

JAMES: Growing housing crisis threatens family ties

[Elizabeth James](#) | Contributing writer

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Just
ASKING
Elizabeth James



"The sustainability, livability and inclusiveness of our community is a key factor in making it a desirable place to live. We work with community groups and other agencies to address critical social issues that affect us all and ensure the needs of our residents are met." – dnv.org/programs (<http://dnv.org/programs>)

The laudable vision outlined by the District of North Vancouver is a variant of those to be found in most municipalities. The question is: are they walking the talk?

The critical social issues in Metro Vancouver today relate to the exclusionary price of real estate, the consequent lack of affordable housing and the seeming inability of most municipalities to take remedial action.

Worse still is that the people being forced out of their homes in search of affordability are causing upheavals and costs for other communities. As school boards confirm, while enrolment is declining in Vancouver and on the North Shore, migration to Surrey is booting many students into portable classrooms – unhealthy for people on both sides of the equation.

In part, the problems have escalated out of control due to outdated provincial legislation and/or poor enforcement of existing regulations.

In lock-step with the rest of the region, North Shore municipalities are authors of their own misfortune. At the beck and call of development applications, the current rate of construction in the District of North Vancouver is set on a course that soon may match the determination of its neighbouring city to reach 2030 regional growth population numbers five years ahead of time. Yet neither municipality can keep up with maintenance or replacement of aging infrastructure and deficient transportation.

Furthermore, as one listens to the endless hand-wringing and mostly unproductive discussions around council tables, it's hard not to gain the impression that some members of council believe solutions can be found within the context of the advice offered years ago by then District councillor, Alan Nixon, who suggested that "some people just can't afford to live on the North Shore."

(Nixon has since moved off the North Shore).

My reaction then and now: "So where and how far are people expected to go?"

Regardless of the North Shore family and community ties that might be forever broken, **a person could travel to Chilliwack and still find housing unaffordable.**

Someone, somewhere needs to grasp the nettle.

Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) still maintains that: "In Canada, housing is considered affordable if shelter costs account for less than 30 per cent of before-tax household income."

It explains that "affordable housing" ranges from temporary emergency shelters all the way to market rental housing or home ownership. Using that rationale at today's low-normal end, if a person can find a bachelor pad to rent at \$1,000, s/he should be earning a gross salary a fraction under \$3,500/month.

So, before someone turns up their nose at the notion the North Shore should have more "emergency shelters," put that stereotyping in the context of one family among the hundreds of people being ejected from Mountain Court and the 60+ apartments at Emery Village in Lynn Valley's town centre.

North Shore residents since 1998, Jenn and Rob Ohlhauser and their four kids have lived in one of the eight four-bedroom Emery Village units for seven years.

Jenn works three days a week as a West Vancouver teacher, while Rob made a career change and attends BCIT in order to upgrade his skills and income prospects as a chartered accountant. They attend church in the area and are fully involved in the children's sports activities.

"It's not just about us," Jenn told me over coffee. "We all know one another at Emery; we care. One of the other four-bedroom units houses a foster family with teenagers, what will happen to them? It's a huge loss to the community," she said.

Another Emery family is a newly widowed dad with two boys aged three and two.

He moved there to be near his mother-in-law who cares for the boys while he works to support them. What of them?

After 16 years with the multi-disciplinary Perinatal Programme of B.C. and later in various endeavours in the growing high-tech industry, Elizabeth James now connects the dots every second Wednesday on local, regional and provincial issues. She can be reached via email at rimco@shaw.ca. (<http://rimco@shaw.ca>)

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