

# Engagement summary

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## Downtown Building Heights Study and Built Forms Standards for Tall Buildings

### Summary of Phase 1 and 2 feedback

The Downtown Heights study aims to identify areas of the Downtown where the permitted building height can be increased to help meet the population density target of 200 people and jobs per hectare in the Downtown by 2051, as set out in the Official Plan.

Engagement activities in the first two phases of the study included pop-up and open house events, online surveys, focus group meetings with local business and development industry representatives, and a statutory public meeting. This summary describes the engagement audiences and methods used, key themes heard, and how feedback will be considered in the next phases of the project.

### What we did

To gather community input on potential changes to building heights in the Downtown, we invited residents and community members to share their thoughts through a range of open house and pop-up events, as well as through an online survey on the City's Have Your Say platform. We also held targeted focus group meetings with local business and development industry representatives to gain first-hand insight into the opportunities and challenges of building and developing properties in Downtown Guelph. These engagement activities took place between October 2024 and mid-February 2025.

Generally, the public engagement activities sought to understand:

- general attitudes towards greater heights in the Downtown,
- key design priorities that should guide changes to built form permissions,
- the importance of view corridors in limiting heights, and
- locations that could or should accommodate greater building heights.

The in-person open houses featured display boards summarizing key project information, inviting attendees to provide their feedback via post-it notes and through conversations with project staff. The online survey included multiple choice and short-form questions, as well as an interactive mapping activity where participants were invited to add location-specific comments for sites perceived to be good candidates for increased heights.

### Phase 1 Engagement Activities

In phase one, conversations started with the fact that meeting the city's density targets (i.e., 200 people and jobs per hectare) requires more locations with additional height permissions. Community members were asked broadly to weigh in on different aspects, including location and standards for various heights.

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- Online survey on the City's Have Your Say webpage
  - Active from December 9, 2024 to January 12, 2025
  - Total of 413 survey responses, with 48 participants who completed the additional mapping exercise
  - Community open house
    - Took place on October 2, 2024 and December 9, 2024
    - Both were hosted as part of broader engagement events for the Downtown Infrastructure Renewal Program to help community members understand more of the context around growth in the Downtown from policy to infrastructure and design
    - In total, there were 44 attendees for the October 2, 2024 open house and 80 attendees for the December 9, 2024 open house
  - Focus group meetings with business and development industry representatives
    - Took place across three sessions on November 18, 2024 and November 22, 2024
    - Included representatives from the Downtown Guelph Business Association, Chamber of Commerce and land owners and developers in Downtown Guelph
    - Total of 21 attendees
  - Guelph Farmer's Market pop-up event
    - Took place on October 26, 2024
    - Approximately 50 engaged attendees

## Phase 2 Engagement Activities

In phase two, a draft Official Plan Amendment (OPA), complete with a proposed height schedule, was shared for consideration and comment.

- Online comment forum on the City's Have Your Say webpage
  - Active from January 21 to February 16, 2025
- Total of 217 people downloaded the draft OPA and 13 participants shared comments
- Community open house
  - Project-specific community open house to present the draft OPA
  - Took place on February 4, 2025
  - Engaged 16 attendees
- Statutory public meeting
  - Presentation to Council on the draft OPA
  - Took place February 11, 2025
  - 6 delegates spoke at the meeting

In addition, the draft Official Plan amendment was circulated to several external agencies as required in the Planning Act, as well as to the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation and the Métis Nation of Ontario on January 20, 2025.

# What we heard

## Phase 1 Feedback

During phase one, participants provided feedback to inform additional locations for greater height permissions for buildings in the Downtown. Key messages heard included the following:

### Importance of Heritage Character

Participants viewed Downtown Guelph’s heritage buildings as a highly valued and unique feature. They support the protection and conservation of the Downtown area’s significant heritage buildings and streetscapes and noted that new development should be designed to fit in with the existing historic character.

### Significance of View Corridors to the Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate

Participants provided feedback on the existing protected view corridors in the Official Plan. Generally, most participants rated the five existing protected view corridors as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in the online survey. However, not all views were judged to be equally significant; the Eramosa Road and King Street view corridor and Gordon Street and Wellington Street were identified as most important to protect. Overall, participants generally recognized the importance of maintaining view corridors to preserve important public views, however there was some feedback about ensuring that they do not place unreasonable and unnecessary limits on development potential.



Image: Feedback from online survey on importance of existing view corridors

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## Support for Strategic and Context-Specific Intensification

Participants were generally supportive of more density within the Downtown, recognizing the emerging growth trends in Guelph and need to increase housing supply to meet those trends. The appropriateness of 'tall' buildings should be considered in the context of each unique site. Priority should be given to more density on vacant and underused sites (such as large surface parking lots). It was recognized that tall building height permissions should be expanded around high activity areas to create key locations of higher density.

## Height Strategy

The project team received a number of comments on building height permissions, including site-specific recommendations for individual properties. The bullets below generalize these comments around where tall, mid-rise and low-rise forms may be appropriate.

- Taller Buildings (18-25+ storeys): Height peaks should focus around the Downtown south of the tracks, Elizabeth Street and surrounding areas, and Carden Street near the GO Station.
- Medium Heights (6-12 storeys): Mid-rise forms are preferred along Wellington Street and Gordon Street, next to areas with taller buildings.
- Low Heights (6 storeys and under): Lower-scale buildings of 6-storeys or less should be around the heritage core to avoid overshadowing.



Image: Height based comments by area in mapping exercise

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## **Prioritizing a Pedestrian-Friendly Public Realm**

Participants voiced their support for built forms which support a robust and pedestrian-friendly public realm; this is influenced not only by building height but by other design elements such as podium-level massing, façade design and material selection, sidewalk zones, and view corridors. Comments stressed the opportunity to introduce bold, innovative and visionary developments, particularly along the rivers and adjacent public open spaces. Participants also highlighted the importance of preserving the commercial identity and 'charm' of the Downtown, and shared a desire for new development to limit shadows on public spaces and main street frontages. It was acknowledged that increased density, along with excellent public space design, would help in drawing more foot traffic to Downtown shops.

## **Phase 2 Feedback**

During phase two, participants provided feedback on the draft Official Plan Amendment, including the draft building height schedule. Key messages heard included the following:

- There was generally a mixed reaction to the proposed building heights schedule – some participants felt that even greater building heights should be introduced, while others felt that the changes should be scaled back.
- There were similarly varied responses in regards to whether buildings should be permitted to exceed the height of the Basilica of Our Lady Immaculate. Some suggestions included considering whether heights should increase incrementally as the distance from the Basilica increases, to help preserve visual prominence in the immediate area.
- For those who felt that greater heights should be introduced, it was suggested that a height peak within a 20-30 storey height range would be appropriate.
- Many participants voiced support for more mid-rise buildings (i.e., buildings in the 4 to 8 storey range) to be developed, with opportunities to deliver increased density within a moderate scale. Some comments recognized the need to increase housing supply in Guelph.
- Participants were generally supportive of the proposed realignment of the Grange Street and Stuart Street protected view corridor to align with Macdonell Street instead.
- We received a number of comments about the appropriateness of proposed height permissions for specific properties. Some of these raised concerns about how greater height permissions would impact local safety, parking and traffic conditions.
- Some comments on the draft building heights schedule pointed out that height categories sometimes cut across parcel boundaries, resulting in confusion about the correct and applicable permissions. It was suggested that the project team revise the schedule to ensure that height categories align with existing parcel boundaries.
- Other suggestions from participants included recommendations for simplifying the height categories and a 'less surgical' approach to height distribution.

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## What we are doing

The feedback from Phase 1 engagement activities was used to inform the draft OPA, which identifies updates to Official Plan policies regarding built form and height distribution, and introduces a revised building height schedule. The feedback from the Phase 2 activities was used to further refine the OPA and will be used to inform the Built Form Standards, both of which will be finalized in Phase 3 of the study.

As informed by public engagement, the proposed OPA aims to locate taller buildings in such a way that limits their direct impact on existing neighbourhoods and public spaces. Mid-rise and tall buildings are proposed to be permitted strategically throughout the Downtown, ensuring that new, context-sensitive higher-density development can be introduced to meet growing demand while ensuring the protection of significant existing cultural and heritage assets.

## What we are not doing

The scope of the Downtown Heights Study is limited to updates to the height schedule and built-form related policies within the Downtown Secondary Plan, and a Built Form Standards document. This study does not involve a full update and/or review of the Secondary Plan. There were a few topic areas which came up through the engagement process that are determined to be out of scope, including:

- **Affordability and Inclusivity:** There were a number of comments received regarding the need for affordable housing, along with specific comments identifying high-potential sites for affordable housing developments.
- **Sustainable Design:** Participants supported sustainable building design practices and highlighted the need for more green spaces in the Downtown.
- **Development Approvals Process:** There were some complaints regarding the City's planning approvals process and how it could be improved, with lengthy processing times seen as a barrier to development.
- **Traffic and municipal Servicing:** A number of questions were raised about the potential for increased pressure on the City's municipal transportation and servicing infrastructure from the increased density. Though these questions are out of the scope of this study, City staff are currently undertaking the [Downtown Infrastructure Renewal Program \(DTIRP\)](#) and have released a draft Capital Implementation Plan identifying proposed infrastructure upgrades.

## Next Steps

Moving into Phase 3 of the study, the project team will continue to gather feedback from the community on the proposed OPA through Have Your Say, focus group meetings and Council Advisory Committees. The project team will also prepare the Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings, which will provide design direction and guidance for tall buildings city-wide.

In response to the comments received from the community, as well as through the development of the Built Form Standards for Tall Buildings, the proposed OPA will be refined and updated. We expect to bring the recommended OPA for Council approval and the Built Form Standards forward for consideration in Spring 2025.