

'No magic bullet' for maintaining Metro Vancouver's affordable-housing stock

BY KIM PEMBERTON, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 16, 2015



Metro Vancouver's updated Affordable Housing Strategy will be presented to the region's municipalities by late spring or early summer.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen Mark van Manen, PNG

Despite an ongoing need for affordable housing throughout Metro Vancouver, municipalities are feeling pressure from developers to allow the demolition of older rental buildings that often make up much of the region's lower-priced housing stock.

Metro Vancouver is seeking feedback from municipalities by January on its Affordable Housing Strategy draft, which will be a blueprint for the creation and retention of affordable housing throughout the region.

When completed, the final report will be delivered by late spring or early summer, updating Metro Vancouver's 2007 Regional Affordable Housing Strategy.

The updated report will again focus on the rental market and make recommendations that the 21 municipalities and one treaty First Nation in Metro Vancouver can choose to follow or not, said Metro's housing planner Margaret Eberle.

"The intention is ... we are at least all moving in the same direction (toward creating and retaining affordable housing). We might choose different ways to get there, but it's a common concern we all have."

Eberle said the report will also touch on home ownership by promoting housing options other than the single-detached family home.

"Municipalities are looking at creating units with more bedrooms in multi-family buildings, and looking at different housing forms, like stacked townhouses or duplexes with suites," she said.

Regarding the challenge of older rental stock being demolished in favour of pricier townhomes and condos, Eberle said "there's no magic bullet."

"The strategy approach is to increase supply (of affordable housing), to try and put in place measures to increase rental supply so if a rental building is lost, tenants would have a place to move to."

Eberle said she is aware of one initiative under Vancouver's West End Community Plan that allows the owner of an older building to develop new housing on under-utilized surface parking lots in order to retain the older rental housing stock located on the same lot.

"The challenge of affordable housing remains difficult to address especially as single-family house prices increase," said Sarah Dal Santo, a policy planning manager for the District of North Vancouver and the author of that municipality's own Rental and Affordable Housing Green Paper now being discussed by council.

"The study being done by Metro Vancouver will look at what works. In our case (in the District of North Vancouver), we have measures in place (to create and retain affordable housing), but they are done on an ad hoc basis. We need a consistent approach, and we need to get direction from council on what is realistic to achieve."

Dal Santo said the problem of trying to retain existing affordable housing stock, in the face of increasing demand by developers, is common throughout Metro Vancouver.

"Cities are seeing pressure for older rental housing stock. We want the tools to protect them and ensure those buildings stay or if the building is falling apart say yes to new development but the development has to come with conditions like one to one rental replacement."

The most recent figures available from the District of North Vancouver show there were an estimated 1,128 rental units in 2012 that were considered at moderate to high risk of redevelopment pressure, according to the district's Affordable Housing Green Paper.

"Emerging developer interest in redeveloping existing rental, and older fractional interest multi-family residential properties in the District has prompted concerns from Council over the potential loss of older, more affordable, purpose-built rental and low-end market ownership units and the potential displacement of lower to moderate income residents," the district report states.

"The purpose-built apartment vacancy rate is considered an indication of the health of the residential rental market, and a residential vacancy rate of two per cent (to) three per cent is generally indicative of a healthy balanced market."

And yet, the district's apartment vacancy rate has been averaging 0.7 per cent over the past 10 years.

The report noted there was an ongoing need for more affordable market rental to accommodate young families that are priced out of single-detached housing, workers being forced to commute from other municipalities where housing prices are more affordable, students wanting to rent smaller units on a short-term basis, and seniors looking to downsize but still remain close to community amenities and services.

In 2011, the District of North Vancouver had 5,790 renter households compared to 24,795 owner households, according to the Canada National Household Survey. The dominant form of rental housing in the district is secondary suites, of which it had an estimated 4,500 units.

The Metro Vancouver Regional Affordable Housing Strategy draft notes Metro Vancouver is growing rapidly, with the region being a destination for nearly 40,000 people per year or another million residents by 2040. There will be a demand for approximately 500,000 new homes over the next 25 years. Rental housing demand is estimated at 6,500 new units each year over 10 years. Yet, between 2011 and 2014, new rental supply fell short of rental demand by about 1,600 units in the region.

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