

Housing the ail of two cities

Vancouver's fix rejected by Burnaby mayor

They may wear the same social democratic cloth and run leftleaning councils, but Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan and Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson have vastly different ideals when it comes to housing affordability and their municipal roles in shaping it.



Burnaby RCMP have removed four housing activists from an apartment building on Imperial Street that is slated for demolition.

As RCMP moved in Wednesday to evict protesters from a lowrent Metrotown building about to be demolished and replaced with condos, Corrigan defended his decision not to adopt some of the rental development incentives Robertson has used to create more housing. Corrigan, who has held sway in Burnaby for 14 years, says he's not about to give in to downloading what he says are provincial and federal responsibilities.

Vancouver's Robertson has loudly pronounced that local governments have a moral responsibility to do everything they can, even when the federal and provincial governments don't step up. His Vision Vancouver council has introduced a dizzying array of programs and incentives to try to create rental housing, some more effective than others.

Burnaby's Corrigan, however, has drawn a firm line, arguing his municipality has neither the resources nor the mandate to take on the provincial and federal governments' housing responsibilities. Instead, he insists that money his city gets from developers in return for bonus density should be spent on the amenities and services new populations will require.

Both men are career social democrats. Robertson served as an NDP MLA and his Vision Vancouver policies are all left-of-centre. Corrigan is a dyed-in-the-wool party-faithful New Democrat married to an NDP MLA.

Yet the two men and their cities have radically different approaches to the rising pressure on the region's diminishing low-income and affordable housing. Even on housing the homeless, Burnaby and Vancouver are worlds apart. Where Vancouver has pushed for homeless shelters and needled the province to fund emergency winter facilities, Burnaby has not a single shelter and has resisted provincial offers to set up a permanent shelter.

Corrigan at one point told a journalist that some who live in Vancouver's shelters are the type of drug-addicted, mentally ill and habitually criminal folks who would steal a dying person's gold fillings.

For Corrigan, Wednesday's police action, in which four housing activists were pried out of an Imperial Street building and later released after promising not to return, was disturbing because it directly challenged his council's long-standing message.

"This is the first time we've had things like what happened on Imperial Street. I think all of us were in shock, because for a long time we've thought that people understood that we were trying very, very hard and were perhaps the most aggressive in challenging the other orders of government about what they are failing to do," he said.

"I am empathetic with the issues that (the protesters) are raising. The problem is they are focusing their attention on the wrong order of government."

Under Robertson, Vancouver gave up those kinds of arguments. In 2011, it created a housing and homelessness strategy aimed at creating space wherever it could. It has since pumped more than \$600 million into housing, watching as 12,000 rental units — a blend of secured market rentals, social and supportive housing, suites and laneway homes — were built by developers.

By contrast, Burnaby's efforts are more subtle. It is legalizing secondary suites and offers developers bonus density in return for 20 per cent of its profits going to a dedicated housing fund. But Corrigan says that money is earmarked for two things: purchasing bare social housing sites that require provincial capital and operating funds, and the community amenities required, such as daycares, schools and parks.

"I don't agree, and I said this at the latest meeting we had of (Metro Vancouver's) regional planning, that we should be subsidizing the market for market rental housing," he said. "The idea that we would be giving a developer bonus density to build rental housing instead of getting bonus density money for amenities is, in my view, a waste."

Corrigan said Burnaby and the Union of B.C. Municipalities have unsuccessfully lobbied the province for the right to zone for tenure, such as rental-only zoning. Such a policy would protect existing rental stock, but that doesn't appeal to the Liberal government.

But housing advocates say Burnaby's stand, however principled, is wrong. Over the last four years, Burnaby has lost at least 500 units of affordable rental housing, according to **Kishone Roy, CEO of the B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association.**

"What I am certain of is that if you continue to sit on your hands, nothing will ever happen. There is no excuse for a major city like Burnaby to go through this major period of growth and have a net loss of hundreds of units of rental housing," Roy said.

Two years of surveys by the association have shown that Burnaby has the worst municipal rating in Canada on its rental housing index. The interactive index factors in five categories, including affordability, overcrowding, income gap, shortfall of bedrooms and amount of income spent on rent.

In NDP Leader John Horgan's thinking, both mayors are justified in their approach.

"Gregor ... is speaking up for renters as Derek is speaking up for them, in different ways," he said. "I think they're both correct, and I think the moral responsibility rests with the provincial government."

He made his comments in Coquitlam's Burquitlam neighbourhood, in front of two complexes set to be demolished to make way for condo towers. A total of 122 rental units are facing the wrecking ball, and less than half will be replaced in the new development.

"It's not just a Burnaby issue, it's not just a Coquitlam issue. It's a provincewide issue focused here in the Lower Mainland," Horgan said. "What's needed here is not action by municipal governments, it's action by the province."