

Barbara Yaffe: Townhomes an affordable alternative in Vancouver

More needed: Restricted zoning limits numbers built and they're not always welcome

BY BARBARA YAFFE, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST AUGUST 20, 2014



Townhouse developments in Vancouver, like this one off Oak St., cost less than single-family homes and offer more space than condos, but are 'probably the most under-supplied part of the housing market,' according to realtor Bob Rennie.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, Vancouver Sun

Can't afford a single-family home in Vancouver, and not enamoured with condo living? There is another option, albeit a frustratingly elusive one: townhomes.

It's a great option for people who want to be able to walk out their front door and be outside — as opposed to exiting via a corridor full of neighbouring units, an occasionally slow elevator and a lobby.

"For most people, it's as close as you can get to having a home in the city," says Vancouver realtor Bob Rennie.

Unfortunately, the stock of townhomes in Vancouver is lamentably modest, with the scarcity of new developments driving up prices.

Townhouses, says Rennie, are "probably the most undersupplied part of the housing market."

He notes only 36 townhomes, part of three developments on the city's east side, are expected to come on to the market in 2015.

Vancouver's planning director Brian Jackson calls them "the missing piece in Vancouver's housing continuum." The focus, he notes, always has been on high and mid-rise development.

"It's a huge issue," says Anne McMullin, President and CEO of the Urban Development Institute. She says a new townhouse in Vancouver these days can run to \$1.3 million, and more.

The root problem — restricted zoning.

No developer wanting to make money will build townhouses on property zoned for denser, more lucrative condo and apartment buildings.

So, new townhomes have to be built on land either already zoned for townhouses or for single-family occupancy.

Rennie says the city used to promote housing density only downtown “but now, we’re moving into single-family neighbourhoods.”

And townhouses are not always welcome.

Maureen Gulyas, a spokesman for the city, says municipal planners have “added policies to encourage this type of development in our community plans.”

Such plans for Marpole, however, initially got stymied by an angry community, with designated townhome development having to be scaled back, from 2,400 units to 800. Consultation with the community last fall yielded a long list of local concerns, outlined in a municipal report: “shadowing, loss of privacy for neighbouring single-family homes, increased traffic and crime”.

Residents also “were doubtful new housing forms proposed would be affordable,” and expressed concern buyers would allow the townhomes “to sit empty as investment properties”.

Jackson, who calls townhouse development “gentle densification,” says the city experienced less pushback from two other neighbourhoods where townhouse development is planned — on Nanaimo Street and along Kingsway. Townhouses also are being earmarked for streets near the Cambie Corridor. Many will be priced at less than \$1 million, he says.

As encouragement, the city is offering townhouse developers density bonuses and an easing of provisions for their Community Amenity Contributions — money from developers directed to city coffers to provide community amenities like parks.

While townhouses give more choice to Vancouverites in a tough housing market, no one should think they’re the answer to the city’s affordability challenge — except perhaps for those priced out of a single-family home.

According to the UDI/FortisBC Housing Affordability Index, in the first quarter of 2013, 26.2 per cent of residents — based on incomes and interest rates — would have qualified for a townhouse mortgage. That dropped to just 18.5 per cent by the first quarter of 2014.

But with 5,000 new residents moving to Vancouver every year, housing options are needed.

And, says Rennie, if Vancouverites want their aging parents to be able to remain in the city, or their adult children to live nearby, new townhouses will be needed, offering their buyers greater space, privacy and outdoor space than they likely could get in a condo.

byaffe@vancouversun.com

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