Reducing Emissions Through Interventions in Development Applications: A Community Checklist



ECOLOGY OTTAWA ECOLOGIE OTTAWA

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What it is

This Checklist is a **practical advocacy tool** developed by Ecology Ottawa and CAWI (City for All Women Initiative) to help Ottawa residents and community organizations ask questions when engaging with a development application, in support of emissions reduction, equity, and community wellbeing. It is part of the Climate Equity Project, a joint initiative by Ecology Ottawa and CAWI, funded by the Ottawa Climate Action Fund (OCAF). The **checklist** has two components. The first component is designed as a checklist (the one currently in hand) for civic engagement. It is an easy tool to bring to a public consultation, committee meeting, or site visit to check out a new development. The second component is a **community guide** that acts as a companion to the checklist and provides additional context, resources, and research.

Why it was developed

Ottawa has committed to building 151,000 new housing units by 2031. With 41% of the city's greenhouse gas emissions coming from buildings, every new development is an opportunity to reduce emissions. But whether a building reduces emissions or locks them in for decades depends on decisions made at the design stage: the building envelope, the unit mix, the parking supply, the proximity to transit, the accessibility of public space. Most residents never get to weigh in on those decisions. This checklist provides community members with questions and information to support their engagement and advocacy to address these.

What is inside

The checklist is organized into four sections: Structure and Design, Neighbourhood Integration, Parking and Mobility, and Procedural Consideration. Each section includes questions to ask about the application and a short explanation of why it matters. A resources section at the end links to key City of Ottawa planning documents and research, organized by theme.

Who it's for

Ottawa residents, renters, community groups, and local organizations engaging with development applications in their neighbourhoods—and specifically for those with no planning expertise.

How to use it

The checklist is designed for use when intervening on a development application, at a public consultation, in a written submission, or at a Planning and Housing Committee delegation. Focus on the sections most relevant to the development you are reviewing and the concerns most important to your community. The rationale provided with each item can be used directly to strengthen your submission or delegation. For guidance on how to find and read a development application, submit comments, or speak at committee, see our **Climate Equity Toolkit**.

Structure and Design

Buildings are responsible for 41% of Ottawa's greenhouse gas emissions. The choices made when designing a building, its size, materials, and energy use, affect the climate and the people who will live in it for decades to come.

1. Density & Building Form

1.1 Total unit number

- Does the number of proposed homes meet or exceed targets set out in the city's Secondary Plan for that area?
    - *Building fewer homes than the City's plan calls for (lower than the density target) wastes the roads, water pipes, and services that taxpayers have already paid for.*

1.2 Form efficiency

- *For buildings with 5 or more floors: do units share walls with each other? Are hallways and shared areas a reasonable size?*
    - *Units that share walls cost much less to heat and cool — and smaller hallways mean more livable space for residents.*

2. Unit Mix & Affordability

2.1 Unit mix:

- Does the building include larger homes with 3 or 4 bedrooms (family sized units)— not just studios and one-bedroom apartments?
    - *A building with only small units shuts out families, including many newcomer and lower-income households, and tends to push them into areas where they have to drive everywhere.*

2.2 Community Benefits Charge:

- Is a Community Benefits Charge being used to make sure some homes stay affordable, or that the developer pays for community improvements?

- *When large buildings get approved, the City can negotiate affordable homes and things like parks or daycares from developers; ask whether this happened, at what income level, and for how long.*

3. Material Efficiency

3.1 Design efficiency: Does the building meet any recognized green building or energy performance standard, such as LEED, Passive House, or the Toronto Green Standard, beyond the minimum required by the Ontario Building Code?

- *The Building Code sets a minimum floor for energy performance, not a target. Asking whether the developer has committed to a recognized standard puts their intentions on the record and signals that the community expects more than the minimum.*
- *Even if this cannot be enforced through the application process, a public commitment creates accountability.*

3.2 Orientation of Build: Do all bedrooms and living rooms get natural light, or do some units only face other units or interior hallways?

- *Homes without natural light use more electricity and are less healthy to live in, and they tend to be rented at lower prices, concentrating lower-income residents in the worst parts of a building.*

4. Whole-building design integration

4.1 Flexible structures: Is the building designed so it can be changed in the future—for example, by moving walls or upgrading the electrical system?

- *A building that can be updated later based on needs rather than torn down saves money, creates less waste, and produces fewer emissions over time.*

4.2 Intentional design: Does the building include step-free access, wider doorways, and layouts that work for people with disabilities, built in from the start, not added later?

- *In Canada, 32.2% of people with disabilities are renters, compared with 27.9% of people without disabilities, which makes accessible rental housing especially important.*

Neighbourhood Integration

A building either strengthens or weakens the fabric of the neighbourhood around it. These questions check whether the development follows the legal obligations under the city's design objectives and existing planning frameworks and whether it makes a genuine positive contribution to the street, the block, and the community it joins.

1. Regulatory Compliance

1.1 General Legal guidelines: Does the proposed building follow the City of Ottawa's Official Plan rules for this location?

- *Following the Official Plan is a legal requirement. If a proposal doesn't follow the rules, residents can formally object during the public review process.*
- *Some of this info will be mentioned in the developer's presentation in public meetings, or should be mentioned in one of the documents (Site Plan Review or Application Summary).*

1.2 Area specific considerations: Does the proposal follow the specific plan for this neighbourhood (the Secondary Plan)?

- *Many Ottawa neighbourhoods have their own local plans with specific rules. If the development doesn't follow the local (secondary) plan, that is a clear and legitimate reason to raise concerns.*

1.3 Required studies: Were all required reports submitted, on traffic, shadows, wind, noise, and the environment? Were any skipped or reduced? If so, why?

- *These reports are the evidence that planning decisions are supposed to be based on. If any were skipped without a good reason, the public is being asked to comment without the full picture.*

2. Built Form & Public Realm Impact

Built form design choice and impact: Is the building's height, size, and placement appropriate for the street and neighbouring buildings, and does it avoid blocking sunlight or creating wind problems for nearby homes and public spaces?

- *How a building sits on its site affects shadows, wind, and whether the street feels safe and welcoming, especially for seniors, children, and people with disabilities.*

3. Ground floor & Retail

3.1 Active ground-floor uses: Are the street-level spaces being used for shops, services, or community spaces, not just parking or blank walls?

- *Buildings with useful ground floors mean people can walk to what they need instead of driving, improving security, making streets safer and reducing car trips.*

3.2 Adaptable Uses: Do the proposed businesses or services match what people in the neighbourhood actually need day to day, and can they change over time?

- *Ground-floor spaces that can change over time serve the community better as the neighbourhood grows.*

3.3 Walkability maximization and pedestrian protection and access: Are there covered walkways, good lighting, or other protections for people walking nearby?

- *Good walking infrastructure makes walking a real option in all seasons, reducing car use and making the neighbourhood safer and more accessible for everyone.*

4. Complete Neighbourhood & Walkability

4.1 Walking routes and connectivity: Are the walking paths through and around the site safe, well-lit, and easy to use?

- *When walking routes feel unsafe or disconnected, people end up on busy roads or in cars, even for very short trips.*

5. Community & Green Space

5.1 Community amenities: Are there enough shared indoor and outdoor spaces for residents—genuinely useful ones, not just the minimum the City requires?

- *Good shared spaces, not just the bare minimum required by zoning, support community life and mean that residents don't need large private units to meet all their needs.*

5.2 Year round use: Are outdoor spaces designed to be used in winter too, with shelter, seating, and sun access?

- *In Ottawa, outdoor spaces without shelter and seating are effectively less accessible from November through April, and also in summer's heat.*

5.3 Accessibility: Can people using wheelchairs, walkers, or strollers fully access all shared spaces?

- *Accessible shared spaces allow all residents to use and enjoy what their building offers. People with lived experience of disability are especially well-placed to spot gaps.*

5.4 Keeping public spaces public: Is publicly accessible open space provided on-site, or is the entire site privatized?

- *When all outdoor space on a development site is private, it shuts out non-residents and reduces the amount of public space available in the neighbourhood.*

5.5 Greenery: Are existing mature trees being preserved? If removed, is enough new planting being done on site?

- *Mature trees cool streets, absorb rainwater, and store carbon in ways that newly planted trees cannot match for decades.*

Parking and Mobility

Transportation produces 44% of Ottawa's greenhouse gas emissions. These questions check whether the development's parking and transit access and provisions will help residents get around without a car, or make it harder and push them to own cars.

1. Car parking

1.1 Car spaces: How many parking spaces are being built? Is it more than the City requires?

- *More parking means more cars, less safety, and reduced walkability. Check whether the amount proposed goes beyond what Ottawa's Official Plan actually requires near transit.*

1.2 Convertible spaces: Could the parking be turned into something else, like housing or green space, if fewer people need parking in the future?

- *Parking that cannot be changed ties up valuable space for decades.*

1.3 EV considerations: Are electric vehicle charging stations, or at least the wiring for them, included in a meaningful number of spaces?

- *Installing EV charging during construction costs a fraction of what it costs to add later, and supports the City's own climate commitments.*

1.4 Parking and city: How does the amount of car parking proposed compare with what the City actually requires? Does it over-provide or under-provide relative to the minimum?

- *A building with far more parking than needed works against the City's own climate targets.*
- *Less parking generally means fewer cars, less emissions, and more space for other uses.*

2. Cycling & Micromobility

2.1 Enclosed bike parking: Is there secure, covered, and easy-to-reach bike storage—at least one spot per bedroom?

- *In addition to safe and connected infrastructure, secure bike storage is the most important factor in whether cycling becomes a real option for residents.*

2.2 Adaptive consideration: Is there room for larger bikes, cargo bikes, and adaptive cycles?

- *These bikes are most used by families, lower-income residents, and people with disabilities — the people who benefit most from cycling but are most often excluded by poor infrastructure.*

2.3 E-bike consideration: Are there charging outlets for electric bikes in the bike storage area?

- *E-bike charging is inexpensive to install now and supports residents who might otherwise need a car.*

3. Car share & transit

3.1 Bus stop: Is there a bus stop within a 5-minute walk with frequent service? Is the site close to an LRT or BRT station?

- *Good transit nearby is one of the most important factors in whether a household can get by without a car.*

3.2 Car share: How much of the provided car parking is devoted to car share?

- *Car share programs give residents access to a vehicle when needed without the cost of ownership, making them significantly more accessible to lower-income households.*

Procedural Consideration

These questions check whether the planning process itself was followed properly. If the rules were not followed, or if important factors were overlooked, that is a legitimate reason to push back and grounds for a formal challenge.

1. Consistency with plans and precedents: Does the proposal follow the City's Official Plan, and the Secondary Plan, and match how similar applications have been decided nearby?

- *If a proposal breaks from the rules without a clear explanation, you can challenge it in a written submission or by speaking at a Planning and Housing Committee meeting.*

2. Consideration of community impacts: Were the effects on neighbouring homes, local rules, and community needs properly considered?

- *Planning decisions are supposed to take all relevant factors into account. If something important was left out, it is worth raising.*

Ecology Ottawa and CAWI acknowledge that this work takes place on the traditional unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people who have been caretakers of this land since time immemorial. As uninvited guests we are committed to listening, learning, and honouring this land in our work to advance environmental and social justice.

Want to Learn More?

For more details on each section of this checklist, and a full list of resources, planning documents, and research references organized by section, see the Development Applications Interventions Community Guide.

For other relevant documents and project resources, or to get in touch with us, visit the project webpage.