

West Vancouver council OKs housing action plan

Community consultation on plan's ideas earmarked for fall

BY JEREMY SHEPHERD, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 22, 2013

WITH tall houses squashing views and high rents squeezing tenants, the District of West Vancouver voted in favour of a plan to shape the future of housing in the municipality at a council meeting Monday.

The housing action plan, which places an emphasis on coach houses, housing diversity and purpose-built rental apartments, may be too restrictive, according to Coun. Bill Soprovich.

"Once this is adopted, this carries the case. Where's the flexibility for future thought?" Soprovich asked.

The current plan incorporates enough flexibility, according to Mayor Michael Smith.

"Coun. Soprovich, I'm just reading the plan and the five action words are: one is 'continue,' two is 'consider,' three is 'identify,' four is 'strengthen,' and five is 'monitor.' That really would indicate that staff is continuing the process. They're going to come back to council with more definitive recommendations."

Soprovich found an ally in Coun. Michael Lewis, who asked to amend the motion, removing the word "adopted" and replacing it with "provide framework."

"There's no need to have this sophistry around the language," responded Coun. Craig Cameron. "It's not a framework. We're not setting up a framework for a framework. We are committing to set this policy direction."

While debating a single word may seem innocuous, Cameron stressed the need to avoid the fate of death by study.

"You can take it for a reference and have it be an interesting document that sits on the shelf, or you can adopt it as the policy of West Vancouver, and I support the latter," he said.

Lewis's amendment was defeated 5-2.

The housing action plan is set to serve as a prelude to fall community consultation before turning up in front of council again in the form of bylaw revisions in January 2014.

In a previous debate, Coun. Mary-Ann Booth noted 30 years of relative inaction in the face of increasingly bulky homes springing up across the district.

The action plan also found support from Coun. Trish Panz, who has said the market for coach houses is comprised of district residents looking for more options.

The housing action plan stresses the need for a variety of housing in order to secure diversity within the community. Excluding housing for seniors, one 16-unit building has been the only purpose-built rental apartment built in the district since 1979.

Approximately 1,950 West Vancouver households have difficulty coming up with the money to keep a roof over their heads, according to a 2006 Metro Vancouver study. About 975 West Vancouverites are at risk of homelessness, according to the same study.

In addition to providing affordable options for seniors, the plan also examines reducing housing bulk and preserving vegetation.

Greater clarity on floor area ratio is also needed, according to the plan.

Both Smith and Lewis have blasted practices that allow homeowners to skirt district regulations regarding the floor area ratio, which measures the floor space of a building against the size of its lot.

Decks and basements are exempt from FAR measurements.

For Soprovich, the danger of ushering in new housing comes in failing to recognize established neighbourhood character.

The housing action plan emphasizes the importance of neighbourhood character while acknowledging the difficulty in articulating that character.

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