

Housing report card ‘deceiving’: councillor

Self-written city assessment notes progress on rental starts

Report cards in grade school tend to start with accomplishments. On that note, the City of Vancouver’s 2015 self-written report card on housing, presented to councillors Tuesday, was no different.



KIM STALLKNECHT Vancouver Non-Partisan Association Coun. George Affleck questions the merit of the City of Vancouver’s Rental 100 program.

According to staff, Vancouver has seen as many rental starts in the past decade as the rest of Metro Vancouver combined.

Meanwhile, the units approved in the past five years will amount to 10 per cent of the city’s rental stock. Impressive figures — and those were just some of them — for a city trying to boost housing with little federal assistance.

But there’s a reason why teachers don’t allow students to write their own report cards, and that was evident by the end of Tuesday’s 75-slide presentation, in which just eight slides had actually touched on Vancouver’s “housing challenge,” as staff put it. Last week Mayor Gregor Robertson called it a “crisis.”

The highest rents and housing costs in Canada, a 0.6 per cent rental vacancy rate, and little space for families were just some of the challenges for residents despite all efforts taken at the city level, the report card noted.

“Much more needs to be done,” slide No. 68 stated plainly.

On that point, staff and councillors said the provincial and federal governments needed to pitch in. While Coun. Kerry Jang asked for help from the province to “bust the cycle of commodification of housing,” Coun. Geoff Meggs noted action was needed from Victoria to enable an affordable home ownership program in the city. Staff characterized the 2016 federal budget (which made commitments of cash and energy) as “a new hope.”

Coun. Tim Stevenson labelled the report card “hopeful and helpful.” He added that while there is more to be done, it was cause to celebrate having made “a huge, huge difference in the lives of so many people.”

In a news release circulated after the presentation, Non-Partisan Association Coun. George Affleck said the mayor and Vision Vancouver were “attempting to give themselves an ‘A’ with this housing report card,” when housing affordability and access to rental units has become worse in the past eight years.

Affleck said in an interview that he found the report card “deceiving,” noting the city did not capture all relevant data. He also questioned the merit of Vancouver’s Rental 100 program, which gives incentives to developers to build rental housing and is responsible for some of the city’s strong housing numbers.

He called the program “too generous” for developers already eager to invest in Vancouver’s booming real estate market and said it does not result in truly affordable rental housing, noting that the low rent requirements in Rental 100 buildings only apply to the initial occupants of a given unit. That was a concern also raised by Green party Coun. Adriane Carr.

“It appears to me that we are building mostly market rental units that are not protected in the long-term to make them truly affordable,” Affleck said.

“The numbers they keep spouting are based on market rental housing and they’re not affordable. And I don’t find that honest to the people of this city. I don’t believe we are building truly affordable housing.”

Affleck said he saw affordability being achieved by reducing municipal taxes and service fees.

Earlier in Tuesday’s meeting, fellow NPA Coun. Melissa De Genova repeatedly asked staff what the margin was for developers of Rental 100 buildings, but did not receive a clear answer. De Genova later told The Sun she intended to pursue that issue with staff, adding: “I’m sure it is lucrative and I’m concerned it could be contributing to ... unaffordability.”

Meggs pointed out that in the years before programs like Rental 100, rental housing starts were only trickling in. From 2003 to 2007, just 716 rental units were enabled, according to the presentation. That jumped to 5,119 from 2010 to 2015, representing a seven-fold increase.

“If we were going to see a solution to housing affordability from supply, you would think we would be seeing it under the current circumstances,” Meggs said.

The comment recalled a longstanding question of whether the city’s affordability crisis stems from inadequate supply or ample demand.

Last week, the new head of the Urban Development Institute (Pacific Region) told Postmedia housing supply was key to affordability. The province also came in on that side of the debate when it announced a tax break on new homes in its recent budget.