

Barbara Yaffe: Home affordability would require flexibility

Changes to bylaws: Smaller homes, density needed

BY BARBARA YAFFE, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 4, 2014



Anne McMullin, the president of the Urban Development Institute Pacific Branch, and architect Michael Geller at Hollyburn Mews in West Vancouver.

Photograph by: RICHARD LAM, PNG

The Urban Development Institute's Pacific Region is challenging City Hall to start making home ownership in Vancouver more affordable.

← By reducing expectations ! - cjk

The Vancouver-based organization is promoting several ideas that, if implemented, could help ease the city's residential affordability crisis.

It will be discussing these with key city officials this month.

As is well known, Vancouver is the second-least affordable housing market in the world after Hong Kong. Annual household median incomes here — about \$70,000 — make buying property a tall task.

Because there is a ready market of fat-walleted buyers from abroad, the situation is perpetuated in accordance with principles of supply and demand.

Politicians and developers have shown little inclination to offer a helping hand. Builders, as long as they are making a profit, aren't in business to worry about people's financial issues. While the city recently created an Affordable Housing Agency, politicians are generally loath to give property purchasers a break lest tax revenues decline.

Enter the UDI, representing those involved in land development and planning, with a desire, says UDI president and CEO Anne McMullin, "to start a discussion on more ways to improve affordability and housing diversity.

"The ideas are there. Let's get going."

The UDI's proposals — all de rigueur for ages in Europe — promote "small-scale densification" for maximum land use. The land is what costs.

Whether the UDI's innovations would constitute strata developments or allow outright ownership of smaller lots would be a municipal decision.

- **Small detached homes on small lots, or cottage homes, would cost less.** An example of such a pocket neighbourhood is Michael Geller's sold-out Hollyburn Mews, built recently in West Vancouver.

Three lots with combined frontage of 160 feet were turned into a nine-unit strata, each lot accommodating two duplexes at the front, one coach house plus three garages at the rear. (The homes — 2,150 to 2,500 square feet for a duplex and 1,800 square feet for a coach house — each sold for \$1.23 million to \$1.69 million.)

"Their compact footprint conserves land and reduces building costs." The UDI notes Vancouver zoning prohibits such a cluster.

- **Allow homeowners to subdivide their lot to build and sell a laneway house,** which, at present, are rentals only. "If property owners could market them as fee-simple homes, Vancouver would see many more of these affordable residences built."

- **Allow homeowners to sell, as well as rent, basement suites.** "This type of gentle infill would allow younger generations access to the housing market and gain equity at a more affordable entry level."

- **Allowing "buried" bedrooms.** The windowless rooms could receive natural light via glass walls and sliding doors. "The conversation on buried bedrooms will become especially important as we move into an era of infill development with more interior sites." The challenge is to have Vancouver change its zoning to enable these proposals. McMullin says planning director Brian Jackson promotes innovation, but the city fears neighbourhood blowback from greater densification.

Also, greed could stand in the way of affordability. I know of a pocket-type neighbourhood created in Kitsilano: Two half duplexes, plus what looks like a coach house at the rear, with three garages, on a single corner lot. Asking price for the half duplexes: about \$1.8 million each; \$1.4 million for the coach house. Not exactly affordable, despite the density.

I have also come across a Kitsilano property, for sale last fall, that was marketed as a townhouse, but was just an expensive basement suite.

↙ **Albeit mostly illegally ! -cjk**

The fact these ideas are already being tested suggests their time has come, says McMullin.

Certainly, the time has come for public discussion. Let's hear from Vancouver's mayoral candidates.

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