

Housing held up by red tape

Contradictory municipal rules delaying 69,500 units, builders say

Complex permitting rules are holding up 69,500 housing units in a half-dozen Metro Vancouver cities, homes that the development industry says would help alleviate the region's housing crunch.

"It's a bureaucratic quagmire. Municipalities must reduce processing delays," said Anne McMullin, president of the Urban Development Institute.

"There is no consideration how much time it takes or how much money it costs. We need to build more supply for families, first-time buyers and renters," she said.

Red tape means complying with dozens of government-imposed rules. They can require double-bulb ceiling fixtures, painting steps a certain way and making provisions for a second refrigerator — all of which must be checked by overworked inspectors.

Developers like Metro homebuilder Jake Fry of Smallworks said his firm is taking 30 per cent longer to build single-family homes than it did five years ago.

"The rules get more and more complicated. There are more regulations like the enhanced building code," he said.

The province said 108,000 housing units are awaiting completion in Burnaby, Coquitlam, New Westminster, Richmond, Surrey and Vancouver.

69,500 are pending a zoning, rezoning development or combined application;

30,500 homes are in the concept planning or policy stage;

And 8,000 homes are pending construction in New Westminster, Burnaby and Coquitlam.

"Project completion can take up to 13 years," said Fry.

Vancouver city manager Sadhu Johnston acknowledged the need for procedural improvements in a July 14 email setting up an expert advisory group.

Sadhu sought input from developers and said that staff's "overarching objective" is to "expedite the City of Vancouver's development process."

McMullin said one example of needless complexity is the way municipalities deal with rising sea levels expected this century; North Vancouver City requires a higher building height above sea level than nearby Vancouver.

"I'm pretty sure the sea level rises the same on both sides of the harbour," she said. "Designers are having to do the same job more than once."

Another example is a proposal from North Van City to require that all bedrooms in three-bedroom units have outside windows. While it "sounds good," McMullin said designers find it hard to satisfy the rule and make efficient use of the available land base.

"It's a problem, especially on the thin towers which are built in Metro Vancouver. Every bedroom has to have an outside wall. You're using up a lot of real estate," she said.

When staff become too busy to keep up with the workload, she said cities aren't doing enough to help. One development in Burnaby required 12 months to obtain an excavation permit; McMullin said Burnaby wouldn't consider paying overtime or hiring a certified professional to do the work, which is occasionally done in Vancouver.

Another time a major Vancouver development was delayed eight months by a parking covenant that "actually didn't exist," she said.

"It takes longer and longer to get approvals for a variety of reasons, adding to the cost of homes," she said.

Sometimes municipal departments are actually at odds with each other: urban design requirements call for more windows to make homes more livable in B.C.'s wet and cloudy climate, while other requirements can call for fewer windows to save energy.

"One plan-checker can say it fits and another can say no. The human element comes in, especially among new staff who may not be comfortable exercising the discretion which they are allowed to do," McMullin said.

Bob de Wit, CEO of the Greater Vancouver Homebuilders Association, said 69,500 is a "big number" in a metropolitan area that sees an average of 20,000 housing starts a year.

He said the solution is to get one set of rules for every municipality in B.C., which the province has called for beginning in December 2017.

"There's still room to go way quicker if cities would only make a few changes," he said.

Vancouver's recommendations for improvements will follow the expert panel's meetings wrap-up in October.

3 Comment(s)



[Ricketty Rabbit](#) 26 July 2016 07:14

Excuse me if I don't take the complaining of UDI at face value today. Developers have reaped windfall benefits over the past several years as a result of Vancouver's real estate bubble. You read it here in the Vancouver Sun last week when the developer of the planned towers at Horseshoe Bay admitted they'd planned on selling prices in the \$800 to \$900 per SF range but it's now looking more like \$1,100. And the difference, folks, has nothing to do with their costs. They already had the land, and construction costs haven't changed. The difference is pure gravy.



[Art Iskandid](#) 26 July 2016 08:11

Wow! I thought it was bureaucracy. Lying bastards!



[RHW](#) 26 July 2016 13:06

Anyone who has had a house built or substantial renovations lately will tell you that the municipal bureaucracy is a nightmare for you and your contractor.