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There goes the neighbourhood 2

Building bigger: Residents band together to fight oversized homes, but odds are stacked against them

With land prices soaring and so much redevelopment underway, homeowners increasingly are becoming combatants in a fight to preserve their neighbourhoods.



WARD PERRIN/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

A duplex is shown under construction in Vancouver. Some neighbours are taking action to prevent the construction of large nearby buildings.

Suzanna Crescenzo and Grant Hodgkins never imagined, back in 2011, when they bought their 1926 home on East 14th near Fraser Street, that they'd be organizing their block and fighting the city over plans for the lot next door.

But that's what they're doing. The couple is now considering suing over a developer's plans to replace a house with a two-unit duplex structure that extends 18 feet farther back on the lot than the neighbouring homes, "completely boxing them in, taking away sunlight," says Crescenzo.

The 30- by 122- foot lot is one of four on the block lately surveyed by developers.

With support from seven neighbours, Crescenzo wrote Mayor Gregor Robertson on Sept 22: "We live on a very nice, friendly street.

"A few houses have sold to developers who are trying to ... build massive front- back duplexes which dwarf all of the houses around them."

What's happening to the East 14th residents is happening across Vancouver as developers slip letters into front- door mail slots, beseeching would- be sellers to contact them before phoning a real estate agent.

In areas zoned for higher density, developers are bulldozing older homes, anticipating good profit from construction of townhouses or duplexes.

Next door to me, a builder bought a decaying 1950s- era Kits bungalow last year for \$ 2.5 million, replacing it with two duplex units, each selling for nearly \$ 1.9 million. You can't beat those economics.

The city generally favours such development: More homes get built, with the dubious hope of more affordable prices.

Developers try to build as big and economically as possible, often battling neighbours wanting to retain the character of their

streets.

Which highlights the issue of whom Vancouver's neighbourhoods belong to. Who should get final say over development?

These issues can become so hot that communities have begun linking arms. Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, formed in 2007, wants more say for local residents. Another group, the Coalition of Vancouver Neighbourhoods, emerged last June, asking Vancouver to "consider the interests of communities and residents above developer profits."

Crescenzo and Hodgkins, business professionals with a young daughter and twins on the way, asked the developer to undertake the expense of building up rather than out. They were rebuffed.

Vancouver's planning department imposed numerous conditions on the builders' plans, which were appealed to Vancouver's Board of Variance. It recently gave the project a green light.

This five- member volunteer board, appointed by city council for three years, is a little known body whose decisions are appealable only to the courts. Lawyers have told Crescenzo that could cost \$ 40,000.

Should a board with this much power be elected? Or at least have representation from the broader community? Right now, its members are involved in construction, real estate and house design. One member works with a company pledging to "take your development and project proposal through all stages of approvals."

And, outrageously, while a developer may appeal the city planners' decisions to the board, neighbouring homeowners, since 2007, have had no such right. This is wrong. The city is only starting to understand that to keep peace, more community viewpoints are needed. At present it's experimenting with a citizens' assembly model to develop a community plan for Grandview-Woodland.

Developers, to be sure, are crucial to a growing city. But Vancouver's rampant redevelopment is not just about their needs.



If Vancouver is to justify its reputation as a livable locale with an engaged citizenry, it also must be about the aspirations of the people living here.

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