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Be creative on affordable housing

Tweaking zoning and building regulations would help decrease housing costs

Through 'inclusionary zoning' whereby additional density rights are offered to developers in return for affordable housing, we can create thousands of homes. MICHAEL GELLER ARCHITECT, PLANNER, REAL ESTATE CONSULTANT AND PROPERTY DEVELOPER

Is it possible to make housing in Vancouver more affordable? This is a question I am increasingly asked by politicians, students, colleagues and relatives.



SMALLWORKS This laneway home was designed and built by Smallworks and featured on the Vancouver Heritage Foundation's 2015 Laneway House Tour. Laneway homes are one of Vancouver's success stories, says Michael Geller — one that is being watched by many cities around the world.

The answer is yes, but the ways to achieve greater affordability may surprise you.

Anyone who has been recently reading newspapers, listening to the radio or watching TV, might believe the answer to greater affordability is to deter foreign buyers, tax empty apartments, and put an end to unsavoury real estate agent practices like “shadow flipping and assignments”.

While these seem like good ideas, and could have some marginal benefits, they are not the answer. Instead, we need to significantly increase the supply of a variety of housing choices to match the growing demand, and consider new forms of tenure.

Last year, I gave a talk at Simon Fraser University titled 12 Affordable Housing Ideas. Some were simple, others more complex. Some could be found looking to the past; others could be found elsewhere in the world.

One of the simplest ideas was to make homes smaller. While many of us grew up in postwar detached bungalows of less than 1000 square feet, with one bathroom and a gravel driveway, similar homes are no longer built today. There are many reasons for this, including municipal fees and standards, and buyers’ expectations. But there is no reason why these cannot, and should not, be changed.

Another idea was to build more semi-detached and duplex — rather than single-family — homes. The reason we don’t is improper zoning. This, too, could easily be changed.

In my presentation, I showed a variety of townhouse and stacked townhouse developments common in many parts of the world, but not Vancouver. Again, having suitably zoned land is part of the problem. Sadly, we do not have the European tradition of building such housing. It is time to start.

Another idea is what planners call “zero lot-line” housing — and form that extends from one property line to the other, without narrow strips of wasted land between structures. We build shops and offices along commercial streets like this. Why not housing?

One of the ideas I looked at was laneway housing. This is one of Vancouver’s success stories, and is being closely watched by many cities around the world.

But it is not a new idea. Anyone who has lived in England knows about carriage homes and mews houses built along back lanes. What distinguishes this housing is that it can be owned, as well as rented. We should also allow Metro Vancouver’s laneway houses to be purchased.

However, not all of us can afford to buy, so we need to rent. Particularly disturbing is that while many rent apartments in small, three-storey walk-up apartment buildings, they are no longer allowed to be built.

Why? Because today’s building codes require elevators and “a double means of egress”. We should include elevators, but let’s change our building codes to allow small apartment buildings with a single staircase, as in Calgary or Sydney, Australia. After all, we now install sprinklers.

In addition to looking at different housing forms, I looked at alternative forms of tenure.

Shared-equity ownership is a creative way for younger people in the UK to get into home ownership. We should offer it here. Instead of purchasing a home, you purchase a portion and rent the balance. Over time, you “staircase” into owning the entire property.

We should also create more “life-lease” developments, similar to the Performing Arts Lodge at Bayshore. It allows over 100 lower-income retired performance artists to live in a wonderful building in a magnificent setting. They even have their own theatre on the roof.

Other affordable housing ideas included different forms of construction, flexible designs and partnerships.

There are other ways to decrease housing costs. On April 6, I will present another lecture at SFU Harbour Centre setting out 12 New Affordable Housing Ideas. I hope you will be able to attend, but here is a preview for those who cannot.

We are often told that we are running out of land. I disagree. I just do not think we are making very good use of the land we already have.

Anyone flying over Vancouver will see a lot of green and a lot of blue. But there is also a considerable amount of grey — the streets, parking lots and rooftops. There is no reason why we cannot be building housing in many of these locations.

I did my architectural thesis on factory-built modular housing, and it is easy to envision how we might hoist modular homes on to parking lots and rooftops. In some cases, we might even build over roads or railway rights-of-way. We might even float housing modules on surrounding waters.

Vancouver has a lot of back lanes. In addition to laneway houses, we should build laneway apartments. This was an idea set out in a report to the Vancouver Mayor’s Affordable Housing Task Force and I am pleased laneway apartments are permitted in the most recent West End Plan. There are many other places around Metro where this would be feasible.

While the recent federal budget makes provision for new social housing funding, there is not enough money to house everyone in need. However, through “inclusionary zoning” whereby additional density rights are offered to developers in return for affordable housing, we can create thousands of homes.

We can also create new affordable housing by regenerating older public and social housing projects. This will also allow a better allocation of existing homes.

These are just a few of the ideas I will be presenting. I hope you will join me to hear the rest.

To register for this free SFU lecture, go to [https:// www. sfu.ca/continuing-studies/ events/2016/04/12-new-affordable-housing-ideas.html](https://www.sfu.ca/continuing-studies/events/2016/04/12-new-affordable-housing-ideas.html)