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District approves coach houses

Jeremy Shepherd / North Shore News

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The District of North Vancouver has gone coach.

Council was unanimous in approving a new coach house policy despite lingering concerns over implementation.

"I get a sense that it's almost not ready to come out of the oven, that it's not baked yet," said Coun. Roger Bassam at the Nov. 3 regular meeting of council.

The district is expecting between five and 25 coach house applications each year, but Bassam expressed concerns that too many detached dwellings could lead to a streetscape similar to Surrey where emergency vehicles awkwardly navigate cluttered streets.

"We're introducing a lot of density, potentially, into single family neighbourhoods," Bassam said.

Coach houses are capped at 968 square feet, but can include another 232 square feet for a car. That parking spot will turn into living space, according to Bassam. "It's not an issue of if it will happen. It will happen," he said. "Almost by policy, we don't enforce this. We don't enforce this in single-family buildings. ... so what is our expectation we're going to enforce it all of a sudden for coach houses?" Mayor Richard Walton referenced Pierre Trudeau's famous quote about the state having no place in the bedrooms of the nation.

"It's very difficult for us to monitor and follow up on what's going on in people's homes unless we have a complaint from a neighbour," he said.

The district allows coach houses or secondary suites but not both on the same lot.

There are worries neighbours could exercise a de facto veto, according to Coun. Robin Hicks.

"I'm not sure about this neighbour's approval which could result in winners and losers on an arbitrary basis," he said.

District staff will likely find sensible solutions, according to Coun. Alan Nixon.

"I have great faith in our development staff and our planning staff to be able to attach appropriate weight to the input that they hear from neighbours," Nixon said.

Nixon suggested final adoption of the coach house rules be accompanied by a date for staff to report back to council on the bylaw's efficacy. Final adoption is scheduled for Nov. 17.

Council can continue to steward the coach house policy after final adoption, said Coun. Lisa Muri.

"This is not a bylaw written in stone. We can amend it," she said.

Council has a history of working with homeowners, architects and concerned neighbours to find solutions to seeming impasses, according to Muri.

"Nine times out of 10 it always worked," she said.

While homes bordering greenbelts might be a better fit for coach houses than many smaller lots in the City of North Vancouver, Muri reminded those in attendance the detached dwellings likely come with a \$250,000 price tag.

"This is not something you build in order to create revenue for yourself to help you pay down your mortgage," she said.

While there may be an "implicit unfairness" to the district's approach of gradually phasing in coach houses, it is the pragmatic approach, according to Coun. Mike Little.

District council will eventually determine what constitutes a good fit for a coach house and what doesn't, said Little.

"We don't know what that is yet."

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