

Groundbreaking initiative focuses on increasing housing supply

Affordability crisis: Greater Vancouver Home Builder's Association says the answer is to build more dwellings

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One of the world's leading voices on sustainability and the future of the planet recently sounded an alarm bell, warning that the shortage of housing supply in cities across the globe is threatening quality of life.

In an article in Britain's Guardian newspaper, Alex Steffen, a San Francisco-based urban futurist, argued there is a huge gulf between available housing and demand for homes in growing cities across the globe. He contends this housing shortage is causing an affordability crisis that undermines the quality of life for the hardworking middle class, worsens inequality and threatens the future of the

planet.

Steffen contends that to make housing affordable again, most cities need to catch up to decades-worth of unmet demand over the next few years: “In many cities, this means goals measured in the tens of thousands of new homes; in the fastest-growing cities, it means hundreds of thousands. Build enough housing and (economists and experience both tell us) prices should at least stabilize. Want social justice? Build a lot more housing.”

In order to build this magnitude of housing, Steffen argues that new efforts are needed — efforts not only in scale, but in approach. That challenge, he believes, demands that local governments need to be willing and able to plan and permit the kind of widespread change that will be needed to accommodate this wave of new housing supply over the next few decades.

News of this global housing shortage crisis comes as no comfort to those of us in Metro Vancouver who experience every day the life-altering pressures of housing costs stretching our means. It’s interesting that we’re part of a global trend, but not in any way reassuring to know this.

We know that our regional population is growing at a rate of 3,000 new residents per month. By 2041, the Metro Vancouver region will need a half-million new homes to house a million new residents.

Some are beginning to realize that to combat the housing affordability crisis in Metro Vancouver, we are going to have to seriously figure out how we can close the gulf between supply and demand.

Some extraordinary measures will be needed to accomplish this and some very ordinary measures — small innovations — also will help.

One way of improving the ability of the market to respond with housing supply is to ensure that municipalities and developers are working effectively together to plan and approve new housing projects.

The Greater Vancouver Home Builders’ Association recently launched an initiative to figure out how to get new housing development projects to the groundbreaking stage, recognizing that we do have a housing shortage and supply is required.

Getting to Groundbreaking — or G2G — is a comprehensive program that will look at the costs, the charge structures, the processes and the policies that go into the processing and eventual approval of new housing development applications in municipalities throughout the region. An annual G2G survey will gather data from both municipalities and developers to benchmark application costs, approval times and management practices. Working with local governments, GVHBA will conduct background research on housing policy regulations and their impacts, hoping to identify innovative ways in which municipalities and developers are already working together to meet housing demand or new innovations where they can work more effectively together.

This initiative promises to be a rigorous one, based on credible research methods. Simon Fraser University’s Urban Studies Program researchers are partners in the project with the GVHBA, and they will be guided by an advisory group that includes members of local governments, the Urban Development Institute, the BC Non-profit Housing Association and Toronto’s Ryerson University.

It is intended to be a long-term initiative, with the promise of an annual report on the benchmarks, highlights on best practices and case studies.

GVHBA hopes the Getting to Groundbreaking initiative will provide some workable ideas on addressing the pressing housing needs in the region.

What's most encouraging about this initiative is that it focuses on supply as the answer to the affordability challenge.

We've been struggling with this challenge in Metro Vancouver for far too long, while we have ignored what Steffen said in his call to action: "Our only choice is to build, build, build."

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Previous

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Workers build walls of a new home at a housing development on April 16, 2013 in San Mateo, California. The Commerce Department reported that new home construction was up seven per cent in March from February, the biggest gain since June 2008. A surge of apartment construction led the monthly gain.

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