

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS: Following the Presentation "Towards a Smart Street An Urban Design Approach to University Avenue

Presented by Mr. Shiban Raina

June 3, 2004

Coles Building, Charlottetown

Co-hosted by the Institute of Island Architectural Studies and Conservation and the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island

Moderator: Charlottetown City Councillor Kim Devine

Following the presentation on the general principles of Urban Design and how they might apply to University Avenue, Charlottetown Councillor Kim Devine began the question period by asking Shiban Raina how City Council should go about making a decisions about buildings that are proposed to be higher than the heights allowable in city by-laws.

Mr. Raina acknowledged that the approval process is complex, and that without a chief architect for the city, it is hard to decide on the aesthetics of a building that has been proposed. He suggested that it becomes necessary to test in a variety of ways. His view, he stated, was that City Hall needs input from architects to be able to interpret how a proposed building might look in actuality. They must avoid "design by committee" and seek instead the expertise of architects, urban designers, and landscape architects. It is not necessarily the case that a lower building is a better or more attractive building for a space. Likewise, tools for analysis must include the developer's need to make money and the city's need to please its citizens. The basic point must be what is optimal for liveability. Conflict misses this point.

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Developer Tim Banks introduced his perspective from the floor, specifying that his comments came from his experience as a developer in Charlottetown, with a "passion to develop our city." He flourished the 1996 City Official Plan for Charlottetown, a 55-page document. When it was developed, the City hosted nine public meetings, all of which he attended. The document shares wisdom about where the city will grow and includes comments about widening streets and improving building accesses. In 1998, Mr. Banks addressed an open letter to the City with his comments on the Official Plan. It has been his position from day one that the City needs to work with the Official Plan. He has repeatedly called on the City and councillors to correct issues and has urged them to look at the document.

The density of the city needs to be increased, in terms of population, residential areas, and retail and other businesses. Most cities in Atlantic Canada have seen major growth downtown with new buildouts in the last five years. No such development in Charlottetown. We have a small trading market, even compared to a small city such as Moncton. But Moncton has revitalized its bylaws FOR developers, with no parking restrictions, for instance. As the tax base comes to town, capacity to fund parking develops itself.

Mr. Banks then addressed the issue of building height. In Charlottetown, the bylaws specify that a building must not exceed 39 feet to the underside of the eave. As a developer, his business has proposed a Pownal Street development, a heritage streetscape that was approved by Council, but tossed out of the Island Regulatory and Appeals Commission on a technicality, after a neighbourhood complaint.

In Moncton, he as a developer could build 60 units. Likewise in Halifax, or Truro, or Summerside. But by-laws and regulations in Charlottetown would restrict his development to 26 units. The real economics of a developer dictate that you need rent roll and income stream. No one will invest in capitalizing without a rate of return. Development has to work from a streetscape AND a development point of view.

Event organizer Jim MacNutt thanked Mr. Banks for his contribution, and emphasized that his comments made it clear that there are issues in Charlottetown that could be resolved through urban planning, and the key point emerging from the meeting's discussions seemed to be that there is a need for urban designers within the city.

He suggested that it is a question of conceptualization — how to come to a process to "see" what a street can look like, what design elements might be vital to consider for the future concept of the street.

Mr. MacNutt also emphasized that the forum was not coming from City Hall, though we were pleased with the level of participation from Councillors. Rather, the idea was to send a message to City Hall.

Mr. Banks replied that in order to pay for the changes that will be necessary to improve Charlottetown, there will need to be more traffic downtown, attracted by more investment in the downtown. He stressed that we need the focus put back on City Council to move forward.

An American member of the audience commented on the "unmitigated disaster" of some American land use practices and asked why the British land use system is not more prevalent in Canada, which has retained other vestiges of British tradition. In other words, why is University Avenue more like Illinois than Britain?

Mr. Raina suggested that it is a matter of difference in attitudes about what city living is like and how much space is available. In Britain, there was little land, and the value of landscape developed as a result. In Toronto, there is no concept of "countryside." He suggested that the British experience stopped fairly abruptly in Canada, and there remains little memory of it in our land use planning. Many small towns in Ontario and Atlantic Canada retain a wonderful spirit.

He said that urban design and planning adds the vital element of physical planning to towns with great spirit.

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To a question about his view on pedestrian pedways or "+15 connectors," Mr. Raina suggested that they can be quite "depressing." The ground floor of a building is very important to allow pedestrians and citizens to relate to the environment and develop their appreciation for the heritage and sustainability elements of their city surroundings. According to Mr. Raina, cities should stay on the ground floor and allow access from all sides. He praised the Confederation Court Mall for providing pedestrians with a very good experience. Pedestrians can window shop even when the shops are closed, but when they are open, the shopper can enjoy the benefits of the interior mall space. Good street access emphasizes the benefits of a lovely, human-scale city.

Mr. Raina suggested that in Charlottetown, each block has its own urban design and its own character. In some senses each needs its own urban design or physical planning. A city needs diversity for vitality.

Regarding the key question of traffic management, various techniques are possible from a design perspective. The challenge is that scale is subjective, whereas bylaws are inflexible. An urban designer looks at each case according to its character. Cities need to be different, no uniform. Cultural aspects of the city must be evident to everyone.

Another question arose: In the mortgage industry, calculations are based on cost per square foot. It is cheaper to go up than out. Why prohibit going up, when there is a need for seniors to have access to condo developments, when there is a desire for harbour views or other attractive views?

Mr. Raina suggested that an answer to the various competing demands in the city has to come from a participatory process that brings people to consensus, not just a process that airs disagreements.

Tim Banks said he has a waiting list of 68 people for the 26 units he would be allowed to build under the Charlottetown regulations. Sustainability issues, Mr. Banks said, can't put the cart before the horse. No projects can be "sustainable" without a tax base. The Atlantic Technology Centre might be a nice building, but it is not yet economically sustainable.

The next comment from the floor summed up the issues this way: Charlottetown needs many more residences, and needs empty buildings filled. And the by-laws are an issue.

Mr. Raina did not choose to offer specific solutions, since these are "pre-conceived ideas" and solutions specific to University Avenue will require that the street be viewed from four or six different sides — and that any solutions need to be "tested" (for instance, in 3-D virtual environments such as those used in planning the site for the new Federal Building being built in Charlottetown).

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There was some variety of opinion expressed about widening University Avenue. The Official Plan specifies widening the avenue as a desirable end. However, even with a strategy to widen the Avenue, it would be almost impossible to avoid bottlenecks at some blocks. Even within the University Avenue Businessowners' Association, there is some difference of opinion. Some want it widened, and others do not. One businesswoman present at the meeting says that she would like to see curbs removed so that people could do business.

Mr. Raina said that in addition to thinking about highways, downtowns must consider pedestrians, who are so vital to well-being and to commercial and civic activity. He stressed that the new government building will need to draw people in and emphasize bringing people downtown, into shared spaces. The hope is that the new Federal Building will become part of a walking area, as an inviting, citizen-friendly building.

A comment from the audience reminded Mr. Raina that many previous government buildings have failed miserably to create inviting public spaces.

Someone asked what kind of parking will be created with the new Federal Building, and Mr. Raina explained that federal guidelines specify that there not be many parking spaces. Instead, they stress that federal buildings should show leadership in environmental design, pressing for public transit or bike transport — keeping people in by other means than cars.

Tim Banks stressed again that some cities provide incentives to developers to allow them to build their buildings higher if they build parking underground. More flexible by-laws would allow the city to condo-ize commercial buildings or to see revitalization of old factory areas.

The conclusion from the audience's comments and questions was that there are excellent ideas in the Official Plan for Charlottetown and in the wider community. It is the responsibility of the City Council to take some of these incipient ideas forward. The matter is urgent and the public pressure is on.

SOME SPECIFIC CRITICISMS AND CONCERNS:

— A Charlottetown businesswoman complained that business owners hadn't been specifically invited to the public event. Another audience member countered that the event had been well-publicized; however, it might be a good idea for future event organizers particularly to invite University Avenue business owners and developers.

— Any future event on the topic of University Avenue needs to broaden its scope not only to look at the section from Euston Street to Province House but also the Avenue out to the University and beyond it, to the Peter Pan corner.

— Likewise, University Avenue is not the only corridor into Charlottetown, and not the only access route with design problems. Other entryways to the city need planning and design applied as soon as possible.

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