

Downtown South Master Plan City of Whitehorse – June 2011

A Written Response by the Yukon Conservation Society

General Comments

The idea of increasing density downtown (especially downtown south) is a good idea.

However, YCS does not think all the ramifications have been thought through and, as always, the devil is in the details. Effects on transit, waste disposal, recycling, non-motorized traffic options and recreation will be created by this densification, but with enough lead time in planning and consultation most negative effects can be mitigated.

The major concern YCS has is the proposed seven story height.

This will cast a shadow when the sun is to the south of these buildings especially in winter, the tall buildings could create a ‘canyon’ effect on roads and trails adjacent to them, and there is concern over how they will block the viewscape (whether it is towards the cliffs or the south).

The City must consider the possibility of only permitting four story buildings.

While this will decrease the density (when compared with the proposed 7 stories) it will dramatically increase the density compared with what is in the proposed development area now (nothing).

Densification Away from major streets

This master plan does not address at all 2nd and 4th Ave as an alternative location for increased density and mixed-use buildings.

Most urban centres naturally grow from the core out, or in a Whitehorse context from the busiest streets (Main, 2nd and 4th) outwards.

What is being proposed for the Downtown South is density (or growth) on the periphery of the Downtown South region. The urban ramifications of this could range from a housing estate 'ghetto' to a vibrant 'metro' style addition to downtown. Care will have to be taken to avoid the former and encourage the latter.

Height of Buildings

The graphics of the proposed development (as outlined in the City of Whitehorse consultation pamphlet) are a bit misleading. If the new heights are 25m (82ft) and the Cliffs are 55m (180ft) that is closer to 45% of the height of the cliff's.

The graphic is also taken from a far bird's eye perspective. The experience of the density they are describing will be more imposing from the ground level.

Viewpoints should be done from the perspective of a pedestrian standing adjacent to these buildings, and from existing residences (such as on Hawkins and Hanson Streets).

Shadow

Shadow modeling to date has not been adequate.

Modeling should be done for 7 and 4 story buildings, and for different dates and times. It should also be done for when the sun is due south, especially in Dec/Jan. Note that a shadow will be cast onto existing properties on Hawkins, Hanson and perhaps Lambert Street. This does not appear to have been explored in the work done to date.

Below is an example of shadow being thrown from four storey building in summer.



6th Ave looking North towards Main Street, June 15th, 6:50 pm

The above picture is from a 4 storey building. Imagine what a shadow a 7 storey building would cast.



8th and Strickland June 15th at 6:50 pm – two storey building casting shadow.

Height Transitions and ‘Stepping Back’

Height Transitions – that is where the 1st and 2nd story are close to the sidewalk, the 3rd and 4th stepped back – can alleviate the ‘canyon’ or ‘cliff’ effect created by tall buildings.

An example of this ‘cliff effect’ is the 4 story buildings currently on 4th and on 2nd. The one on Main/Hawkins Street is not set back from the sidewalk on Main but it is set back about 2m on Hawkins Street. The 2m setback can be modified, but walking along 4th and 2nd next to 4 story bldgs is not comfortable because the wall of the 4 storey high building comes right up to the sidewalk – it’s like walking next to a cliff.



Second Ave Sidewalk next to a 4 Storey Building – the ‘cliff’ effect



Same building as picture above, but looking up Hawkins Street – 2 metre setback makes sidewalk much more inviting

The ‘stepped’ concept for tall buildings must apply on all sides of the building, including the back, and especially the portions facing the cliff. This because the gap between the proposed 7 storey bldgs and the clay cliffs will include a bike/pedestrian trail. If a step-back isn’t done this will not be pleasant.



Stepped Building corner of Hawkins and 3rd. Note also the setback from the sidewalks on both roads.

It is worth noting what Washington DC currently has on the books regarding building height restrictions – “the width of the adjacent street plus 20 feet (6 metres), so a building facing a 90-foot-wide (27 m) street could be only 110 feet (33.5 m) tall.” A variation on this might be appropriate for Whitehorse.

Architectural Controls

Visual blight – tall buildings can be visually unattractive – a lot depends on architectural controls dictating such things as siding, balconies, peaked roofs, etc. The City can mandate this sort of criteria, if it so chooses. An example would be the new houses that are being built in Takhini North where some architectural controls were dictated by the City.

Zoning Changes Related to Height Restrictions

Changing the zoning to CM1 and CM2 really gives a developer no restrictions on what they build. There are no setback requirements in these zones, and 90% of the site can be building footprint. These zones also currently have no tiering (or stepping back)

requirements. The City must have something specific in either code, regulation or zoning to require large buildings to be set back as they increase in height.

For example, North Vancouver has a 45 degree line setback at a certain height to ensure the buildings are tiered.

Population Density

Increasing population density is a good thing, however it must reflect a broad range of socio-economic housing. Large building complexes composed exclusively of high-end condo's are as much a social blight as large-scale housing estates composed exclusively of social housing units.

The same applies to complexes designed to house just one age demographic, such as senior citizen housing. Wherever possible, 'warehousing' of specific age and income demographics must be avoided.

Building Inspector Liability

The proposed increased height of buildings should also trigger questions about an Architect's Act in the Territory. Currently, anyone can construct a building if an Engineer sign's off on the structure. When you get to larger buildings, issues of exit capacity, fire resistant ratings and fire separations, limiting distances for opening in walls, and accessibility all become more complex. The Yukon (and thus by extension the City) is one of the few jurisdiction in Canada and the US that does not require an Architect for larger scale buildings. This will definitely put more liability on the City building inspectors, who will be responsible for approving the building permits. The City of Delta has lost civil lawsuits over failure of multifamily residential condos.

East/West Connections

There is very good emphasis (and the existing road and trail network) on north/south movement within the downtown south area of Whitehorse. However, east/west connections need work just based on the current population (for example, try crossing on a bicycle 4th Avenue at Hanson Street during the morning rush minute). With the increased density along the clay cliffs (ie the extreme west) a lot of crossing redesign (whether traffic lights, roundabouts, crosswalks etc) will have to be done on most roads running north/south.

Yukon Housing

It is our understanding that a large chunk of the YTG land is for Yukon Housing. Recent housing projects by this organization have raised some community concerns. For example, the Yukon Housing units in Riverdale along the river edge, while no doubt energy efficient, are architecturally 'uninspired' and are surrounded by asphalt and chain-link fence (however, it is the understanding of YCS that landscaping will be

happening this year). Also, they don't face the scenic Yukon River or take advantage of this attractive south-facing location.

Yukon Housing developments must be integrated into adjacent buildings from a visual perspective and must take advantage of natural viewscapes.

This would take unprecedented cooperation between the City of Whitehorse Planning Department and Yukon Housing, but there is a first time for everything.

Transit

It is recognized that determining public transit needs over the life of this project (up to 20 years into the future) is difficult. However, should the densities proposed come to pass (600 new apartment/housing units could mean an additional 2000 people residing in the area in question) it is worth examining some of the implications this could mean.

Main Street/YTG Admin Bldg complex are within walking distance of the Downtown South planning area. The big box grocery stores (Extra Foods, Superstore) and home furnishing stores (Canadian Tire, Walmart) are probably not within walking distance (especially winter).

The current transit layout will have to be tweaked. However, the closeness of the railway tracks could provide a trolley/light rail alternative. The tracks run around to the Spook Creek station, thus providing access to the big box stores from the downtown south side. Utilizing this would mean running the system year round, not an impossibility (one just has to look at trolley and street car systems in Toronto, Scandinavia and Russia).

No doubt some downtown dwellers will not have vehicles (it is unknown currently what percentage of downtown Whitehorse residents do not own vehicles) because they will be able to walk to work. These individuals could put a heavy burden on the transit system, especially outside work hours.

They do not take transit to work (when the system runs the most) but need it in the evening and on the weekend (when the current schedule is less frequent).

Access to the Canada Games Centre, the Beringia Centre lecture hall, Yukon College, Yukon Arts Centre, the Guild etc. is restricted due to limited transit after hours. While the City is to be congratulated for ongoing transit improvements (such as the new schedule and routing that is being implemented on July 1st) high density downtown living will see a concentration of population that does not own vehicles. The City must recognize that they will be placing further demand on transit to reach facilities away from the downtown core, and in all likelihood in hours outside of the typical work week.

Bike Paths

The concept of a paved path along the base of the clay cliffs is great. Essentially running from the south access road to the existing community garden area, and tying into the existing riverfront millennium trail, it will provide a 'loop' suitable for recreation.

However, this trail must not be used as an excuse to marginalize bicycles on City roads.

Bikes are traffic! All roads must be designed for bicyclists and the expectation is that cyclists will be using roads (at least downtown) year round.

Where there are pedestrian activated lights to cross busy streets (such as is currently the case at the intersection of 2nd and Hanson) cyclists now have to ride onto the sidewalk to press the button. Consideration must be given to traffic light activators that cyclists can use without leaving the road.

Compost Collection

Most of the units proposed will be apartments or condominiums. As such, they will have private garbage pickup. They will not receive City garbage pickup nor compost pickup (as it currently stands no apartment or condominium complexes currently receive compost collection from the City).

This must change. The City must pick up compost from apartment and condominium complexes.

The City could charge building complexes to receive this service.

Recycling

City buildings (especially apartment buildings) have space on their ground floor for a garbage dumpster. **City building codes must be amended so that space is included for recycling canisters.** Note that currently private contractors can be engaged to collect recyclable material.

Community Gardens

Space must be allocated for community gardens in the Downtown South planning area. The popularity of the existing gardens in the north end of Downtown show the need. These existing gardens are probably too far to walk from Downtown South.

Sidewalk Widths

The proposed Downtown South densification means more people walking which in turn will mean more people on sidewalks. Some City of Whitehorse sidewalks are designed in such a manner to encourage walking (3rd Avenue between Main and Strickland, all of Main street, all of 1st Avenue). Other busy sidewalks, however, are extremely narrow and discourage walking.

Some examples are shown below – this is what must NOT happen in the Downtown South area.



Sidewalk crowded with parking metre – 3rd and Elliots



Sidewalk crowded with poles – Hanson and 4th



Crowded Sidewalk Discouraging Walking – 3rd and Main (looking North)

A denser downtown means a walkable downtown, and the City will have to rethink its sidewalk construction standards.

Lighting

Street and trail lighting needs to be improved but not in the sense that more of it is needed. Too much lighting destroys the night sky. As it currently stands, it is virtually impossible to see the northern lights now from downtown in the winter. In addition, the light pollution from downtown is now destroying the view of the night horizon for adjacent suburbs.

Any new street lighting should be of the energy efficient LED variety. Not only does it save on electrical consumption it somewhat mimics moonlight. It is less visually intrusive than current lighting. The initial purchase of these lights is expensive, but the operating costs are miniscule. To the City's credit, test trials are being done with these lights in certain downtown streets.

Lighting on trails will be required for safety reasons, but they should be as low-key as possible. For example, lighting on the proposed new stairs up the clay cliffs should be spot-light on the stairs and immediate areas adjacent to it, and not on lighting up the entire night sky.