

Tough questions for the EFCL

We've heard the questions many times at Better Infill: Where's my community league on the zoning bylaw and infill issue? Why have community leagues (with a handful of important exceptions) been quiet on the biggest change to hit Edmonton's neighbourhoods in a lifetime? We hear of community league boards declining to discuss infill or insisting on remaining neutral; of queries going unanswered; and of boards refusing to allow meetings on infill and zoning in their community halls.

These questions matter because community leagues and the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues are the primary channels through which the city consults neighbourhoods on zoning and development changes. If the community leagues and EFCL don't properly engage their members and the public, then good consultation doesn't happen.

Better Infill decided to dig into these matters by speaking with former staff and board member/volunteers of the EFCL; examining documents and correspondence; and reading histories of Edmonton's community league movement.

What we found raises important and difficult questions. If you wonder how Edmonton ended up with its current zoning bylaw and district plans, and want to know better how to push back, we urge you to read this article.

Being quiet on important issues is not normal for community leagues. In their 1986 book on Edmonton's community leagues, Vaughn Bowler and Michael Wanchuk wrote,

“...the community league movement has long been effectively involved in the political affairs of the city. It has shown a consistent interest in neighbourhood and city planning, frequently challenging transportation and parks planning, zoning codes, and building development. Throughout its existence, the movement has sought to represent the neighbourhood in all matters which it feels directly affect the quality of life in the city.”

That spirit of outspoken advocacy for neighbourhoods and communities continued unabated, until something drastic changed in 2022.

Edmonton's first community league, now known as Crestwood, was formed in 1917. By 1921 there were nine of them, and they formed the EFCL to have a common voice and help with shared matters. The EFCL formally incorporated in 1946. A consistent theme of its existence was that it was "owned by its members," not by city hall.

From their beginnings, Edmonton's community leagues committed to welcoming everyone, putting them decades ahead of their time. In a period when society was sharply divided by religion, gender, income, age, and ethnicity, they strove to be open to all.

Community leagues were inspired by "City Clubs" in the US, which were formed to provide "a counterbalance to the pervasive power of aggressive municipal politicians or developers and allowed more say in their local governance." (Kuban, p. xviii.) From their inception, community leagues were intended to help neighbourhoods raise issues with city hall and the development industry. They were much more than sport, recreation, and social clubs, they were advocacy groups.

The work of community leagues is seen in community halls, playgrounds, and sports facilities, but the less visible work may be more important, especially on land use and zoning. In the late 1940s, community leagues and the EFCL pressed the city for better neighbourhood planning, contributing to the wonderful neighbourhoods built in Edmonton from the 1950s to the 1970s. With schools, parks, shops, a diverse range of housing, and access to public transit, they were fifteen-minute communities before the term existed.

In the 1960s and 1970s, community leagues and the EFCL helped organize opposition to city hall's plans to build freeways down Mill Creek and McKinnon ravines and played a vital role in the creation of Edmonton's river valley park system, often in opposition to city planners and developers.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the city granted community leagues and the EFCL formal roles in planning and zoning processes, realizing that a workable mechanism was needed to allow citizen input. In 1999 the city agreed to give advance notice to leagues and residents of proposed developments and zoning changes in their neighbourhoods. People would finally be properly informed about what was proposed on their street before it was approved (this was substantially reversed by the city in the 2023 zoning bylaw).

Starting in the 1990s the EFCL employed an urban planner on its staff to advise leagues on development issues and zoning bylaws. This position didn't advocate for individual leagues but rather educated and supported them. It produced monthly bulletins to keep leagues abreast of the latest zoning changes and held workshops for members to look in-depth into the big issues of the day. It helped offset the power imbalance that had always plagued the relationship between neighbourhoods on the one hand, and city hall and developers on the other.

Many developers and city officials actively disliked this role because it empowered community leagues. Former EFCL staff say city hall sometimes threatened to cut the EFCL's funding. But empowering neighbourhoods was part of the EFCL's reason-for-being; it was democracy in action and a key reason Edmonton had, in the city's own slogan, "Great Neighbourhoods."

In about 2020, the EFCL stopped providing urban planning support to its members. This couldn't have happened at a worse time for neighbourhoods, or a better time for the city officials and developers who wanted to lay an entire new scheme over the city from above, rather than building it up from below. Pre-occupied by the covid pandemic, most Edmontonians were unaware the community league movement had lost this key strength. While the development industry had several powerful lobby groups and close ties to city hall, neighbourhoods were in an information and advocacy vacuum.

At city hall, a radical new city plan was nearing completion, including zoning changes and district plans intended to transform every residential neighbourhood

inside the Henday. The city plan called these long-established neighbourhoods “redeveloping areas;” combined them into much larger “districts”; and slated them for a staggering 600,000 new residents within a few decades.

During the next three years, in the midst of the pandemic, correspondence and documents reveal dramatic changes at the EFCL and a complete shift in its support for the zoning changes and district plans.

At first, the EFCL voiced league concerns. On June 29, 2021, it sent a letter to urban planning committee of city council saying the bylaw was “overly permissive” and that some leagues were concerned the mature neighbourhood overlay (which respected neighbourhood character) was called outdated by the city, even though it had been “significantly updated in 2017.” Leagues were also concerned about “loss of notification and ability for community members to comment on decisions that affect their neighbourhoods” and that “communities will no longer be afforded the opportunity to have a voice.”

On April 11, 2022, the EFCL sent a three-page letter to council’s urban planning committee again expressing concerns. “Our concern,” said the letter, “is that the approach being considered does not seriously draw upon neighbourhood visions or local knowledge that Leagues have...” These concerns were serious enough that the EFCL said the city may need to re-evaluate the scope of the zoning bylaw and district plans. “We have heard clearly from Leagues that they desire inclusion in the decision-making process, not [just] information sharing or opportunities to refine policy at the end of the line.” The EFCL was doing what it had done for a century: standing up for the interests of its members.

Then things changed dramatically. By September, 2022, the city had negotiated a new “collaborative agreement” with the EFCL. This agreement stood in sharp contrast to the policy that had governed the city’s relationship with the EFCL for forty years, known as city policy C110. Enacted by city council in 1980, policy C110 confirmed that “the community league is a useful mechanism for debate of area concerns and presentation of views and recommendations to Council.” More than that, it declared,

“Participation in Community League activity is a desirable element in a democracy which seeks to place decision making for appropriate activities at the neighbourhood level.”

Democracy and decision-making at the neighbourhood level was effectively the city-endorsed creed of the community league movement, right up to 2022.

The new 2022 agreement said none of these things. The emphasis was on the EFCL having a “collaborative relationship” with the city. In an evocative phrase, the new agreement stated, “This unifies our work as we achieve our strategic goals.” It seemed the EFCL was being “unified” with the city to achieve the city’s goals. The principle that the EFCL was owned by its member leagues was nowhere to be seen. One paragraph made clear what the city wanted from the EFCL and community leagues:

to “provide valuable recreational, social, and cultural opportunities within City neighbourhoods. These opportunities contribute to the provision of essential facilities and services, enhance the social fabric of Edmonton and contribute to cost savings through the valuable contributions of volunteers.”

It seemed the EFCL and community leagues were primarily to be cost-saving recreational and social clubs.

An attachment to the new agreement tightened the leash, stating “The City will provide guidance and support to EFCL and its members in the following areas” and specifically listed “land use,” which would cover the zoning bylaw and district plans. The policy attachment bluntly says funding will be provided to the EFCL “in an amount determined by City Council in its sole discretion.”

2022 brought another crucial change: the EFCL suspended its longstanding planning and development committee. This committee of nine people from leagues across the city had been monitoring and commenting on the proposed zoning changes and district plans since 2019. According to a letter sent to leagues months after-the-fact,^[1] this committee had been “paused in 2022 due to inadequate

representation,” though the EFCL didn’t say inadequate in what sense. Too few people? The wrong kind of people?

Having suspended one committee, the EFCL promptly created a new one, called the “community planning and sustainability working group.” This working group quickly commandeered the EFCL’s work on the zoning bylaw and district plans.

The impacts of the new funding agreement and working group were immediate: the EFCL fell fully onside with the city. On January 14, 2023, the EFCL submitted an “Update on District Planning” letter to council’s urban planning committee, stating clear support for the city’s zoning bylaw and district plans, based on work by the EFCL’s new working group. The shift at the EFCL from being a voice of the leagues that “own it” to something very different is made clear in the second paragraph:

“While we have heard from individual Leagues over the past months, we also created a working group of 15 League leaders that included architects, engineers, planners and community builders. We directly engaged this group to develop the recommendations in this letter.”

Note that it was the select group of fifteen that formed the EFCL’s position, not an open majority of member leagues. The letter continued:

“This engagement leads us to offer our support for the draft district plans (DP) and district general policy (DGP)...We support the plans as presented and are encouraged by the language in the District Plans and District General Policy.”

The EFCL was enthusiastically endorsing a plan that virtually eliminated neighborhoods from the city’s planning process, replacing them with the much larger and more anonymous districts of the district plans. It’s hard to imagine any previous version of the EFCL doing this.

Most Edmontonians had no idea about the new city plan and zoning bylaw. In May 2023, as the zoning bylaw went to council’s urban planning committee, a poll by national polling firm Pollara Research showed 62% of Edmontonians had never

heard of the proposed changes, and only three percent felt they could explain them to someone else. Pollara noted that people tend to overstate their levels of knowledge, so the “true recall of the Zoning Bylaw Renewal Initiative is likely only 3% who have a general idea and another 7% who have heard of it in passing.” As many as 90% of Edmontonians had no idea about city hall’s plans.

This didn’t seem to bother the EFCL. On May 2, 2023, it sent a convoluted letter to its members explaining its position on the new zoning bylaw and district plans. “Dear Community Leagues,” the letter began, “The way we plan our city is evolving.” Right away alarm bells should ring, for it wasn’t the role of the EFCL to plan the city. The EFCL was sounding a lot like city hall.

The letter acknowledged some member leagues had raised concerns about district plans, but they were “not being addressed.” It didn’t say what those concerns were or why the EFCL ignored them.

It then slipped into the rhetoric of crisis, listing problems that were far beyond the purview of the EFCL: “The City of Edmonton” faced “unprecedented challenges...climate change...fiscal sustainability ...sprawl...urgent need to take immediate action...affordability crisis...lack of housing supply, most especially affordable housing...”

The letter made no mention that Edmonton had the lowest housing prices of any major city in Canada, or that the city’s plan to squeeze 600,000 more people into established neighbourhoods would almost certainly drive housing costs up, making affordability worse.

Then came the EFCL’s central message:

“[T]o become stronger players in the solutions to all of these problems [w]e explicitly support redevelopment in neighbourhoods that brings people of all ages and backgrounds into the community, and believe that the proposed Zoning Bylaw will add vibrancy, diversity and health to neighbourhoods.”

The letter provided no evidence to support these assertions. It's possible, even probable, that the city plan will fuel gentrification, increase housing costs, and polarize the city into enclaves of wealth, poverty, and ethnicity.

The EFCL confirmed its unflinching commitment to the zoning bylaws and the city plan in an article in *The Edmonton Journal* on October 6, 2023, ten days before city council's final hearing and approval of the bylaws. The article's aggressive tone shows how dramatically the EFCL had changed since it raised concerns with zoning in its April 2022 letter.

“City planners have proposed a comprehensive rewrite to how the city regulates land. Gone will be exclusive zoning that gives the most affluent the most say over land use. In its place will be permissive zoning that allows more equity, through allowing gentle density development, like rental and multi-family housing, almost everywhere in the already-built city... we need to pass these changes, now.”

Note how the EFCL merged itself with the city, creating a singular “we”: “*We* need to pass these changes now.” At times the article had an almost authoritarian feel, with a message that resistance is fantasy and ignorance:

“Let's get some things straight. Every neighbourhood in Edmonton will be disrupted by the influx of new residents — regardless of what's decided at the Oct. 16 meeting [of city council]. Any position that suggests resisting this bylaw will protect one's quiet residential street from change is fantasy.”

“...any position that suggests pausing this decision because Edmonton residents have not been consulted ignores City of Edmonton consultation on this project, beginning in 2018 and intensifying over the past two years.”

Claims like these are commonly used to discredit and suppress neighbourhood involvement and they are not helpful. Resisting this particular bylaw didn't mean people resisted change on their residential streets, it meant they resisted this bylaw. And claiming the public consultation had been intense ignored the evidence that up to ninety percent of Edmontonians knew nothing about the bylaw.

As the article approached its conclusion it admitted the EFCL's support for the bylaws was unexpected. It then implied that anyone resisting this zoning bylaw was resistant to change, as if this bylaw was the only version of change possible.

“It may shock some to see the EFCL and community leagues in general not being central platforms for those most resistant to changes in neighbourhoods. We know this has been the case in the past.”

Then this remarkable paragraph:

“But, as we continue to evolve as an organization and a federation of 162 (soon to be 163) leagues, the lack of this discussion from us and a majority of leagues is now entirely by design. Leagues are democratic organizations that must aspire to speak for all in their communities, not just the most vocal, influential or motivated.”

Apparently, then, it was “entirely by design” that the EFCL excluded people who were vocal, influential, and motivated, and who might not agree with the proposed zoning changes. In a twist that seemed bizarre, the EFCL claimed to have done this in the name of democracy.

When many dozens of people spoke in opposition to the zoning bylaw at meetings of city council and its urban planning committee in 2023, their concerns were often dismissed by councillors and city staff because of the EFCL's position. Councillor Andrew Knack, for example, posted on his Twitter account that “Knowing [the EFCL] did everything possible to engage community leagues...gave me a lot more comfort that the wide variety of engagement attempted was shared heavily.”

Except everything possible *wasn't* done by the EFCL to engage its members, not even close.

Can the EFCL and community leagues be reclaimed? They can be and they should be, but the people of Edmonton will have to demand it, because city hall won't give up its grip easily. While previous city councils formally acknowledged the value of democracy, debate, and decision-making at the neighbourhood level,

recent councils and city administrators take an approach that has more faith in technocratic top-down management and control.

The contrast between the results of these two approaches can be stark: on the one hand, a large number of beautiful, welcoming, dynamic, and affordable neighbourhoods that are diverse yet socially cohesive, constantly evolving and changing from the energy of their own residents; on the other hand, a series of enormously expensive city hall grand visions that range from disappointing to derelict, including Blatchford; The Quarters; The Fort Road BIA/Urban Design Plan; and downtown revitalization. Yet city hall keeps repeating its mistakes.

It's not coincidence that Edmonton's successful neighbourhoods have until very recently been actively guided, protected, and nurtured by local community leagues and the EFCL, and that so many of Edmonton's failures in urban planning have been driven by city hall. It's doesn't bode well that the new city plan, district plans, and zoning bylaw are all city hall projects that have not just failed to engage community leagues and citizens, they have at times been deliberately designed not to engage them.

This June 3, the EFCL will hold its annual general meeting. Tough questions might be asked. Is the EFCL still a federation of community leagues, or is it a puppet of municipal government? How could it endorse a complete overhaul of the city's established neighbourhoods when the vast majority of citizens knew nothing about it? What happened in the back rooms in 2021 and 2022 that led to such huge changes in the EFCL's internal organization and its position on the zoning bylaw? Can the EFCL still lay claim to be the legitimate voice of Edmonton's neighbourhoods?

Perhaps the most fundamental question of all: how are community leagues and the EFCL going to return to their role of being independent and vigorous advocates for Edmonton and its neighbourhoods?

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Confidential interviews:

With former EFCL staff and volunteers.

^[1] Letter sent from the EFCL to its members May 2, 2023.