



STAFF REPORT
Planning

Title: City of Waterloo – Urban Design Manual 2.0 Launch
Report Number: IPPW2026-006
Author: Max Kerrigan
Meeting Type: Council Meeting
Council/Committee Date: January 26, 2026
File: N/A
Attachments: None
Ward No.: City Wide

Recommendation:

1. That Council receive staff report IPPW2026-006 for information.

A. Report

The City of Waterloo is committed to a high standard of urban design. The City's urban design vision and objectives are implemented through the City's Official Plan, its Urban Design Manual ("UDM") and supplementary guidelines, and investment in the public realm.

At the broadest level, the City's urban design policies establish the primary design objectives and priorities for the city and its built environment. These policies are further defined and implemented through the UDM, a consolidated set of design standards, guidelines, design-related criteria, and reference materials.

Adopted by Council in 2009, the UDM is used by staff, Council, the development industry, professional consultants, external agencies, committees, and the general public to evaluate proposed changes to the built environment. The UDM has and continues to play a critical role in the development review process, and for public realm improvement projects, throughout the city.

After more than 12 years since its adoption, the City's Planning Division initiated a process to update the City's Urban Design Manual (2009) in May 2021. The update consists of two phases:

- (i.) **Phase One** was quick wins, amending the UDM to better implement the City's Strategic Plan, incorporate approved strategies and plans such as the

Uptown Public Realm Strategy, update references to align with current standards (e.g., City of Waterloo Accessibility Standards 2016), and advance minor amendments related to exterior design. Phase One was advanced to Council in June 2021; and

- (ii.) **Phase Two** is a comprehensive review and update of the UDM, titled the Urban Design Manual 2.0 project (“UDM 2.0”). IPPW2026-006 provides a high-level overview of Phase 2 and anticipated project milestones, including opportunities for engagement.

What is UDM 2.0

Since 2009, new urban design policies and guidance has emerged including strengthened design-related policies in the Official Plan, built form performance standards in the Zoning By-law, Station Area Plans, and specific neighbourhood or ‘focus area’ urban design guidelines. These policies, objectives, standards and guidelines have provided supplemental and more focused urban design direction. A comprehensive update to the UDM is needed to reflect this work and to incorporate contemporary urban design best practices where appropriate.

UDM 2.0 will update two key sections of the City’s Urban Design Manual, through the development of two companion documents:

- Waterloo Built Form Standards (the “**BFS**”)
- Waterloo Urban Design Standards (the “**UDS**”)

The primary purpose of these two companion documents is to provide urban design direction and guidance to planning applications, and to assess, promote and fulfill the intent of the built form and urban design related policies in the City’s Official Plan and the built form performance standards in the City’s Zoning By-law, all of which play a fundamental role in shaping our growing city and neighbourhoods.

The goal of this project is to consolidate existing built form and site planning standards, guidelines and objectives into a contemporary and user-friendly document. The BFS and UDS will form two critical chapters of the updated UDM and will provide a set of standards that echo, support, strengthen, and further articulate existing policy objectives in the City’s Official Plan and Zoning By-law as they relate to built form and site design.

Evolving Planning Context

Since the introduction of Phase One, the Province of Ontario has passed a series of laws and policies aimed at accelerating housing construction and streamlining planning approvals. These include:

- Bill 23 – More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022;
- Bill 185 – Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act, 2024;

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- Issuance of a new Provincial Planning Statement (PPS 2024);
- Bill 17 — Protect Ontario by Building Faster and Smarter (2025);
- Bill 60 — Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act (2025).

Collectively, these changes reduce the range of urban design matters that municipalities can regulate through site plan control, exempt certain developments from site plan control, and place stronger emphasis on clear and efficient development approvals.

The Urban Design Manual will be updated to align with existing legislation through UDM 2.0, in a new clear and concise format that efficiently sets out the City of Waterloo's urban design standards, specifications, and guidelines.

Key Provincial Changes Affecting Urban Design Guidelines

1. Reduced authority to regulate exterior design (Bill 23) – exterior architectural elements.

Impact: Municipal influence over design must shift earlier in the process.

2. Exemptions for certain small-scale residential projects - Many low-rise or small multi-unit developments no longer require Site Plan approval.

Impact: Urban Design Guidelines may be the only design tool available to provide any form of design direction for this form of infill/intensification.

3. Provincial Planning Statement, 2024 - The PPS now emphasizes housing supply, intensification, and predictable development approvals.

Impact: Urban design expectations should support streamlined processes and advance provincial objectives.

4. Expanded use of Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs) - MZOs can override municipal planning decisions, including urban design objectives.

Impact: Clear, upfront, widely understood standards, specifications and guidelines reduce the risk of conflict or inconsistent design outcomes.

Why an Update to the Urban Design Manual is Timely

Provincial legislative reforms have reduced the scope of municipal site-plan discretion and increased the use of as-of-right approvals and provincial instruments to enable development. As such, municipalities have fewer tools to secure quality design that meets the community urban design vision and objectives. Updating the UDM can facilitate continued design quality while staying aligned with provincial objectives.

1. Shifting design influence to earlier stages

Legislation is leading municipalities to clearly articulate urban design expectations early in the planning process, using consistent design language, embedded in:

- Official Plan policies
- Zoning By law
- Urban design guidelines/standards

This ensures applicants incorporate high-quality design *before* detailed plans are prepared.

2. To maintain design quality amid accelerated approvals

Even within a streamlined system, municipalities can still promote:

- walkable, complete communities;
- compatible intensification;
- high-quality streetscapes;
- climate- and age-friendly design.

Effective and concise guidelines help achieve accelerated approvals.

3. To provide clarity and predictability for applicants

Clear, concise, well-illustrated guidelines reduce confusion, shorten review timelines, and support applicants in meeting both municipal expectations and provincial timelines.

4. To address more development occurring outside of Site Plan Control

For exempt projects, guidelines may be the primary design reference for builders and homeowners. The guidelines must therefore be easy to use and directly applicable at multiple scales.

5. To prepare for potential future provincial audits

Transparent, policy-based guidelines demonstrate that the municipality is applying design expectations fairly, consistently, and in alignment with provincial housing objectives.

How to Get Involved

A consultation and engagement strategy is planned which includes a continuous online platform where interested persons can find project background, data, milestones, and feedback opportunities (<https://www.engagewr.ca/udm-refresh>). Additional opportunities are planned to include visioning sessions with the community, specific interested parties, as well as a feedback opportunities once draft documents are available.

Once details are finalized, the Engage page will be updated to include specifics on the various engagement opportunities, as well as provide project details for public feedback as they become available.

B. Financial Implications

SGL Planning & Design Inc. (“SGL”), a multi-disciplinary planning and design firm, has been retained to assist the Planning Division in advancing UDM 2.0. Project costs are funded from existing capital budget approvals relating to planning studies. A request for additional funding is not anticipated.

C. Technology Implications

None.

D. Link to Strategic Plan

(Strategic Objectives: Equity, Inclusion and a Sense of Belonging; Sustainability and the Environment; Safe, Sustainable Transportation; Healthy Community & Resilient Neighbourhoods; Infrastructure Renewal; Economic Growth & Development)

(Guiding Principles: Equity and Inclusion; Sustainability; Fiscal Responsibility, Healthy and Safe Workplace, Effective Engagement, Personal Leadership, Service Excellence)

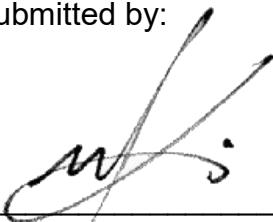
UDM 2.0 will refine, update, and enhance the City’s primary design guideline document to assist in creating a Healthy Community & Resilient Neighbourhoods that are inclusive, equitable, safe and convenient to navigate; be sensitive to goals of Sustainability and the Environment; and promote continued Economic Growth and Development.

E. Previous Reports on this Topic

IPPW2021-030

IPPW2021-032

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