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TO: Chairs and Members of Planning and Housing Committee and Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee

DESTINATAIRE: Président et membres du Comité de la planification et du logement et de l'agriculture et des affaires rurales

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**SUBJECT: Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference and Urban Design Guidelines
Updates**

**OBJET : Mise à jour du mandat du Mémoire sur l'esthétique urbaine et des Lignes
directrices pour l'esthétique urbaine**

PURPOSE

The City of Ottawa is undertaking a comprehensive update of its Urban Design program to implement the Official Plan, and recommendations from the [Housing Acceleration Plan \(HAP\)](#). This work includes updating the full suite of existing Urban Design Guidelines, refining the Urban Design Review Panel (UDRP) process, and introducing a simplified Terms of Reference for the Urban Design Brief.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To ensure consistency with the Official Plan and the Zoning By-law, and to address HAP recommendations, City staff have reviewed and undertaken housekeeping updates to ten existing Urban Design Guidelines. The updated guidelines are now organized into three groups: Buildings, Neighbourhoods and Streets, and Commercial Uses. Each group includes specific guidelines that provide clear and context sensitive design direction. Subsequently new guidelines for Low, Mid and High-rise buildings; Corridors, Hubs, Rural Villages and Privately Owned Publicly-Accessible Spaces (POPS) will also be forthcoming between 2026 and 2028 in support of the Official Plan and to address any outstanding HAP recommendations.

In alignment with the ongoing reform of the development review process, staff have also completed a comprehensive review of the Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference with internal stakeholders and external representatives.

This review has resulted in a simplified Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference (TOR) (Document 11). The simplified TOR reduces and clarifies the requirements and when the document is required.

Overall, the Urban Design program updates will continue to support design excellence across Ottawa in alignment with Council direction, while providing efficiencies and supporting greater clarity in the associated process.

RÉSUMÉ

Pour assurer l'uniformité avec le Plan officiel et le Règlement de zonage et pour donner suite aux recommandations du Plan d'accélération de la création de logements (PACL), le personnel de la Ville a revu les dix directrices existantes sur l'esthétique urbaine et y a apporté des mises au point techniques. Les versions à jour de ces lignes directrices sont aujourd'hui organisées en trois groupes : les Bâtiments, les Quartiers et les rues,

ainsi que les Aménagements commerciaux. Chaque groupe comprend les lignes directrices spécifiques, qui définissent clairement et en contexte l'orientation à suivre dans les travaux de conception. Par la suite, de nouvelles lignes directrices pour les bâtiments de faible, de moyenne et de grande hauteur; les couloirs, les carrefours, les villages ruraux et l'espace public appartenant à des intérêts privés (EPAIP) seront également publiées entre 2026 et 2028 pour étayer le Plan officiel, de même que pour donner suite à toutes les recommandations en instance du PACL.

De concert avec la réforme en cours du processus d'examen des demandes d'aménagement, le personnel a également procédé à un examen complet du mandat du Mémoire sur l'esthétique urbaine avec les intervenants internes et les représentants externes.

Cet examen a donné lieu à une version simplifiée du mandat du Mémoire sur l'esthétique urbaine (pièce 11). Ce mandat simplifié réduit et précise les exigences et les cas dans lesquels les documents doivent être déposés.

Dans l'ensemble, les mises à jour du programme du design urbain continueront d'assurer l'excellence des travaux de conception dans l'ensemble de la Ville d'Ottawa, conformément aux directives du Conseil, tout en réalisant des gains d'efficacité et en améliorant la clarté du processus connexe.

BACKGROUND

Achieving design excellence is a key strategic direction of the City's Official Plan (Big Move 3), which aims to strengthen urban and community design at all scales across various transects of the city. The Official Plan places significant importance on context specific design based on the distinct characteristics of Ottawa's variety of unique Neighbourhoods and Villages. The Official Plan further re-enforces the importance of context as it relates to design, through the use of Design Priority Areas which are located city wide. These areas serve as local, national and international focal points for our various communities and are strategically located in Hubs, Corridors, Villages and Special Districts. The Official Plan identifies these key locations as it relates to the importance of design decisions in both the public and private realm. To support the goal of design excellence at all scales in the urban, suburban and rural areas, the City has a robust Urban Design program which maintains urban design guidelines, facilitates staff led design reviews, and coordinates the Urban Design Review Panel, in addition to other initiatives such as the Ottawa Urban Design Awards.

Design guidelines are a key tool in the promotion of good urban, suburban and rural development. The City currently maintains 11 urban design guidelines that address various development typologies, ranging from commercial uses; to high-rise development; to rural villages. These award-winning guidelines have been used by City staff, Council, development industry, community associations, and the general public in the planning and development review processes to implement Council's city-building vision. The impacts of these guidelines can be seen city-wide on projects of all scales which are often recognized at the local, national and international level for their delivery of design excellence and their contributions to the City's liveable urban fabric and attractive public realm.

The guidelines are further bolstered by the City's Official Plan (2022) Section 4.6, which foresees "Urban design playing an important role in supporting the City's objectives such as building healthy 15- minute neighbourhoods" and plans for an Urban Design Framework within which various tools including Design Priority Areas, the Urban Design Review Panel and Urban Design Guidelines play a key role in the implementation of urban design excellence. Section 4.6.5.1. further outlines that "Development throughout the City shall demonstrate that the intent of applicable Council-approved plans and design guidelines are met.". Therefore, it is important that the associated design guidelines are maintained on a continual basis to ensure they are aligned with other City policies and best practices to meet the needs of our diverse communities.

To address this need, Staff have undertaken a review of the existing guidelines to ensure conformity and consistency with the Official Plan and Zoning By-law. As part of the [Housing Acceleration Plan](#) (HAP) approved on October 8, 2025, staff were further directed to complete a comprehensive review of the Urban Design Guidelines and report back by Q4 2026. The work that has been completed to-date is housekeeping in nature to ensure consistency with the Official Plan and the new Zoning By-law and aligns with the recommendations of HAP. These updated guidelines form Documents 1 to 10. Staff are also working on several new guidelines over the next two years as outlined in this memorandum.

The Urban Design Brief (UDB) is a required submission for specific development applications. The key purpose of the UDB is to illustrate considerations in the design process that demonstrate the appropriateness of a proposed design including site context, massing, and public realm considerations. The preparation of the UDB is guided by a Terms of Reference (UDB TOR), which has also been updated from time to time to reflect the most recent policies and practical considerations. The most recent update includes significant changes aimed at simplification of the required contents and

when the UDB is required as part of a development application. The updates were made in consultation with representatives of the development industry and are in alignment with the recommendations of HAP. The updated UDB TOR is attached as Document 11.

DISCUSSION

Urban Design Guidelines

The City of Ottawa currently maintains 11 Urban Design Guidelines that support the development review process by supplementing existing policies and by-laws. These guidelines have contributed to improved design quality city-wide over the past 20 years, offering flexible, context-sensitive direction rather than prescriptive rules. Because many pre-date the current Official Plan, varying levels of updates are required to ensure housekeeping and consistency. Furthermore, to modernize and make the guidelines more user-friendly, staff have reorganized them into three broader guideline groups, which will be posted online following release of this memorandum. The updated Urban Design Guideline groupings are as follows:

Design Guidelines for Buildings

- Low-Rise Infill Housing
- Mid-Rise
- High-Rise

Design Guidelines for Neighbourhoods and Streets

- New Neighbourhoods
- Transit Oriented Developments
- Mainstreets (Wider than 30m)
- Mainstreets (Narrower than 30m)
- Rural Villages
- POPS - Privately Owned Publicly-Accessible Spaces

Design Guidelines for Commercial Uses

- Drive-Through Facility
- Large-Format Retail
- Commercial Patio
- Gas Station

These groupings improve usability for applicants, community members, staff, and Council by providing clear, context-specific sub-guidance and enabling more targeted

updates. All updated guidelines will be available on Ottawa.ca and are attached as Documents 1 to 10.

Staff have completed housekeeping updates to ten of the existing Urban Design Guidelines (Documents 1-10). These updates included a consistency review, minor editing to align with updated policy direction, consistent look, feel and introductory language, in addition to various new illustrations and photos. They are provided for information purposes in support of this memorandum. It is important to note that five of the ten updated guidelines are interim guidelines. They include High-rise Buildings, Mainstreets (Narrower than 30 metres), Mainstreets (Wider than 30 metres), Transit Oriented Development and Rural Villages.

The following seven new guidelines are planned to be newly introduced, replace or consolidate existing guidelines:

- Low-rise infill housing (Q2 2026)
- Mid-rise (Q2 2026)
- High-rise (Q1 2027)
- Corridors (replaces Traditional and Arterial Mainstreets, 2027)
- Hubs (replaces Transit Oriented Development, 2027)
- Rural Villages (2028)
- POPS - Privately Owned Publicly-Accessible Spaces (2028).

These guidelines will be presented to Council for review and approval over the course of the next two years and will be subject to a robust consultation process engaging members of Council, industry partners, public stakeholders, internal staff and subject matter experts.

Direction from the Housing Acceleration Plan (HAP)

The following, HAP recommendations including additional direction from, the 'Removing Barriers, Opening Doors Action Report' are addressed in the current housekeeping updates as follows:

Window streets in new subdivisions (Amend noise attenuation rules to eliminate window streets)

Response: Addressed in housing keeping updates, see (Document 2). The New Neighbourhoods guideline language has been updated to allow flexible design responses and considerations to noise attenuation requirements. The guidelines no longer recommend window streets as the only solution to noise attenuation on Arterial

roadways. It is also important to note that noise attenuation requirements are governed by the Environmental Noise Control Guidelines, not Urban Design Guidelines.

The following HAP recommendations will be addressed as part of the seven new design guidelines:

- **Noise attenuation for mid-rise buildings**
 Response: To be addressed in upcoming new Mid-rise guidelines in alignment with zoning and noise by-law requirements. (expected to come forward in Q2 2026)
- **Floor plate requirements (Relax floor plate requirements to improve constructability and efficiency)**
 Response: To be addressed in the new High-rise design guidelines. The review process will include an assessment of the appropriateness of current floor plate standards (expected in 2027)
- **Revise guidelines with an affordability lens.**
 Response: New guidelines are being developed with greater flexibility to support construction affordability, including considerations and guidance for denser housing typologies as part of the guidelines for low-rise infill housing; and flexible alternative transition measures and considerations for mid-rise buildings to reduce costs by providing greater simplicity and ease of constructability.
- **Enable greater design flexibility.**
 Response: New guidelines will emphasize context-specific flexibility in design based solutions to commonly identified issues specific to the three areas of design guidance (Buildings, Commercial Uses, Neighbourhood and Streets).
- **Remove angular planes in high-density nodes and along mid-rise corridors.**
 Response: New Mid-rise and High-rise guidelines will provide alternative considerations to address transition and will not specifically reference the use of an angular planes.
- **Expand the definition of mid-rise to include buildings up to 12 storeys.**
 Response: The Official Plan defines mid-rise as up to nine storeys; changes would require amendments to the OP and Zoning-By-law city-wide. Staff will work with stakeholders to address flexibility for nine to 12-storey slab and bar buildings through the new High-rise guidelines review process.
- **Exempt projects of 20 units or fewer from Site Plan Control.**
 Response: This item is being reviewed through a separate process.
- **Consolidate and reduce the number of Urban Design Guidelines.**
 Response: The former 11 guidelines have been reorganized into three broader

guideline families with targeted sub-guidance. Opportunities for additional consolidation of guidelines in the future will be reviewed as part of the on-going Urban Design work program: ex. Mainstreets will be consolidated into Corridor guidelines.

Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference

The Urban Design Brief (UDB) Terms of Reference (TOR) also required review and updates in alignment with other updated development application requirements. Throughout 2025, staff worked with internal and external stakeholders to review the Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference.

The requirement and content for an Urban Design Brief is currently determined as part of the pre-consultation process using a checklist form. Applications and requirements may currently be exempted due to a lack of complexity and/or applicability, but this can lead to mixed outcomes, a lack of consistency and unclear expectations for all stakeholders involved.

To address this issue, a simplified and scoped approach is planned, which reduces application types requiring a brief and streamlines required content into a standardized list based on the complexity of the application and the applicability of Urban Design Review Panel (UDRP). The updated Terms of Reference is provided as supporting Document 11.

Key Updates to the Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference include:

- Exemption of low-rise buildings and Site Plan Control applications unless also subject to UDRP (e.g., major institutional facilities).
- Removal of microclimate assessment (wind and shadow requirements) in alignment with the updated Development Application Studies and Plans list of requirements to deem an application complete.
- Simplified brief focused on site context, design issues/opportunities, and proposed solutions, with policy analysis removed.

CONSULTATION

The following internal and external stakeholder consultation took place between 2024 and 2026 regarding Urban Design Program updates.

- **September 2024:** Presentation to Industry Steering Committee on the Urban Design Guideline Update Workplan
- **January 2025:** Meeting #1 with Greater Ottawa Home Builders Association (GOHBA) working group to confirm issues grouped into three themes – UDB TOR, UDRP process, and general process/timing.
- **March 2025:** Meeting #2 with GOHBA working group to confirm action items, followed by consultations with Planning Services and the UDRP members.
- **May 2025:** Two focus group meetings on UDB TOR and UDRP process elements with GOHBA working group.
- **August 2025:** Presentation of proposed solutions with GOHBA working group.
- **February 2026:** Presentation of the final UDB TOR and UDRP process elements to the Planning Engineering Liaison Committee (PELC).
- **February 2026:** Presentation of the UD Program updates to the Federation of Citizens Association (FCA).
- **April 2026:** Presentation of Low-rise and Mid-rise residential design guidelines to the Planning Advisory Committee (PAC)

The housekeeping updates to the existing Urban Design Guidelines are limited to amendments to ensure alignment with the HAP, the language of the Official Plan and Zoning By-law in addition to ensuring they have a consistent look and feel and glossary. The housekeeping nature of this work did not necessitate consultation but general awareness. All new Urban Design Guidelines are subject to a robust consultation process including internal and external stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The current housekeeping updates and newly planned Urban Design Guidelines in addition to the Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference represent a significant step forward in modernizing the City's approach to design review. Together, these improvements streamline requirements, enhance clarity and flexibility for applicants, and strengthen alignment with the Official Plan, the Housing Acceleration Plan, and the new Zoning By-law. This comprehensive work will continue to support design excellence across Ottawa while ensuring that the development review process remains responsive, efficient, and grounded in contemporary best practices.

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SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Document 1 – Design Guidelines for Neighbourhoods and Streets: Mainstreets (Wider than 30 metres)

Document 2 – Design Guidelines for Neighbourhoods and Streets: New Neighbourhoods

Document 3 – Design Guidelines for Neighbourhoods and Streets: Transit Oriented Developments

Document 4 – Design Guidelines for Neighbourhoods and Streets: Mainstreets (Narrower than 30 metres)

Document 5 – Design Guidelines for Neighbourhoods and Streets: Rural Villages

Document 6 – Design Guidelines for Buildings: High-Rise

Document 7 – Design Guidelines for Commercial Uses: Drive-Through Facility

Document 8 – Design Guidelines for Commercial Uses: Large-Format Retail

Document 9 – Design Guidelines for Commercial Uses: Commercial Patio (*Held on file with the Office of the City Clerk*)

Document 10 – Design Guidelines for Commercial Uses: Gas Station

Document 11 – Urban Design Brief Terms of Reference