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Could Toronto's approval of garden suites hurt Long Branch's dwindling tree canopy?

City to review garden suites in two years or once 200 units are built

BY TAMARA SHEPHARD ETOBICOKE GUARDIAN
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Christine Mercado, chair of Long Branch Neighbourhood Association, said the association isn't opposed to garden suites in the city, but believes the city missed an opportunity to take more time reviewing it. - Dan Pearce/Metroland

Toronto council's decision earlier this month to allow garden suites has heightened concerns in Long Branch they'll now start popping up in investor-owned rebuilds, adding a new threat to the dwindling tree canopy.

Lot splitting has been a contentious phenomenon in Long Branch for more than a decade. Builders tear down old, small bungalows on 50-foot lots and replace them with twin narrow, two-storey ‘mirror houses.’

Trees are also falling.

From 2009 to 2018, Long Branch lost 56 per cent of its tree canopy on redeveloped lots and lost 24 per cent tree canopy on adjacent properties, Jacqueline De Santis reported in a University of Toronto research project.

Latest city statistics reported Long Branch’s tree canopy at 15 per cent, down from 26.5 per cent in 2009.

Long Branch Neighbourhood Association (LBNA) isn’t opposed to garden suites. But they believe the city missed an opportunity to take more time to review it, make permitted garden suites smaller, and put in place effective tree protection.

“We don’t see a reason for it. It’s not creating affordable housing,” said Christine Mercado, LBNA’s chair. “There’s no rush for it. It doesn’t need to be everywhere. Why not have test neighbourhoods and see the impacts?”

Recently, LBNA secured its 17th “win” at the Toronto Local Appeal Body on a lot severance application.

“TLAB refused the inappropriate build and it ended up in a settlement,” Mercado said. “We see them as wins when it makes a better application.”



The Green Accessible Granny ADU by The Architect Builders Collaborative Inc. was the winning design in the City of Kitchener's recent backyard home design competition. This month, Toronto also legalized garden suites. The Architect Builders Collaborative Inc. image

LBNA is particularly concerned with garden suites' 'as-of-right' zoning, which means the unit complies with the zoning bylaw and generally only requires a building permit; it doesn't require variances.

"What we've seen is if a tree is within an 'as-of-right' building envelope, it's done," Mercado said. "What we're dissatisfied with is the wording of the city's tree protection bylaw that states the manager of urban forestry can refuse a tree removal permit on an 'as-of-right' build; in practice, they don't do that."

Protected trees are 30 centimetres or more in diameter. But many developers fell trees, pay the fine, and "see it as the cost of doing business," Mercado said.

LBNA has planted more than 1,000 trees in memory of Long Branch veterans in recent years, and given away more than 3,000 trees to Long Branch and other Toronto residents.

Toronto councillors recently voted 19-2 to approve garden suites, along with amendments related to application monitoring.



Etobicoke-Lakeshore Coun. Mark Grimes with James S. Bell Junior Middle Sports and Wellness Academy students during a 2018 heritage plaque unveiling of a 200-year-old red oak tree in Long Branch. Metroland file photo

Etobicoke-Lakeshore Coun. Mark Grimes, who represents Long Branch, echoed LBNA's concerns.

“There’s a major concern about the tree canopy,” Grimes told councillors. “Some of the locations where these garden suites may go I imagine would be some pretty big, mature trees. It’s a big, big issue for neighbourhoods.”

Councillors approved Grimes' amendments that city planners consult residents' groups during monitoring, city staff and committee of adjustment members receive application processing training, and city staff monitor the units' impact on Toronto's tree canopy and growing space.

"I'm supporting this," Grimes said. "I have four kids still at home. I'd love to move them out to the garage."

Council voted for the city to review garden suites in two years or once 200 units are built, whichever comes first.

The city's planning report states garden suites will be smaller than the original home on the lot. The units can occupy a maximum of 40 per cent of a home's backyard up to 645 square feet.

Toronto head planner Gregg Lintern said it's important to remember that, although people think Toronto neighbourhoods are stable, they have never been static.

And with the city expected to grow by 700,000 people by 2051, he said, "we need to open up as many possibilities at different scales, mind you, to meet that goal as possible."



Nancie McLeod, longtime designer and Sutton Group Old Mill realtor, helps clients "rethink your real estate." Garden suites will enable seniors to age at home, and aging parents or adult children to live independently near family, she said. Dan Pearce/Metroland

Nancie McLeod, a Sutton Group Old Mill realtor, thinks the units will help make Toronto home to more people, help aging seniors with rental income and support, and enable aging parents and adult children to live independently with family support.

"It just really works if you do a careful build and nice landscaping," McLeod said. "Someone could have their grandchildren, or even a family they didn't know, living in a backyard house and they have burgers together on a Saturday night. It's a lot better than looking at a garage."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: Reporter Tamara Shephard wanted to explore the Long Branch Neighbourhood Association's concerns with Toronto council's garden suites' approval, knowing the neighbourhood has faced contentious lot severances and a shrinking tree canopy in the face of considerable redevelopment.

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Tamara Shephard is a journalist in Etobicoke reporting hard news, politics and health and human-interest stories. Tamara loves to travel and is a fan of foreign and independent films.