

Affordable housing for all **not impossible**

City needs to change rules to allow more utility of land, developer says

Reliance Properties president and CEO Jon Stovell on Thursday was named chair of the Urban Development Institute (Pacific Region), a national association of the development industry with more than 650 corporate members.



Jon Stovell of Reliance Properties says giving people with larger lots the right to subdivide into smaller properties can increase the supply of housing.

Stovell, whose company built Vancouver's first micro-lofts, turning a defunct Gastown single-room occupancy (SRO) into a 30-unit rental project, believes much more needs to be done in Metro Vancouver to provide affordable housing for people hoping to remain in the city. But, he says, that requires a radical change in thinking, including giving people with larger lots the right to subdivide into smaller properties. Q What's wrong with Vancouver's housing policy?

A One word: supply. We need more supply of housing options of every type in every neighbourhood. There's many ways to do that. None are painless, but that's what we need to do. I'm advocating a proportional upzoning of every neighbourhood in the city. That means areas that are allowed to have 300-foot (91-metre) buildings should be allowed to have a 500-foot (152-metre) building. Areas allowed to have a house that's 60 per cent of the size of the site should be allowed two houses that are 80 per cent the size of the combined site. Every single neighbourhood and development we do, whether it's townhouse, single family, fourstorey wood-frame, 12-storey midrise, highrise, all of them need to be allowed to get more utility out of the land. Q How do you build affordable housing in Vancouver?

A You build more. We all know blueberries are cheaper in the summer than the winter because there's an abundant supply. The inventory of housing in Vancouver is plummeting because there's simply not enough supply. The city is trying to create supply, but there's a lot of political reality that makes that difficult.

Q How can you save the city's stock of heritage homes by increasing densities?

A If you open up more supply in all neighbourhoods, you have less economic and demand pressure on those homes to be demolished. If you have a heritage house in Point Grey or Shaughnessy, and if you could build a lane house and actually sell it as opposed to only being allowed to rent it, then an aging couple or extended family might be able to pull enough capital out of that sale that they wouldn't be motivated to sell the home and have it torn down.

Q You've called on the City of Vancouver to "grow up" and change its "glacial policies" in order to meet housing demand. What do you mean by that?

A I think the city is hanging on to a notion in terms of types of housing and densities that is out of step with where Vancouver falls on the world stage now. We invited the (world) to come to Expo 86 and the Olympics, and they came. Now the world wants to come back to Vancouver. And we're hanging on to this kind of parochial view of the city that's just out of step with the new reality. Seventy per cent of the land in Vancouver is occupied by 30 per cent of the population. That's just going to have to change.

Q Most people prefer singlefamily detached homes, but there's fewer available. How do you get people to embrace more density everywhere?

A I think that's the toughest question of all. It comes down to separating your own personal interest and the way things used to be for you when you were growing up. We have a whole generation who grew up thinking they would build like their parents, and I think it's a question of just looking into the benefits of more-dense urban living and letting go of some of the idealistic notions of single-family living and moving ahead with the new world. But there are ways that we can get more single-family homes that don't get talked about much. My last single-family home in Vancouver was on a 26-foot-wide lot, and it was every bit as nice of an experience as when I lived on a 100-foot-wide lot. We could reduce the minimum frontages of single-family lots in Vancouver and get a lot more singlefamily homes built. Older ones would come down, bungalows on 100-foot (30-metre) lots, or 60(18-metre) or 75-foot (23-metre) lots, and we could replace them with three single-family homes on 25-foot (7.6-metre) lots.

QUESTIONABLE!

Q You're the president of Reliance Properties and your company owns a lot of property in Gastown and elsewhere. How do you counter critics who say that by promoting this type of growth, you're only looking out for yourself?

A I was born and raised in Vancouver. I love the city and have a strong sense of our anxiety about our young people not being able to live and work here anymore. I'm the pioneer in (Vancouver) of micro-lofts, which is a great bottom rung on the ladder of housing ownership and affordability. Look at what we do. We're saving heritage buildings in Gastown, we're trying to build micro-homes for young people. I'd just say measure us by our record of what we build as opposed to lumping us as "You're just another developer."