

PLANNING FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP

Facilitating the Development of Urban Churches

A Case Study of Hamilton, Ontario

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Churches are important institutions in Canadian cities that are frequently not given adequate consideration by municipal governments. They are seldom included in planning documents and as a result often face struggles when developing new facilities. A consequence of this treatment in planning policy has been a trend of churches and other places of worship developing their facilities outside urban areas where no communities exist and consequently, their ability to do effective ministry is compromised. This report was completed to address the question: How do planning policies support or impede the development of urban churches? Subsequent questions that were addressed included: How can planning policies be improved to encourage the development of urban churches? How have existing policies impacted church developments in the past? And how can planning policy address other obstacles to urban church development? It was found that policies could be developed to benefit both municipalities and church groups by facilitating the development of urban churches.

A qualitative case study of church developments in Hamilton, Ontario was implemented for this report. The Methodology included a literature review, a policy review with descriptions of best practices in urban church development and a description of the Hamilton context, and a research questionnaire to obtain information about the development experiences of Hamilton churches. The structure of this report included a background section that made the case for urban churches; a research section that gathered information on the policies, their impacts, and possible alternatives; and a discussion that resulted in eleven recommendations for municipalities to consider, and two recommendations for church groups.

Background

The report begins by articulating a definition of urban churches and giving rationale for why they are a desirable form of church development. Urban churches are those that exist within proximity-based communities and have a sense of being connected to their neighbourhoods. They are desirable from the perspectives of both municipalities and church groups for various reasons. Municipalities benefit from urban churches because they provide many social services that would otherwise have to be provided by the municipal government, they contribute to a sense of community within neighbourhoods, and they provide significant intangible benefits that far outweigh any short-term losses in tax revenue. It can also be argued that churches should be included in community planning exercises because they are protected under the laws of Canada and Ontario.

An argument is also put forward for why churches should prefer urban locations. Churches are mandated to be stewards of the earth and should therefore prefer a more sustainable form of development if one is available. Christians are called to love their neighbours including benevolence towards the community. Because churches in urban settings have been shown to have greater potential for effective outreach to their communities, they should be preferred by

Christian congregations. Finally, churches are called to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7, NIV), which can only be achieved when the church is present in the city.

Findings

The findings of this report were derived from a best practice review of Markham, Brampton, and Oakville; a policy review of the City of Hamilton; and a research questionnaire.

The Town of Markham is the first example of a policy review for places of worship to be included in this report. It was initiated in 2002 and included the following key recommendations that were adopted by Town Council:

- That place of worship development be restricted in “Agricultural” and “Business Park Area” designations
- That specific place of worship development criteria be developed
- That a site reservation policy for places of worship be maintained that reserves one place of worship site per 6,000 residents
- That clear definitions be developed for the terms ‘place of worship’ and ‘auxiliary use’

Significant contributions of the Markham case include the recognition that places of worship are important parts of the community and should be planned for; and the establishment of location, development criteria, site acquisition, transportation, and zoning as critical policy areas when planning for places of worship.

The City of Brampton released its review of places of worship planning policies in 2008 and included the following recommendations that were also adopted by its Council:

- That a site reservation policy be implemented, reserving at least one site per 10,000 residents
- That separate location policies be developed for large and small places of worship
- That accessory and auxiliary uses be differentiated and that accessory uses be allowed as part of the place of worship while auxiliary uses require additional approval
- That one parking space be required for every 4 persons of worship capacity

The most significant contribution of the Brampton case is that it showed how a permissive policy context is inadequate to produce desirable church development trends. This is because of a variety of other factors that make many urban sites unattainable to church groups. Brampton demonstrates how municipal policy can be implemented to help churches overcome these obstacles.

The final case in the best practice section was the Town of Oakville. While Oakville found a less active approach to planning for places of worship to be appropriate, it contributed most profoundly with its emphasis on design guidelines for places of worship. Oakville released its initial study in 2011 and it included the recommendation to develop specific design guidelines

to assist places of worship in their development. These would clearly express the Town's expectations for development proposals and ultimately expedite the process.

The policy review of the City of Hamilton revealed that the City does not plan specifically for places of worship, and that while the policy framework is generally quite permissive to places of worship there is little to assist them in their development.

Respondents to the research questionnaire who had recently experienced the development of a church in Hamilton indicated a number of important elements that contributed to the formulation of the recommendations of this report. It was made clear that location was important to church groups as the two most commonly identified factors of the decision were access for congregants and access for the wider community. Positive aspects of the development experience in Hamilton that were identified by respondents included friendly and helpful City staff, and the general permissiveness of City policies. Some negative aspects that were described include difficulty competing with developers to acquire available land, lack of appropriately sized sites for church development, high parking requirements, a lack of clarity on building requirements, a lack of communication between City departments, and a general sense of unhelpfulness within municipal policies.

Recommendations

After gathering information from all three primary sources an analysis was conducted and recommendations were put forward. The recommendations are general in nature, as any changes to City policy would require further study. These recommendations are intended to overview what would be an improved policy framework related to church development in Hamilton. The recommendations for the City of Hamilton include:

Recommendation #1: That the municipal government study and understand the vital role of churches in its communities and plan for them accordingly.

Recommendation #2: That the municipality provide adequate information regarding church development policies and contacts in an accessible manner.

Recommendation #3: That places of worship not be included as a permitted use in Business Park, Industrial, Agricultural, or other similar Official Plan land use designations

Recommendation #4: That large and small churches be differentiated in policy and that appropriate location criteria for each be developed

Recommendation #5: That places of worship be considered in community planning exercises and that sites be designated for their use

Recommendation #6: That terms such as place of worship, accessory use, auxiliary use, worship area, etc. be given clear and specific definitions in the Zoning By-Law.

Recommendation #7: That accessory uses be considered as part of the place worship and require no additional approval, and that auxiliary uses be subject to zoning approval.

Recommendation #8: That design guidelines be created specifically for places of worship.

Recommendation #9: That a site reservation policy be implemented.

Recommendation #10: That shared parking agreements, on street parking, transit access discounts, and other potential strategies be studied; and that policies be implemented to allow for alternatives to on-site parking.

Recommendation #11: That parking requirements for places of worship be reviewed, and that future policies be based on worship area instead of gross floor area.

Two additional recommendations were put forward for church groups considering the development of a new worship facility. They are:

Recommendation #1: That churches understand the importance of the location decision.

Recommendation #2: That churches deepen their understanding of the development process and seek expert advice as needed.

Conclusion

This report was written as a result of concerns relating to the development trend of churches locating outside of urban areas. It was found that while policy may not always cause this trend, it could be implemented to curb it. If the City of Hamilton and other municipalities implement the recommendations of this report it is reasonable to expect more churches to locate in urban areas that maximize their potential for ministry in addition to offering more benefits for the municipality.