

# 10 MORE HOUSING IDEAS

## City can adopt high-density policies without highrises, Michael Geller writes.

We can increase density without building highrises in ways that would also create new housing choices appealing to those hoping to rent or buy their first home. MICHAEL GELLER, Vancouver architect

I opened last Saturday's Vancouver Sun with considerable interest. According to the front page, on page B5 of the Weekend Review I would find "Ten ways to cool housing prices." Like all Vancouverites, I am eager to see an end to the rapidly escalating housing prices in our city. So I immediately turned to the page.

I found an article by the highly respected Douglas Todd. It featured a photo of Justin Trudeau and Christy Clark, who in Todd's opinion were "acting blind to the housing regulations in place in most countries, all of which restrict foreign speculation and related causes of houseprice mania."

Todd then went on to list "10 policies that could ease the current calamity." The majority were fiscal interventions, including taxing foreign ownership of property and unoccupied houses; demanding more of foreign investors and pressing to end Quebec's immigrant investor program; adjusting interest rates and mortgage rules; combating money laundering and attacking flipping; reducing or redirecting immigration patterns; and stopping foreign donations to B.C. politicians.

While I do not disagree with these propositions, with the exception of taxing unoccupied houses, which is easier said than done, in my opinion Todd's most important recommendations were to increase zoning density and build more social housing.

Unfortunately, for many Vancouver residents, increasing zoning density is a euphemism for allowing highrise buildings. However, we can increase density without building highrises in ways that would also create new housing choices appealing to those hoping to rent or buy their first home, and others ready to move out of larger properties into something less expensive and more manageable.

Inspired by Todd's column, I would like to offer 10 more ways to cool housing prices.

### Reduce municipal parking requirements

Most parking bylaws are outdated and often result in more expensive parking spaces than necessary. By reducing resident parking requirements and increasing car-share spaces, we can lower the cost of housing and help reduce greenhouse gases and traffic congestion. Reduced parking standards could also facilitate development of underutilized parking lots.

### Allow more laneway and coach houses for rent and sale

Laneway houses are now permitted in Vancouver and some other Metro municipalities. Located at the rear of single-family properties, they result in new housing without significantly altering neighbourhood character. The size of the home is generally quite small and related to the size of the lot. These homes cannot be sold. It is now time for all Metro municipalities to permit laneway housing. Moreover, family-sized laneway houses for sale should be permitted on larger corner lots, and lots with smaller character homes that are to be conserved.

### Allow basement suites in duplexes, townhouses and apartments

Basement suites provide a significant amount of affordable housing. However, they are generally not allowed in duplexes and townhouses. Municipalities should change zoning to allow this form of housing. They should also allow "lock-off suites" within apartments, such as those at SFU's UniverCity. Think of them as "mortgage-helpers in the sky."

### Zone more land for townhouses and "fee-simple" row housing

All over the world, people own row houses that are not part of a condominium. However, this form of housing is rarely offered in Metro Vancouver due to a myriad of zoning and municipal regulations. Municipalities should zone more land to accommodate those who want to own a row house without having to pay monthly strata fees. After all, why should someone who can often least afford it pay someone else to cut their grass?

#### **Change municipal regulations to encourage smaller homes on smaller lots**

Many of us grew up in three-bedroom, one-bathroom homes of less than 900 square feet. Today, such homes are rarely built, in part because of subdivision regulations and high municipal charges. However, by allowing larger lots to be subdivided, and establishing municipal fees related to lot and house size, we could bring down the cost of new housing.

#### **Allow housing on industrial lands**

Today's industrial uses are very different than in our grandfathers' day. Around the region are thousands of acres of one- and two-storey light industrial buildings with extensive parking areas. We should be building housing on many of these existing and future industrial properties. As long as the required industrial space is built, we need not worry about a rise in land values.

#### **Make better use of public and institutional lands**

Many school, community centre, and church sites offer excellent potential for more housing, especially affordable housing. We should also be increasing housing densities around public parks. This is happening elsewhere around the world, and should be encouraged in our region.

#### **Regenerate older public and social housing projects**

Many public and social housing projects were built at much lower densities than considered appropriate for today. While most non-profits do not have the resources or expertise to redevelop these properties, municipalities, in concert with senior levels of government, could facilitate the creation of new housing through various forms of public-private-non-profit partnerships.

#### **Encourage new affordable housing through inclusionary zoning**

While the federal and provincial governments have limited funds for affordable housing, municipalities can offer incentives such as density bonuses and reduced or deferred development fees to encourage affordable housing as part of new market developments. They can also "pre-zone" land to increase the supply of multi-family sites, and simplify approval procedures.

#### **Explore alternative forms of tenure**

In addition to new forms of housing and zoning changes, alternatives to traditional owning and renting could reduce the cost of housing. Forms of tenure such as shared equity, a hybrid form of ownership; rent to own programs; and life tenancy (a good example is the Performing Arts Lodge at Bayshore), which offers the right to acquire housing at a lower cost than conventional condominium ownership, should all be explored.

In summary, while most of Todd's fiscal measures could help cool the market, without allowing density increases and changes to zoning and the complex approval process, we will never make Vancouver more affordable or supply an urgently needed increase in the stock of affordable social housing. Michael Geller is a Vancouver architect, planner, real estate consultant and property developer, and also serves on the adjunct faculty at SFU.

#### **1 Comment(s)**

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Geller seems to forget that every 33 foot lot (and up) in Vancouver has already been re-zoned to allow for a single family home, a laneway house and a basement suite. May be he should look at the reasons why the up-take of these "solutions" is so slow.