeper taxes.

As one solution, the city has its sights set on infill. Last year, there was zoning bylaw renewal. This year, it's district planning. And now, the focus has turned to the neighbourhood next to the University of Alberta. Next week, council will make Garneau a major node. In the spring, they'll vote on a proposal to upzone most of the neighbourhood.

This level of policy change is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for city-building. Yet residents of Garneau are worried. Living in one of the city's most vibrant and historic neighbourhoods, we worry that the city's proposal will ruin precisely what makes Garneau special.

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Let's be clear: We know that every mature neighbourhood needs to add density, especially near transit and major destinations. In recent years, we've added three new residential towers

and are welcoming a 34-unit supportive housing development. Ninety per cent of all housing units in Garneau are in buildings with four storeys or more.

Growth has spurred an eclectic mix of uses in Garneau, so now we have new homes in addition to century-old buildings and thriving local businesses. As a result, we have a rich mix of families, students and seniors.

No matter what you're doing, you can meet all daily needs in Garneau. You could arrive for post-secondary education, stay and establish a career, start a family, retire and enter a care facility — all without leaving. With its historic homes and one-of-a-kind shops and restaurants, it's a great place to visit, meet a friend for coffee, or simply take a walk.

Yet the city's proposal could annihilate that diversity. Nearly all of Garneau's small-scale residential streets — single-family, duplex and row housing — could be zoned for eight-storey buildings. In an absurd twist, it would be illegal to tear down your own house and rebuild a single-family residence in its place. Instead of welcoming diversity, the city is punishing it.

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For many young families, an old home is still within reach in Garneau. That would likely end as land values spike. That's great for real estate speculators sitting on vacant lots, but not great for families looking to build the community.

While Garneau is a destination neighbourhood, we are fully aware that it's far from perfect. Because the University of Alberta is on our doorstep, we've seen waves of speculators buy up homes and then let them deteriorate. If you regularly drive down 109 Street, you might notice excavators tearing down houses, despite the fact that other large lots along the corridor have remained empty for a decade.

This is where the city's hopes for upzoning ring hollow. Instead of figuring out why medium- and highrise development has stalled on our major corridors, the city simply wants to blanket upzone the rest of the neighbourhood.

We think it's lazy planning. It will only worsen land speculation, increase the number of derelict properties and fast-track the destruction of the city's precious remaining heritage houses.

The upcoming decisions are pivotal for our neighbourhood. But they're also a real test for council, and for our fast-growing city. The fact that the city is trying to "fix" what already works is a troubling sign.

Council should be watching closely. On Oct. 2, they could amend the Scona District Plan. They could include provisions for small-scale, family-friendly housing and increased heritage protections, without sacrificing their density targets.

It's an opportunity to be strategic and forward-looking. We just hope that council doesn't blink and miss it.

Steph Neufeld is president of the Garneau Community League.