

**WHAT
WE
HEARD.**



**PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION**

2024 Supportive Housing Focus Groups

Project Overview:

November 12-14, 2024, Planning and Development held three focus groups with Airdrie residents to explore potential changes to the Land Use Bylaw relating to Supportive Housing, specifically the Supportive Housing, Limited land use designation. The City used its digital communications channels including MyAirdrie, Facebook, Instagram and X to create awareness of a call for volunteers to participate in the focus groups.

Date: November 22, 2024

Prepared by City of Airdrie

Executive Summary

Reviewing the City's current Land Use Bylaw regulations related to Supportive Housing, those of other municipalities, and reaching out to community members, provided an opportunity to gain a better understanding on how the City's standards could be amended to better accommodate the range of housing needs to support all of Airdrie's residents while balancing any concerns with this type of housing option.

The City held three evening focus group discussions between November 12-14, 2024. The focus groups were organized by sentiment towards, and experience with, supportive housing. Further, within each focus group we sought a diversity of perspectives by balancing self-reported demographics such as gender, age, household income, identifying as a visible minority, and location of residence in the city (i.e. NW, SW, NE, SE, Central). Discussion was centered around the Supportive Housing, Limited land use.

What We Heard

Development Permit/Discretionary vs. Permitted Use

- Most participants indicated that Supportive Housing, Limited should remain a discretionary use, both to better inform adjacent residents about how they can be aware and supportive neighbours and to have the option to appeal the decision.

Intensity of Use

- There was significant agreement among participants that the number of clients for any given supportive housing should depend on the size of the building/home – ensuring a comfortable quality of living space per resident. Many focus group participants indicated that between 3-6 clients maintained more of a residential nature for the facility, more than this started to feel more institutional.

Parking

- Participants generally didn't have specific recommendations for parking – but noted that there may need to be a consideration for more on-site parking on a case-by-case basis where the intensity of use on the site is higher (e.g. higher staff to client ratios, higher numbers of clients who drive).

Location/Siting

- Participants identified a number of items for consideration related to location and/or siting of Supportive Housing, Limited uses including access for emergency vehicles, proximity to parks, services and programs, distances between other similar or same land uses, distances from schools and being sensitive about proximity to transit.

Public Engagement/Outreach

- Most participants felt that requiring pre-application outreach to adjacent residents could be a good way to foster good neighbour relations and address any concerns or questions without having to go to an appeal process.

Project Information

Exploring updates to Supportive Housing regulations in the Land Use Bylaw has roots in recent Development Permit application experiences and Council direction. Since 2022, the City has seen an increase in applications for Supportive Housing, as well as related concerns, and regular appeal board visits. This suggests that current Land Use Bylaw standards may be out of date and are misaligned with the needs of residents and supportive living operators.

Reviewing our current regulations, those of other municipalities, and reaching out to community members provided an opportunity to gain a better understanding on how the City's standards could be amended to better accommodate the range of housing needs to support all of Airdrie's residents while balancing any concerns with this type of housing option.

Public Participation Approach

The topic of supportive housing can be complicated as the City and the Province each have contributing roles regarding this type of housing and care service. The City determined a dialogue was needed to both ask and answer clarifying questions. In order to foster discussion and deeper understanding of Airdrie residents' concerns, values, and priorities around integrating supportive housing into residential areas, the City held an evening focus group discussion on each of November 12, 13 and 14, 2024 respectively.

To solicit participants for the focus groups the City distributed a call for volunteers through its digital communications channels including MyAirdrie, Facebook, X and Instagram. 79 applications were received, and 27 participants were selected to participate. Of these, 22 attended the focus group sessions.

The focus groups were organized by sentiment towards, and experience with, supportive housing. Further, within each focus group we sought a diversity of perspectives by balancing self-reported demographics such as gender, age, household income, identifying as a visible minority, and location of residence in the city (i.e. NW, SW, NE, SE, Central).

Nov. 12 Focus Group

Neutral to supportive sentiment towards supportive housing

No/low live or work experience with supportive housing

Nov. 13 Focus Group

Strong sense of wariness about supportive housing applications

Any (or no) live or work experience with supportive housing

Nov. 14 Focus Group

Neutral to supportive sentiment towards supportive housing

Have live or work experience with supportive housing

Summary of Public Participation Input

For those participants who indicated they felt more neutral to supportive of Supportive Housing, Limited applications in Airdrie, a large focus of the discussion was on how to better support an efficient application process for this type of housing, ensuring that public engagement balances neighbours' concerns with client privacy, and placing supportive housing facilities in proximity to parks, services and other programs and resources to support client needs.

For those participants who indicated they felt wariness about Supportive Housing, Limited applications, discussion focused more on who the client(s) might be and therefore what the risk to neighbours might be, as well as how monitoring and supervision of operators could be ensured (note that these areas of concern are largely outside the purview of the Land Use Bylaw).

Both groups of participants want to ensure that client quality of life, quality of care as well as security and safety are ensured through appropriately sized living arrangements, relating maximum number of clients with the size and layout of the homes.

Both groups also felt that pre-application engagement with neighbouring residences by those applying for the land use was important for contributing to neighbours' awareness and understanding of the facility, as well as supporting good relationships between the operators of supportive housing and adjacent residents.

What we heard

The following sections provide summaries of responses to each of the discussion questions/topics explored during the focus group.

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ABOUT DEVELOPMENT PERMITS – DISCRETIONARY OR PERMITTED USE

Current regulation: Supportive Housing, Limited always requires a development permit and is always a discretionary use.

Q1 Are there circumstances where Supportive Housing, Limited should/could be a permitted use?

Q2 Are there circumstances where Supportive Housing, Limited should/could be exempt from a development permit?

- *Probing questions/examples: In certain types of residential buildings? When there are three or fewer residents? When there are three or fewer support staff on-site at any given time?*

Discretionary vs. Permitted uses:

- Most participants in the focus groups felt that regardless of size or type of residential building that the Supportive Housing, Limited use should continue to be a discretionary use. This was largely due to the sense that adjacent residents should be notified about this type of use, both to be better informed about how they can be aware and supportive neighbours and to have the option to appeal the decision.
- Some participants were concerned that getting approved appeared to be a long process and could delay getting the people who need it from getting into this type of housing and care.

Balancing notification to neighbours and the privacy of residents:

- There was some concern expressed at one focus group session that the intent of this type of housing is to allow clients to live as normal a residential experience as possible. Therefore, notifying adjacent residents, highlighting that someone is moving in, and they are different and have different needs for support could jeopardize that desired outcome.

Additional considerations for development permit conditions:

- There was a desire expressed by some focus group participants to prioritize clients who are from Airdrie. Note: this is outside the purview of the Land Use Bylaw.
- A suggestion was received to consider a time-limit/renewal aspect for the development permit, such as every five years or so, in case the details of the client needs/operations has shifted a lot from first application.
- Some participants felt that the City should not issue permits for units under three clients as these types of supportive housing facilities do not require a licence from Alberta Health Services (AHS). For these participants, this sentiment was related to a feeling that if the operator did not need a licence from AHS, then they would be unsupervised. (This is an assumption made by participants, but one that fueled this concern).
- A question was asked whether it is possible to require the operator's connection to an agency in the application, or if not, as part of the business licence? For example, are they connected to AHS, Persons with Developmental Disabilities (or PDD), Child and Family Services, etc. This would give the city and adjacent landowners a broad category of the types of people that may be housed in the facility. Perhaps there is an existing agreement or contract that can be sent as part of an application requirement. The partner agency may offer some information to alleviate concerns.

ABOUT MAXIMUM INTENSITY

Current regulation: Supportive Housing, Limited does not currently specify maximum numbers of residents or staff.

Q3 Should the regulation specify the maximum number of residents?

- *Probing questions/examples: Is there a number of residents where the home would no longer be compatible with being considered residential in nature? What about staff? (Could be more difficult to specify as a change in resident could mean a change in staffing requirements).*

Maximum number of residents and/or staff:

- There was significant agreement among focus group participants that the maximum number of clients for any given supportive housing should depend on the size of the building/home – ensuring that there is a comfortable quality of living space per resident.
- Many focus group participants indicated that between 3-6 clients maintained more of a residential nature for the facility. More clients than this started to feel more institutional in nature. But that a true ‘maximum’ within this range depended on the size of the living space and the nature of the care/support being provided.
- The ratio of care staff to a resident is important to consider. A 24/7 shift is the same as one person living on site.

Proximity of supportive housing unit to other supportive housing units:

- Participants consistently expressed that not putting supportive housing facilities side by side, or locating several close together, is important for managing cumulative impact and any potential parking issues.

Multi-unit groups homes:

- While the main area of discussion of the focus groups was related to small types of supportive facilities that are located within neighbourhoods – there was a concern raised about multi-unit group homes (Supportive Housing, general land use) and the potential for this type of housing to have increased cumulative negative impacts to the areas in which they are located.

ABOUT PARKING

Current regulation: Supportive Housing, Limited inherits the parking requirements of the residential housing form (usually two on-site parking stalls).

Q4 Should there be additional parking considerations? For staff? For residents? For visitors?

- *Probing questions/examples: For past applications, residents are rarely also drivers. On-site visitor parking is not regulated for regular single-family homes.*

Participants generally didn't have specific recommendations for parking – but indicated that there may need to be a consideration for more on-site parking on a case-by-case basis where the intensity of use on the site is higher (e.g. higher staff to client ratios, higher numbers of clients who drive).

ABOUT LOCATION/SITING

Current regulation: Consideration shall be given to proximity to other similar facilities, location of the facility on the block and in the neighbourhood, and classification of the street on which the facility is to be located.

Q5 Should any siting considerations be specified in the regulations for supportive housing?

- *Probing questions/examples: Not within so many meters of a similar facility? Located within so many metres of transit services and/or bus stop? Located on a 'collector' street in a neighbourhood?*

Participants offered of several considerations related to where Supportive Housing, Limited should/could be located, these included:

- Placing supportive housing facilities in proximity to parks and services and other programs and resources is important to help the clients
- Some concern was expressed that Airdrie may not have sufficient additional services or programs that may be available in larger centres (e.g. Calgary).
- Because clients of supportive housing are not living totally independently, living very close to bus/transit stops could result in unintended trips/consequences. Though locating somewhat close could be helpful for support staff.
- Some participants wanted to ensure that supportive housing isn't located too close to schools
- Ensuring access to the home for emergency services is a good idea and this might mean looking at mid-block, corner lot or main (collectors) street locations as opposed to cul-de-sac or smaller street locations.

ABOUT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT/OUTREACH

Current regulation: Strongly recommend (but not required in the Land Use Bylaw) that applicant undertake public engagement or outreach with neighbouring properties prior to application submission. Includes a guide to assist applicant in preparing for public engagement.

Q6 Should public engagement be required as part of the application process? Required notification of adjacent residences within 60m (similar to other notification requirements in the LUB)?

Most focus group participants indicated they felt this was a good practice. Some of the reasons why included:

- Creating an opportunity to ask questions before a formal appeal/hearing process
- Creating good neighbour relationships between the operator and adjacent residents
- Protecting the privacy of individual residents, while creating dialogue about the type of supportive housing and potential impacts to adjacent homes.

Q7 The guide for public engagement identifies questions to answer/ information recommended to be shared about the facility with adjacent residents. Are there other questions/information that you think would be helpful? Any that should be removed?

The following comments were received based on the guideline questions provided by the City:

A. Brief overview and history of the supportive housing business and proposed use of this location. (Primary/typical business activities, days and hours of operations, etc.)

Comments:

- Include timeline of business operations
- What is the experience of the supportive housing business
- Focus on the proposed use

B. Number of clients residing in the home (maximum occupancy) and their intended stay period. (Permanent or temporary occupancy, pre-determined exit dates, maximum stay period, etc.)

Comments:

- Helpful for making a decision, but not for the residents/neighbours
- This may vary over time, so may not be that helpful
- What is the population being served (Children/adults/seniors)
- Are your clients from within Airdrie or out of Airdrie
- Remove “and their intended stay period....”

C. Outline the level of care, safety and supervision your supportive housing development will provide its clients. (Mechanisms in place to support residential safety and security, meal services, housekeeping services, personal care. Etc.)

Comments:

- Remove ‘outline level of care’ as it could compromise the confidentiality of clients
- What kinds of needs are being supported
- Focus on the safety and security measures

D. Number of employees working in the home (maximum on the property at once) and their schedule.

Comments:

- What is the staffing ratio
- Remove “and their schedule”

E. List of certifications and licenses held by the caregiver and other employees. (Staff providing on-site professional care should have professional training and certification)

Comments:

- e.g. HCA, RSW
- Remove question (x4 comments)
- This may invade employees' privacy

F. Number and type of visits to the property and their frequency per day/week. (Ex. Emergency vehicles, social workers, program pick-up/drop-off, etc.)

Comments:

- This may vary too much to be worth the effort to track
- This may change if/when the resident changes
- Who is monitoring the provider
- Remove question (x3 comments)

G. List of approvals and licenses issued from other governing agencies that you have obtained. (Ex. Alberta Health Designated Supportive Living Accommodation approval/licence, Family Support for Children with Disabilities accreditation, Public Health – food handling permit, Environmental Health Inspection, Facility-based Childcare licence, etc.)

Comments:

- Which Provincial body is overseeing/funding your supportive housing business
- Provide your contract with the governing agency
- This isn't needed as is an Alberta Health Services issue (x2 comments)

Additional questions that may be helpful for adjacent residents:

- Compliance with Community Standards and/or Noise Bylaws
 - There aren't any questions about the exterior of the property – e.g. sidewalk clearing, waste management, landscaping, and how the supportive housing will fit in with the rest of the community in these ways.
 - There aren't any questions about how any issues with noise control/complaints will be handled
 - There aren't questions about ways other behaviours, that could be seen as a nuisance, would be handled e.g. light pollution or numbers of people smoking on the balcony (Note: While a concern for some focus group participants, these are also not items specified for residential homes in general in the Land Use Bylaw).
- If the operator's contact information is included in the engagement/outreach that would help with neighboring landowners' concerns, so that they do not necessarily have to contact the RCMP or Municipal Enforcement every time.

What's Next & Timelines

Feedback from these focus groups, combined with Planning and Development's internal and comparative data and policy reviews, has been used to make recommended updates to the Land Use Bylaw related to Supportive Housing.

Recommendations will be presented to the Community Infrastructure and Strategic Growth Committee (CISG) in Q4 2024. And, pending direction at Committee, are anticipated to be presented at a Public Hearing meeting of Council in early 2025.

Contact Information

For more information regarding the 2024 Supportive Housing Focus Groups, contact:

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