

# Intensification Through Collaboration

## KELOWNA'S INFILL CHALLENGE BUILDS BONDS OF COMMUNITY AMONG PEOPLE OF ALL AGES

When the City of Kelowna, in British Columbia, wanted to increase housing options in its downtown core, it found that neighbourhoods are not defined by boundaries or created by policies. "Neighbourhoods are comprised of people and built on relationships. Break those connections and the neighbourhood suffers," says James Moore, Acting Department Manager, Policy and Planning for the municipal government. Today, the community has taken an important step forward in creating inclusive designs that will allow more people, including seniors, to live full, independent and active lives in neighbourhoods where many services can be reached without driving.

The process was called the Infill Challenge, an innovative competition that called for new housing designs in select parts of Kelowna's urban core. In developing the project, the City created a unique committee of residents, developers, planners, health officials, architects, realtors and others with an interest in community development. Moore realized early on the project would be unprecedented. "I had never seen such co-operation and consensus at public meetings. When we hold public meetings on a particular proposal, residents might only see the specific change at the micro level and will often oppose it. In discussing the vision for the neighbourhood as a whole, parties that are usually on opposite sides quickly came together."

### The Infill Challenge

Infill development uses vacant or underused land within existing urban areas. The aim of the Infill Challenge is to encourage the development of new housing designs that would contribute to housing intensification in the city's core to help develop walkable, livable and diverse neighbourhoods for people of all ages. Winning projects are intended to act as catalysts, inspiring greater achievement in the design of sensitive infill housing.



**Figure 1** Infill Challenge boundaries

The competition was designed to produce innovative results. The rules of the competition made clear that submissions must form sensitive infill housing not presently permitted under current City of Kelowna zoning bylaws. Designs were based on a single lot having a width of 15 m and a depth of 37 m, and having lane access only. This represented one of the most common types of infill lots in the city's core. The design could not exceed a maximum density of four units per parcel and had to provide adequate off-street parking. The designs were required to align with all applicable standards of the current BC Building Code.

## The Infill Challenge: A Timeline

June 2015 – Kelowna Council first endorsed the overall strategy for the Infill Challenge.

Spring/summer 2015 – A community panel was assembled and met twice. Working with the panel, staff created the rules of the Infill Challenge competition and defined the criteria against which submissions would be evaluated.

November 2015 – A memorandum on the progress of the Infill Challenge was provided to Council.

November 12 – The Infill Challenge competition officially opened on November 12, 2015.

January 11, 2016 – The competition closes, ten submissions were received from interested parties throughout the province. Each submission is reviewed for general compliance with the BC Building Code. Where deficiencies were found, an opportunity was provided to make the necessary revisions.

March 1, 2016 – The first meeting of the evaluation committee was held. The Committee shortlisted three of the ten submissions for further review. Comments and suggestions were provided to the three shortlisted submissions.

April 6, 2016 – A second and final Evaluation Committee meeting was held where the Committee decided on by the final two submissions to recommend as winners to Council.

## What is stopping development of complete neighbourhoods in the core?

The inspiration for the Infill Challenge built up over time. Like others in the community, Moore had looked at the complete neighbourhoods being built on the outskirts of Kelowna and kept asking the same question: “Why can’t we do this downtown?” It turns out that, sometimes, the grass is, in fact, a little greener on the other side. “Greenfield” is a term that refers to land that has never been developed and is still in a largely natural state. “In greenfield areas, there are no neighbours with a vested interest saying ‘don’t build that near me.’”

However, Kelowna saw a healthier future for the city by also developing “infill properties” within the city limits. In these areas, change requires communication and collaboration. “Existing residents value these spaces for different reasons,” says Moore. “In fact, in the core, the municipal regulations were preventing the kind of developments we were seeing out in the valley.”

## The Healthy City Strategy

The Infill Challenge is part of a broader effort to improve quality of life in the community through an initiative called the Healthy City Strategy. Part of that strategy was the Community for All Ages Plan. Infill housing can help achieve the density needed to attract a wide range of services and viable businesses back to the core. This allows seniors to be able to access services without driving, which contributes to good health. Not only are seniors able to live at home and in the community longer, they are in an environment that contributes to their overall well-being. The City wants to get away from the idea of single-purpose neighbourhoods, where residents might live in one neighbourhood in their early adult years, and then other neighbourhoods when having a family, and still another in their senior years. “Neighbourhoods should allow us to live healthy lives at all stages in life. The core should be the natural place for complete neighbourhoods.”

## Building relationships before building homes

From past experience, Moore and other city officials knew that the process for achieving housing intensification would have to be non-confrontational or it would have been a non-starter. “We needed to build relationships, not build tension,” says Moore. So the Infill Challenge followed an inclusive approach that brought many voices to the table.

A community panel of 21 people was drafted, representing diverse groups. For example, in addition to residents of the core, people living in other parts of the city were invited to participate. Other contributors included representatives from the school district and the Interior Health Authority. Housing professionals included realtors, architects and representatives from the Canadian Home Builders’ Association. The group members met to discuss the issues and create a vision for what infill should achieve. As part of this process, they developed the rules of engagement for the competition, including evaluation criteria and mandatory components for the designs.

## Infill Challenge Evaluation Criteria

1. Respect for context – designs should respect their local and neighbourhood contexts.
2. Limit bulk – the bulk and massing of buildings should not dominate surrounding development.
3. Positive relationship to the street – buildings should demonstrate an open and positive relationship to the street through front porches and other tools.
4. High-quality open/green space – designs should provide ample, accessible open space for residents.





**Figure 2** Recommended design 1 – Inhabit: Thoughtfully designed infill living

The competition ran for several months and closed in January 2016. A seven-person evaluation committee, drawn from the larger committee, was formed to look at the submissions. They used an evaluation matrix that had been developed by the full committee and selected the top two submissions to recommend to City Council. Council accepted their recommendations.

## The winning designs

### *Design 1: Inhabit 4*

The top design was a highly adaptable and flexible concept that proposes a total of four units.

There are two narrow-single detached units at the front of the site, which maintain the single-family character of the street. Another two units are located above the garage at the rear of the site, a concept similar to a house and carriage home.

The design would allow for all four units to be owned or for a combination of owners and renters. The design also includes open space, including a “shared space” for all four units, which would encourage social interaction. Each unit also has its own private outdoor space.

### *Design 2: Simple*

While this design also provides four units, they are all located in one compact building, which closely resembles a single-detached dwelling. The designers aimed for a design that looked like a single-family home so it would easily “fit in” with the existing neighbourhood. Each unit is provided its own private open space at grade and one garage parking spot at the rear of the site accessed from the lane. Two front doors face the street, and all four units have direct street access.



**Figure 3** Recommended design 2 – Simple

## Next steps: continuing engagement

The winning submission was rewarded with a \$5,000 honorarium. The top two winning submissions are eligible for accelerated processing benefits, such as development and building permits. Council has now directed municipal staff to look at changes that would be needed to zoning bylaws and the City’s Official Community Plan to accommodate implementation of the infill housing designs.

“Both of the recommended winners represent different approaches to achieve the same ends: to balance the economic return of development with designs that still respect neighbourhood character and meet overall City objectives,” says Moore.



As implementation moves forward, the community will remain engaged in the project. Residents can see the designs at open houses and ask questions of the developers. Information will be mailed to residents. Regular updates will be provided on the website and social media. “These changes hold the potential for significant shifts over time in the affected neighbourhoods. With the progress already made in community engagement through the Infill Challenge itself, we’ll continue building broad support and a common vision for infill housing,” says Moore.



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