

HOUSING

Families look to other communities for affordability

As real estate prices in Vancouver soar, several Lower Mainland cities make changes to lure residents

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VANCOUVER SUN

Two years ago, Alisa and Vivek Ramakrishnan were spending more than \$2,000 a month on a cramped two-bedroom basement suite with a half-office in Vancouver's pricey Kitsilano.

So the couple upped stakes and moved their family to south Surrey's Morgan Crossing, where they now rent a four-bedroom townhouse — twice as big as the basement suite — for the same price.

"It's like a little Yaletown," Alisa Ramakrishnan said. "We have room. We can fit our stuff in here. And it's a little bit slower paced, too."

The decision to move from Vancouver to Surrey was a no-brainer for the Ramakrishnans, who immigrated from India and settled in Vancouver to be closer to Vivek's wife. They needed more space to raise their two young daughters — one is in elementary school, the other in preschool — and there were more housing choices south of the Fraser River. The Morgan Crossing neighbourhood has shops, schools, parks and amenities nearby. Most importantly for Ramakrishnan, it's been easier there to make friends with other stay-at-home moms.

"I didn't have a lot of friends (in Vancouver)," said Ramakrishnan, who worked as a geneticist before having her children. "When we moved down here, there were a lot of displaced people ... professional women who were taking care of their kids. It's fun. In Vancouver, you have to work, you can't stay home. It's hard."

Surrey has long been a draw for families, credited mostly to its variety of housing types and more affordable prices. Twenty-seven per cent of the city's population is under 19, and the Surrey school district is B.C.'s largest.

Indeed, the average number of families in Surrey rose by about



MARK VAN MANEN/PNG

Maya Ramakrishnan, 9, plays in the front yard of her Surrey home with mother Alisa and sister Sahana, 4. The family, which also includes dad Vivek, pays the same rent for their four-bedroom home as the two-bedroom basement suite with half-office in Kitsilano they lived in previously.

19,310 between the 2006 and 2011 censuses, compared with just over 7,000 in Richmond during the same period. In Vancouver, however, the number of families with children increased by only 100.

Surrey has been actively building more townhouses, secondary suites and highrise apartments to serve the growing demand for family housing across the city, said Jean Lamontagne, Surrey's general manager of planning.

In the year to date, for instance, Surrey has issued \$486.1 million worth of residential building permits, \$220 million more than the same time last year. Of those, 187 permits were issued for single-family homes, while 217 were for single-family homes with a secondary suite and 118 were for new townhouses — mostly in areas like Morgan Creek, Guildford and City Centre.

There were only three permits issued for highrise apartments,

and last year none were issued.

"It's the market that's going to dictate the type of housing," Lamontagne said. "We look at the typical housing we have across the city. We're not at the point where we have to direct what kind of housing has to be delivered."

But while Surrey has no problem luring families, other municipalities are looking at ways to keep them. Vancouver has just begun considering options to provide more affordable housing for families, while cities like New Westminster have gone a step further, becoming the first city to mandate minimum percentages of three-bedroom units.

Beverly Grieve, New Westminster's director of development services, said the city brought in the new measures after hearing concerns from families living in cramped conditions or not being able to find a bigger home.

Families are attracted to New Westminster — the schools are full and a new elementary school was recently built in the downtown core — but council was concerned by a decline in the number of children and youth in the 2011 census, which suggested some couples were moving out of New Westminster as their families grew, Grieve said.

"It seems when they have one or two children they're fine, but when the third comes along they found there wasn't housing in the community and we were losing them," Grieve said. "That was a bit of a wake-up call, something we needed to pay attention to."

As a result, New Westminster city council last week amended its zoning bylaws to require multi-family ownership projects to include a minimum of 30 per cent two- and three-bedroom units, with at least 10 per cent of the total project units being three bedrooms or more.

Multi-family rental projects will also be required to include a minimum of 25 per cent two- and three-bedroom units, with at least five per cent of the total project units being three bedrooms or more. The policy and bylaw takes effect Jan. 1 and will apply to all developments with more than 10 residential units.

The policy is part of the city's overall child- and youth-friendly community strategy, which aims to develop neighbourhoods with child care, parks, playgrounds and recreation programming. The strategy will be forwarded to council for endorsement in the fall.

"We hope to bring families here," Grieve said. "I think it is really going to be a good choice for families who can't afford downtown areas of Vancouver or even Burnaby."

She noted cities like Burnaby and Richmond have called her up for advice.

However, Ted Townsend, spokesman for the City of Richmond, said while the city does not have a formal policy for multi-family construction right now, its Official Community Plan encourages a range of housing types and sizes. The city also encourages developers to negotiate a mix of unit types, including multiple bedrooms.

In Coquitlam, council tries to "make sure our zoning doesn't favour one-bedroom studios over larger units," Mayor Richard Stewart said, without dictating to the market what it must build.

"A lot of cultures are raised in highrises," Stewart said. "We need to make sure we support the market when it's trying to meet the demand."

North Vancouver City Mayor Darrell Mussatto said his council doesn't plan to follow New Westminster's lead, but noted developers are starting to look at building bigger units, which will bode well for families.

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