

Council tackles huge issue of monster homes

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Richmond council is taking measures to control a proliferation of “monster” homes across the city, with plans to cancel single-family land-use contracts by next year.

The move, slated to go to a public hearing this fall, is aimed at bringing land-use contracts under existing city zoning bylaws to ensure homes remain in character with their existing neighbourhoods when they’re redeveloped.

City staff have been working on the proposed changes for at least a year, after several developers were found to be using a loophole to build three-storey mansions on existing lots prescribed for two-and-a-half storey homes, said Richmond Coun. Linda McPhail. A third storey is allowed as long as it’s under a pitched roof, but homebuilders have been building flat, or barn, roofs instead, which lets them create an entire third floor without exceeding Richmond’s nine-metre height restriction.

“What we’ve heard is a lot of other areas have had a lot of renewal in their neighbourhoods ahead of us,” McPhail said.

“In 2009, the first couple of houses started being built and we realized we really didn’t have any recourse. The provisions in the land-use contracts superseded the zoning regulations.”

Land-use contracts, which were mostly signed in the 1970s between property owners and municipalities, allowed to build in many cases to circumvent local zoning bylaws and do what they wanted on the land. Roughly a third of the land in Richmond is covered by 94 land use contracts, which govern more than 4,000 single-family homes, most of them in large subdivisions. About 21 contracts also govern more than 1,600 multi-family residential units as well as parks, schools, medical facilities and a church.

But the province last year passed legislation that requires



MARK VAN NANCY/INGLIS EYES

Richmond is battling the rise of over-sized homes, which are popping up and are out of character in some residential neighbourhoods.

municipalities to adopt underlying zoning bylaws for land-use contracts by June 30, 2022 — two years before all contracts in B.C. expire in 2024. The new legislation also allows municipalities to terminate those contracts immediately.

Ted Townsend, spokesman for the City of Richmond, said city records show 44 building permits have been issued for single-family homes over the last five years. And while it’s hard to

predict when or if other properties might re-develop, Townsend said in an email “we do see numbers trending up and expect that to accelerate.”

City staff will bring forward a process for the proposed changes, including zoning bylaws and changes to enable the cancellation, within the next few months. The process is expected to “be extraordinary,” the city said, given the number of properties involved.

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LINDA MCPHAIL
RICHMOND COUNCILLOR

In areas governed by city zoning bylaws, maximum house size is generally dictated by floor area ratio, or the size of the building against the size of the lot. In most cases, that ratio is 0.55 in Richmond, meaning the square footage of the house can be just over half the total lot size.

The hearings are expected to draw huge crowds and last over several nights, given the heated debate around the issue.

“It is anticipated that attendance at the public hearing may require use of a special venue over several evenings in order

to meet capacity demands and public interest,” the city said in a news release.

McPhail said while many people are upset with the change in character in their neighbourhoods, others are worried they can’t use the land-use contract as a selling point.

Monster homes have become a huge issue across Metro Vancouver. In West Vancouver, residents are balking against a plan by city officials to reduce the size of massive new homes, including a new 17,500-square-foot home being built in the Caulfield neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, Surrey city officials are also looking to start a process to cancel its land-use agreements, although that city doesn’t appear to have the same problems as Richmond, said Jean Lamontagne, general manager of planning, because it has more underlying zoning. Surrey has 297 land-use contracts, of which 243 govern about 7,000 single-family homes.

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