

## Not in your backyard? Speak up

### **You snooze, you lose: When densification hits your neighbourhood, you'd better get involved at the planning stage**

Late last year, some fancy metal fencing was erected at the public park near my house, effectively closing off a large area that is now accessible only by gates.



The Moody Park Residents' Association is working to get people in the long-established neighbourhood involved in the plans for densification that New Westminster city hall has for the area.

Puzzled, I called New Westminster city hall and inquired. "A dog park" came the reply. "Seriously?" was my reply to that reply.

Not that there's anything wrong with dog parks — well, there is, but that's for another column guaranteed to enrage someone. But what, I wondered, were my elected officials thinking in cordoning off a chunk of Moody Park so that dogs might romp and fight and poop and bark right

next, literally a leash length away, to the much-used children's playground and water park when there are other areas of the park more suitable?

Well, that's where the people who cared enough about the issue wanted it, she said, with more than a little reproof.

Ah, touche, oh dear public servant.

Clearly I had missed those (and maybe a few other) council meetings, and the notice in the local newspapers, and the chatter at the local coffee shop.

Well, you snooze, you lose. And, these days, when it comes to grappling with urban growth, there is a lot to lose.

This is something Christopher Bell, president of the Moody Park Residents' Association, knows well.

Most taxpayers, and this is no surprise to anyone, don't bother getting involved in neighbourhood issues, their hackles raised, their ire fired only when it's too late, when civic decisions have been made and, you know, the park down the street has gone to the dogs.

For the past few months, Bell has been trying to get the several thousand residents living in the Moody Park neighbourhood acquainted with the official community plan that city council has been seeking public input on for the past two years.

The short version is this: Metro Vancouver's 2011 regional growth strategy predicts New Westminister will need to add about 40,000 more residents to its current population of 66,000plus by 2040. Coupled with a natural growth rate of about two per cent a year, our small town is getting more crowded by the day — and we need somewhere to put those welcome mats.

So New West council, which has spent years dilly-dallying over density and still-banned laneway infill housing, has been holding workshops and touting a community plan with all manner of fairy tale jargon, online surveys and maps and push-pins denoting "livability corridors" and "moderate infill" choices that, if adopted, will drastically affect land use from one side of the city to the other.

If approved, the plan could see the rezoning and subdividability of hundreds of single-family housing lots to allow groundoriented duplexes, triplexes, quadruplexes, townhouses, row houses and even laneways. Along with the potential loss of the city's coveted heritage housing stock, which will fall to make way for the new builds, the spectre of that most controversial of all real-estate initiatives — land assembly — is no longer far-fetched.

The public process ends next month, when the backroom tinkering really begins, with council expecting to adopt a final plan this summer.

Is density a bad thing? No. Growth is inevitable, the people are coming and they need places to live — a real-estate story that is being played out all over the region.

But Bell is worried that too many of us — and not just in our little town — aren't paying enough attention, aren't getting involved in what's going on around them.

To that end, he has resorted to an old-fashioned means of spreading the word, this week delivering flyers to 500 Moody Park area homes, the second time he has done so in a month, inviting homeowners to attend what he calls a Moody Park "neighbourhood visioning" workshop.

"People just aren't aware," Bell says. "They don't read local newspapers and they don't go online, but I found if you want people to know something, put it through their mail slot."

His last workshop attracted 100 people, a number that surprised him and gives him hope that those most affected by coming change will step up and have a say.

"We're just trying to have a neighbourhood point of view," he says. "We just want people to be aware that some of the scenarios could really impact their neighbourhood." Could they ever. What the changes could mean in my neighbourhood, as they already have in many other Metro Vancouver neighbourhoods, is that sometime in the near future, my quiet leafy enclave of heritage houses and mid-century bungalows on big lots will be unrecognizable.

Gone will be hundreds of perfectly livable single-family homes, replaced by mid-rise rabbit warrens and builders' boxes, bringing with them more traffic, more strain on schools, resources and infrastructures and much less grass — except, of course, at the dog park.

Not in my backyard, you say? Well, good luck with that. A subdividable lot in this market is worth far more than one that isn't, and the speculators are on standby.

If that's not your idea of how a community should be planned, then speak up.



Because change will happen with or without us, as consultants, developers and urban planners rush to "transform" the region's long-established neighbourhoods, as if the word transform has been dipped in pixie dust, as if hasty artificial evolution somehow trumps organic natural evolution, which is the way neighbourhoods came together before Metro Vancouver real estate turned into a shell game.