

People of all ages, all incomes united in anger over housing

Poll shows vast majority blame politicians for failing to act

As debate over skyrocketing home prices and foreign investment boils over in B.C., a new poll by Insights West shows 80 per cent of British Columbians support a tax on absentee owners.

And for the first time, Insights West measured anger directed at B.C. politicians over housing costs.

All three levels of government got scathing reviews in the poll. The provincial government was hit hardest, with 76 per cent of British Columbians expressing dissatisfaction with Victoria's inaction.

Insights West pollster Mario Canseco said support for taxing vacant homes in B.C. has climbed steadily from 72 per cent in 2014. Support is broad, Canseco said, with all generations, ethnic groups, and income levels backing an absentee tax.

"It is very rare to get a number as high as 80 per cent, and it is very rare to get three generations and people from all income levels to agree," Canseco said.

The poll comes as average singlefamily home prices in Vancouver have seen surreal price jumps of about 40 per cent over the past year. A ripple effect is pouring across the region, with suburban areas such as Tsawwassen seeing benchmark prices jump as much as 48 per cent year over year.

A growing consensus of experts point to a surge of money from Mainland China as the major force driving housing price gains. Canseco said his poll "really takes away from the notion you are targeting a specific group for race, because you are only targeting investors because of their absence."

Support for the absentee tax peaks with millennials, aged 18 to 34, at 89 per cent. Voters aged 55 and over show 75 per cent support for the tax. The cross-generational agreement also applies to views of politicians.

"Anger is widespread, voters are upset with all levels, and most of all Victoria," Canseco said. "It is inaction that is leading to more cynicism against the provincial government, which is understandable given the cozy nature they have with developers, including their chief fundraiser, (condo marketer) Bob Rennie."

In a widely reported speech this week, Rennie said Vancouver should "get out of the affordable ownership business" — and that investment from Mainland China should not be tampered with, and foreign investors should not be taxed.

In Metro Vancouver, 82 per cent support the absentee owner tax, Canseco said.

After playing down concerns about investment from Mainland China as "ridiculous" in 2013, Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson this week said that because of "unregulated, speculative global capital flowing into Metro Vancouver's real estate, we are seeing housing prices completely disconnected from local incomes."

Robertson told Bloomberg News his government is considering a number of measures, including a vacant home tax.

Vancouver millennial Eveline Xia, who several years ago launched “don’t have one million” — a popular social media campaign criticizing unaffordability driven by offshore investment — said she is gratified that politicians like Robertson have adopted the protest’s message.

“I think there has been an awakening that housing affordability is a global issue and we need to address global capital’s role in Vancouver,” Xia said. “We are behind other cities, like Sydney and London, on taking action.”

UBC real estate economist Thomas Davidoff is among a large group of B.C. economists advocating a plan to decrease taxes paid by local workers and increase the property tax bills of investors who can afford to pay for vacant B.C. homes.

Davidoff said in recent years, money from Mainland China appears to be driving B.C. housing prices, but he can foresee the investment from Russia and the Middle East that is prevalent in New York City soon pouring into Vancouver.

“Something needs to be done or you have this two-tiered society where local people are pushed out, and international money is partying in Vancouver,” Davidoff said. “And then suddenly you have someone like Donald Trump winning an election in B.C.”

Vancouver resident Jason Czorna, 34, said he would support laws allowing only permanent residents and Canadian citizens to own homes in B.C.

“The state of our housing market is a disaster and (Premier) Christy Clark will never do what it takes to fix it,” Czorna said. “Real estate as an investment only benefits the rich and crushes the average person’s chance to live affordably.”

Not all Vancouver millennials support a tax on absentee investors.

“This will do absolutely nothing to change housing affordability. Do you not understand how much money these foreign buyers have?” said 33-year-old realtor Brad Richert. “Demand is insanely high and supply is falling. A tax isn’t going to stop or even slow down anything.”