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Affordable housing issue aired at public hearing

Jeremy Shepherd / North Shore News

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Residents listen in at the Mountain Court public hearing. Photo Cindy Goodman, North Shore News

The fate of Mountain Court Apartments and its approximately 200 residents is in the hands of District of North Vancouver council following Tuesday's public hearing.

Council is mulling the prospect of a four-building, 321-unit development on East 27th Street that would wipe Mountain Court from the face of Lynn Valley.

"We are providing needed homes for North Shore residents," said Hugh Ker, vice-president of development for Polygon.

But while the developer may be providing the "next generation of rental homes," the demolition of Mountain Court will cost one community dearly, according to several residents who attended Tuesday's meeting.

"I'm not opposed to development unless it is displacing families with nowhere to go," said Wesley Pifer.

The lack of control over his family's fate is "heartbreaking," according to Pifer, who said his sons may end up leaving behind friends, schools, "and everything else that they've ever known."

Also standing in the path of the wrecking ball is Karolina Francis.

While acknowledging the apartment building is in need of repair, Francis said the monthly rent of \$1,300 can't be matched in Lynn Valley.

"There is no affordable housing on the North Shore," Francis said. "We should not be told to move to make room for newer and better . . . just because we can't afford to pay premium market prices."

In order to assuage the hardship of moving, Polygon is offering Mountain Court tenants a compensation package. According to a formula based on how long they've lived in the apartment building, tenants will receive an average of \$4,400 to help cover costs and find new housing, according to Ker.

However, that offer is hollow if there's no place to go, countered Don Peters.

"Where does one go if the vacancy rate is 0.5 per cent?" Peters asked.

Peters suggested several methods to combat the lack of affordable housing, such as establishing a number of units where rent is tied to the median district income.

While several speakers lamented the loss of community, other residents celebrated the emergence of new housing options.

Real estate agent David Goodman beseeched council to support Polygon's project, particularly in light of the lack of new rental units throughout Metro Vancouver.

"Rejection will defy the universally accepted planning premise of densification next to a developed town centre," he said.

Goodman also characterized the 47-year-old Mountain Court structure as outdated and inefficient.

That assessment was echoed by Ian Graf, a partner in a law firm representing Mountain Court's owners.

The wood-frame building is in need of new plumbing and electrical systems and likely needs to be torn down, according to Graf. Even if the buildings weren't demolished, a major renovation would necessitate the eviction of tenants followed by new, higher rents, according to Graf.

Polygon's development will usher greater vibrancy to Lynn Valley and offer an alternative to soaring real estate prices, according to Scott Sigston.

"As someone who's grown up in Lynn Valley, I've seen the cost of housing rise from the unaffordable to the impossible," he said.

The development could allow many young renters to "settle in the place we love," he said.

New development like the Polygon project is the antidote to "existing suburban gentrification that is threatening to turn North Vancouver into a large-scale retirement municipality for the rich and/or the lucky," according to Sigston.

Council is tentatively slated to debate the project's approval — and the fate of Mountain Court apartments — on July 6.

The project, composed of 75 rental units and 246 condos spread through a quartet of five-storey buildings, split council this spring.

Couns. Lisa Muri and Jim Hanson voted against the development, citing traffic concerns and unmanageable construction. The rest of council supported the project.

The new development features studio units and three-bedroom apartments ranging from 491 to 1,234 square feet. Rent for a two-bedroom unit will be an estimated \$2,000.

Mayor Richard Walton did not attend Tuesday's public hearing.

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