



Metro's plan will bump housing costs

Affordable market, rental housing should be greater priorities in regional growth strategy

BY MAUREEN ENSER, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 20, 2011



Single detached homes in Richmond and Vancouver's west side that are the most sought after properties in the marketplace.

Photograph by: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun files

The Lower Mainland consistently ranks among the most livable regions in the world -an accolade residents frequently cite with considerable pride. This international recognition not only makes us proud to live here; it also attracts others from around the world.

Sadly, "livable" Metro Vancouver is also among the least affordable housing regions in the world. There is immense demand and very limited supply -fuelling higher and higher housing prices.

Young people wanting to buy their first home are hit hardest by this supply crunch. All too often, they are priced out of the region, forcing long commutes, traffic congestion and limited family time.

The median household income in Metro Vancouver is \$62,763, which means a home for an average family should cost about \$315,000 by most measures of "affordability." Median house prices here range from \$450,000 for an individual condo and up to \$1 million for a modest singlefamily home.

Put another way, a city is considered "unaffordable" if the ratio of income to house price exceeds 1: 3. Vancouver's ratio is 1: 9, and neighbouring municipalities follow close behind.

We all know our region is unaffordable. We all know this needs to be addressed -and urgently.

According to Metro Vancouver, our population will grow by about 35,000 per year over the next three decades. That's an

increase from 2.2 to 3.4 million people by 2040. Managing this growth sustainably requires a regional growth plan that will supply enough affordable family housing to meet these forecasts and provide for new jobs to feed and provide for these families near their homes.

This is the only way we will maintain our much-lauded livability and highly valued environmental stewardship.

Affordable market and rental housing should be a critical priority for Metro Vancouver, as part of its regional planning process. Alarming, Metro's proposed Regional Growth Strategy fails to adequately acknowledge or address this crucial need.

At a time when leading urbanists increasingly recognize the connection between density, affordability and long-term livability, the Regional Growth Strategy is a step backward.

The Agricultural Land Reserve and Green Zone already protect 70 per cent of land in the region from development. With building outward limited by mountains and water, building up is our only choice. The current version of the plan does little to enable the creation of new affordable housing, while needlessly constraining development. It largely ignores the economy, and fails to adequately address the politically challenging reality that density done right is a key part of the solution.

Planned strategically and in collaboration with communities, concentrated density is the best thing we can do to address affordability and sustainability. Ideally, intensified affordable housing can and should occur near transit; providing convenient, greener, and more affordable ways to live with efficient access to jobs, shopping, schools and recreation.

Instead of facilitating housing creation, Metro's plan leaves local communities and municipal councils to fend for themselves in the face of polarized political interests and NIMBY-ism. This volatile equation already restrains the provision of sustainable, affordable, centrally located housing. The plan makes it worse.

At the same time, the proposed plan would increase bureaucracy and introduce a multi-tiered approval process. The plan subjects local decisions to increased interference by politicians from neighbouring cities - politicians who are not democratically accountable to the families and communities that will be affected.

It gives a few large municipalities a veto power over the affairs of all other municipalities. And it will add time and development costs that will ultimately be borne by homeowners in taxes and in the price of their homes, making housing less rather than more affordable.

Red tape stifles the innovation, growth and progress necessary to create affordable, accessible housing for our children and, eventually, their parents who will want to live near them as they age and downsize.

There are serious implications for housing affordability if the Regional Growth Strategy is approved in its current form -which expects the developers that build homes and communities to deliver on laudable goals, while crippling their ability to do so.

We will fulfil the vast potential of our region not through easy platitudes, not through avoiding difficult conversations, but by working together to address tough questions and complex challenges.

The need for collaborative, visionary leadership is urgent. We call on the province, Metro Vancouver and local governments to look at our region holistically and to collaborate with us and other stakeholders to make affordable housing for today's and tomorrow's families a reality.

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