



COPE floats plan for new authority that would focus on affordable housing

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The left-leaning Coalition of Progressive Electors wants to create a Vancouver housing authority that would build thousands of units of new subsidized and affordable housing.

It hopes its 98-page position paper will drive debate leading up to the Nov. 15 civic election, and if elected the party would then put an authority in place to buy property, undertake developments and manage finished subsidized housing, COPE announced Tuesday.

Sean Antrim, the executive director of COPE, said the proposed authority could build upwards of 1,000 units per year.

COPE's plan was unveiled on the same day that the Vision Vancouver-dominated city council approved a rezoning and substantial increase in rental units at Metro Vancouver Housing Corporation's Heather Place near Vancouver General Hospital.

The aging complex of 86 rental units, including 52 rented at social housing rates, will be replaced with two towers containing 230 units. All of the people who get subsidized housing in the old building will

be given first right of refusal to move into the new buildings at the same rate they now pay. The rest of the units will be rented at market rates. A total of 118 units would be two-and three-bedroom units meant for families.

Although some residents objected to the dramatic increase in density on the site, the city said it is in keeping with its policies of trying to create more rental housing.

The project is the first Metro Vancouver Housing Authority has built in years. It owns about 50 sites across the Metro region containing 3,500 suites that are home to about 10,000 people.

Antrim said COPE'S proposed housing authority would be substantially different from the Metro Vancouver model, whose units were built with federal and provincial support. Ottawa has since got out of the business of funding social housing.

However, COPE'S concept is similar to an "affordable housing authority" already pledged by the current Vision Vancouver council as an outcome of Mayor Gregor Robertson's "task force on affordability" in 2012. Coun. Kerry Jang, a member of the task force, said city staff will issue a report in June or July laying out the legal framework for the authority, which could be in operation later this year.

He said the new agency would operate independently of the city but would have access to lands the city controls. As many as 1,500 units of affordable housing for seniors, families and the poor could be built annually. Jang said the city plans to examine the best practices of other cities around the world that have housing authorities.

But Antrim said COPE has already done the surveys. It looked at six housing authorities in Toronto, Singapore, New York, Stockholm, Hong Kong and Vienna. A COPE government would fund the housing authority in part by increasing property taxes, he said.

"We think we could institute a more progressive property tax and give rebates to people who need them," he said.

COPE is also proposing a "tenants union" similar to one in Stockholm that negotiates rents and maintenance on all public housing. About one third of the residents in Stockholm, which is about the same size as Vancouver, live in public authority housing.

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