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Urban planning goes online

City site's 'hoard of information' to include studies, applications, zoning changes

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The Ottawa Citizen

Monday, May 12, 2008

The city is going online with all major development applications in an effort to increase transparency and build public confidence in the planning-approval process.

As of tomorrow morning, citizens can go on the city's website and see all current development applications and supporting studies for everything from zoning changes that allow taller buildings to site-plan applications that show exactly how a building project will be laid out.

It's a big move to get more information on planning out to the public. While citizens were always legally entitled to see the documents, actually getting them could be a real chore. The new policy states that when an application for development comes in, the builder must file an electronic copy as well, so the documents can be posted on the city's website.

For instance, someone living next door to a proposed condominium tower is now supposed to be able to see the study that shows what kind of shadows are cast by the new building.

The new search engine, called a "development application search," also allows citizens to make written comments and send them to planners. Users of the site can easily see what projects are proposed for each ward in the city.

Councillor Peter Hume, chairman of the planning and environment committee, said that with this online move, Ottawa is well ahead of other Canadian cities in making development information available. He said some developers aren't happy with the move, and wanted the documents only posted after projects were approved. But he said that would defeat the purpose of the process, which is informed public debate.

Mr. Hume said instead of planners spending a lot of time hunting down and copying documents, they'll have more time for planning work and residents will spend more time getting information and less time calling City Hall.

"We're demystifying urban planning," said Mr. Hume. "There's no secret hoard of information anymore."

Mr. Hume said one of the city's biggest problems is public mistrust of the development-approval process and he said citizens regularly show up for meetings saying they have not seen certain documents.

Peggy Schenk, manager of the online project, and urban planner Geraldine Johnston spent the last year developing the search engine, with the city's information technology staff.

They say there may be some bugs in the early stages, but they are excited about how easy it will be for people to follow what's going on in the city.

In future, they hope to be able to ease the paper burden for applicants as more people view material online.

As well, the city may develop a search instrument that allows browsing through an archive of development applications.

Committee-of-adjustment documents, for issues such as minor variances, won't be online, but are meant to be eventually.

The Building Owners and Managers Association of Ottawa got a preview of the new online tool and executive director Dean Karakasis said the group understands the need to place material online. He said there is concern that some of the material the city posts could be a company's proprietary information that should not be shared with competitors.

Mr. Hume, however, says the documents being posted are public documents.

Mr. Karakasis also said he hopes the city's planners distinguish between comments about a development from area people who are truly affected, and comments made by citizens from outside the area, who oppose a project, but don't have direct stakes as neighbours.

As well, he said businesses are concerned about any change that might add costs to the development process.

Gary Ludington, secretary of the Westboro Community Association, said an online search tool could make the work of community groups concerned about urban development much easier. He said that in an area such as Westboro, where there is a lot of community interest in new development, it's hard to keep track of issues such as proposed 12-storey buildings, which have a big effect on the neighbourhood.

He said sometimes officials refuse to hand over documents and it's often cumbersome to get them, even if permission is granted.

"It's about like extracting teeth from an elephant," said Mr. Ludington, calling online searches "a step in the right direction."

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