



Building Better Homes and Communities

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ACT Solutions **Streamlining Office-to-Residential** **Conversions** **Windsor, Ontario**

The issue

In the mid-1990s, the City of Windsor's City Centre Revitalization Task Force chose office-to-residential conversion as a priority revitalization measure for its downtown area.

Windsor had a number of vacant commercial buildings in its City Centre and a real need for new housing. However, the existing zoning bylaw did not deal with conversion projects. Any such projects would require several planning approval applications. These would include time-consuming amendments to the zoning bylaw, new development standards, waiving of parking requirements and so forth. In addition, producing affordable units would require a waiver of standard development charges and levies—another appeal.

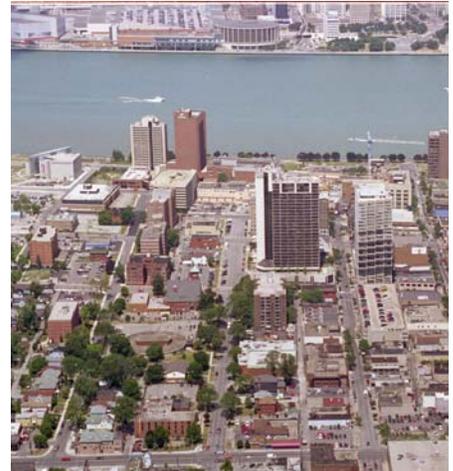
All of this discouraged building owners and developers from pursuing conversions.

The plan

The City wanted policies that would encourage conversions by reducing both the length of time for the approval process and the developer's cost. Windsor was awarded a \$10,000 grant towards the \$20,000 cost of 1) reviewing Windsor's existing procedures, from initial planning to final implementation; 2) reviewing processes and incentives used in other municipalities; and 3) recommending policy changes to encourage conversions in Windsor's City Centre.

The project team

Team members represented the Mayor's office, the Windsor Planning Department, the City Centre Revitalization Task Force and the City Centre Business Association. A planner, hired on a temporary basis, did the research and recommended options.



Windsor had a surplus of commercial buildings and a need for residential units in the central area.

Source: City of Windsor

The results

It was found that a minor variance in Windsor normally took about 5 to 7 weeks, while a zoning bylaw amendment took 16 to 19 weeks. Building permits for conversions required 6 to 9 weeks.

Following an extensive review of approaches taken by other cities, the project team recommended a 17-point plan, with key points as follows:

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- ❑ create a City Centre district in the City's new Official Plan, with a broad range of home occupations encouraged;
- ❑ interim amendments would
 - i) allow most conversions without bylaw amendments or minor variances,
 - ii) accept existing numbers of on-site parking,
 - iii) waive amenity area requirements, and
 - iv) allow home occupations, including live-work, possibly under its own licence system;
- ❑ a free preliminary audit on changes required to meet residential building and fire code requirements;
- ❑ a community improvement plan with financial incentives for commercial-to-residential conversions;
- ❑ instruction booklets for people interested in converting commercial buildings to residential use; and
- ❑ a designated staff person for conversion applications.

The City of Windsor amended its Official Plan in 2000. The new plan specifically encourages residential uses in the City Centre area, including mixed-use projects in medium- to very high-profile areas. For the first time, a broad range of home occupations is allowed across the entire city. The need to apply for zoning amendments and minor variances for all conversions has been eliminated.

Some recommendations were not adopted. A developer wanting to limit parking is still required to apply for a minor variance, and there are no free audits or new financial incentives.

However, a staff member in the Planning Department has been designated as contact person for all potential conversions. As well, amenity area requirements have been reduced by half, and they do not apply to the first eight dwelling units in the CD3.1 zone (the commercial/retail zoning that applies to about 30% of the City Centre, including the main street).

The changes make it easier and faster to convert commercial buildings to residential use, says Windsor developer Rosario Cosco. Without them, his Bartlett Building project wouldn't have been possible. The building now provides 35 one- and two-bedroom apartments in the core area. Cosco plans to convert a larger building within the next few years.

Several other conversions have been completed and proposed, adding vitality to the downtown and allowing people new options for affordable living and working.

Related reports

Expediting the Approvals Process to Encourage Commercial-to-Residential Conversions in Windsor's City Centre (Windsor's ACT Project Team, 1998)

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The Bartlett Building: one of the first projects to benefit from Windsor's commercial-to-residential conversion policies.

Source: City of Windsor

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