

MUNICIPAL POLITICS

City's housing strategy set for review

Affordability pegged as No. 1 issue, affecting the homeless and potential homebuyers

MATTHEW ROBINSON
VANCOUVER SUN

The City of Vancouver is planning a rethink of its housing strategy as concern mounts over the strain foreign buyers, vacant homes and Airbnb are putting on renters and homebuyers in the region.

Housing affordability will be top of mind for Mayor Gregor Robertson and city councillors for the next few months as staff roll out a parade of reports and initiatives on housing.

"Affordability is our No. 1 issue," Robertson said in an interview Thursday.

"As a city, we need to strive to ensure there's housing available for people who want to live and work in Vancouver, and particularly those who grow up here and want to build a career and start a family."

Up first this spring is a comprehensive look at the size and scope of Vancouver's empty home problem. A report with the city's findings — based on BC Hydro smart meter data — goes to council on Tuesday.

Robertson said the next step will be creating tools to unlock all that unused housing.

The city's 10-year housing strategy focuses on ending street homelessness and boosting affordable housing options. In the five years since the strategy launched in 2011, homelessness has remained a visible issue.

Despite all the resources the city has spent on affordable housing and homelessness — the most in Canada, the mayor contends — it is "barely keeping up with the mounting pressure," Robertson said.

At the same time, a far broader base of residents began to find itself in despair over housing costs. Would-be tenants now worry they're competing with tourists in a city with less than one per cent vacancy, while



DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS FILES

Mayor Gregor Robertson says the city must 'strive' to ensure people who want to work and live in Vancouver can find — and afford — a home.

homebuyers fret that foreigners and flippers are snapping up homes at nonsensical prices. Earlier this week, an RBC report declared that the city has never been so unaffordable.

When a six-month rethink of the city's housing strategy launches later this spring, the priority will remain on Vancouver's most vulnerable people, Robertson said. But the strategy's scope may broaden, with the mayor stating a need to act

across the housing spectrum.

Overseeing much of the city's soon-to-be released work on affordability is Mukhtar Latif, the city's chief housing officer.

"We have focused on homelessness because that was a key priority for council, and that continues to be a key priority from our perspective," Latif said in an interview Thursday.

But with market prices increasing and affordability becoming an issue for those in higher

income brackets, the city is also looking at ways "to support young people and families to stay in Vancouver," he said.

Among the proposals heading to council this spring is a program aimed at supporting home ownership for first-time buyers. The pilot program would give financial assistance to buyers with limited means who live and work in the city.

The idea takes cues from programs around North America,

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some of which offer equity loans — an idea under consideration by the city. Latif said the pilot program could restrict purchases to certain areas in Vancouver.

Staff will also report on a plan to require at least 35 per cent of units in apartment buildings and condominiums to be suitable for families, with two, three or four bedrooms.

Meanwhile, city staff are preparing the Grandview-Woodland community plan and the next steps for the Cambie corridor for an April release. Both will include a focus on stacked townhouses and row houses like those that made recent appearances in city documents for Norquay Village and Little Mountain.

A modular-home pilot with 30 to 40 units of housing could be ready to launch as soon as April with the recent conclusion of a request for proposals. Those homes are intended for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Prospective renters who think they're feeling a squeeze from Airbnb will have to wait a few months to have their suspicions confirmed or refuted. Latif said a team has been working on the question for a few months, and they should be ready to take their findings to council in June.

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5 Comment(s)

[WaskesiuT](#)

04 March 2016

07:28

There's that "affordability" word again, always followed by a load of BS.

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[GMan](#)

04 March 2016

08:07

As I said yesterday all of Robertson's density initiatives should be reversed.

Bidding wars on single family detached houses have distorted the market because the purchaser can tear down the perfectly good house and build something bigger and more dense thereby making a profit.

Although competitive I have not heard of massive bidding wars on condos. With the lack of bidding wars condo prices have not risen as much as detached homes. I think the reason is that a single condo unit can not be redeveloped and densified to make larger profits.

The solution is to reverse Robertson's zoning changes and define single family zoned areas to allow no increase in square footage built on the properties.

[tug](#)

04 March 2016

08:18

If house sizes were limited to a percentage of lot size it would solve the monster house problem and level the playing field.



[Ricketty Rabbit](#)

04 March 2016

10:55

"Bidding wars on single family detached houses have distorted the market because the purchaser can tear down the perfectly good house and build something bigger and more dense thereby making a profit. "

I think most of the tear-downs these days are being rebuilt within the current building codes, which pre-date Robertson. And density doesn't mean increasing square footage - it means increase people per hectare of land. Rebuilt larger single family homes are unlikely to have more people per hectare than the homes they replace. Increasing density is mostly about changing zoning from single family to multi-family; and increasing the FSR for those already zoned multi-family.

Rolling back these true density increases would be far more likely to increase housing prices than decrease them.

With the rate at which the City, Province and Federal governments are addressing this, they'll be ready just about when the prices bottom out after the next downturn.