

DIM VIEWS ON HOUSING UPSET FINANCE MINISTER

Councils too quick to alter plans when residents gripe, de Jong says

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Finance Minister Mike de Jong was in fighting form last month over obstacles to increasing the housing supply in Metro Vancouver when he cited what he regarded as a particularly egregious action by a local council.



THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE Finance Minister Mike de Jong says he's frustrated with municipal councils across the province that reject multi-unit housing proposals simply because neighbouring residents make it known they don't want to lose their scenic views.

"A developer wanted to add two more floors," said de Jong. "It was consistent with the community plan. The recommendation from the planning department was to proceed."

Yet "the council responded to concerns from some neighbours about a view corridor," and turned thumbs down.

“Well, look, we can’t have it both ways,” the finance minister continued. “We can’t on the one hand all wring our hands in despair and say we have a housing issue, and then frustrate those who are prepared to address that by building housing.”

De Jong stopped short of identifying the offending municipality. But after I noted his comments, two readers directed me to the case that had provoked the finance minister’s outrage.

It happened in Port Moody earlier this year, in circumstances much as the finance minister described.

A developer had proposed a four- and six-storey condominium development for a vacant site close to one of the stations on the new Evergreen SkyTrain line.

The 100-plus units dovetailed with the official community plan’s goal to increase housing density near the transit line. Included were some three-bedroom units, touted in some quarters as the best option for young families unable to afford the traditional detached home.

The project was endorsed by the city’s advisory design panel and the land use committee. Staff filed a favourable report on enhancements to the design including open space, amenities for pedestrians, a \$250,000 contribution to the affordable housing fund and \$50,000 worth of public art.

But when crunch time came in late April, council nixed approving the increased height.

“All but two council members — Mayor Mike Clay and Coun. Diana Dilworth — voted against the rezoning application after a public hearing at which about 20 people, all but one of whom lives in a neighbouring building, spoke against the proposed development,” the Tri-City News reported in a story published April 29.

Some of those objections to the Aragon Properties proposal, filed earlier, were included in the background package posted on the council website.

“Our view is very badly affected if the proposed plan is approved,” said one. “We purchased on the top floor paying a large premium for the view of the inlet and the mountains,” protested another.

Others, living in a nearby building developed by Aragon Properties, claimed that they’d been promised their view would be protected: “My view and privacy was guaranteed not to be blocked.”

You’ve heard of “not in my backyard?” Now, here’s “not in my line of sight.”

While the council majority was spooked by those complaints, Mayor Clay anticipated the reaction that was later expressed by Finance Minister de Jong.

“I don’t know what we’re supposed to do when somebody comes in with an application that meets everything we’ve described in the OCP and council turns it down,” he told Tri-City News reporter Sarah Payne.

Far from agreeing that people were entitled to think that their view corridors would be preserved for all time, Clay noted that city densities and zoning have to change over time.

“What are they going to do if (another nearby site) is redeveloped and something there blocks their view?” he challenged. “Twenty people came to the public hearing, all but one lived in one of the two buildings that touch this building. The other 34,980 people of the city don’t seem to be objecting to this.”

The council vote sent the developer back to the drawing board to try to scale down the project, but not without first expressing some frustration.

“We thought we were following the rules and following the directions from staff and all the policies that council has endorsed in the past, including the OCP,” said Aragon’s David Roppel.

The negative decision for developers could also have long-term consequences for local ratepayers in terms of reduced investment in the community in the future.

Already this year, Port Moody has registered one of the biggest increases in property taxes in the Metro Vancouver region. The average hike, approved at the same meeting where council decided to let concerns about views trump the community plan, was pegged at five per cent. But my colleague Kelly Sinoski reported last week on homeowners who were looking at 13 per cent and 21 per cent respectively.

Meanwhile, the ripples would appear to be spreading beyond the municipal boundaries, given the B.C. Liberal government’s determination to double or triple the number of housing units coming on line in Metro Vancouver.

Council’s forced scaling down of a project next to a SkyTrain station is also at odds with the provincial government’s stated goal of increasing density along transit lines to help pay the cost of construction.

“That upzoning, that densification, it generates housing supply and it generates value,” de Jong said last month. “It is entirely legitimate for governments — civic, provincial, federal — to tap into that value for the purpose of developing transit infrastructure.”



Details await Premier Christy Clark’s promised rollout of a housing action plan “in the coming weeks.” But if the Liberals are serious about overcoming local opposition to increased housing density along transit lines, they had better be prepared to use provincial powers to make it happen.