

Not all municipalities can prevent rental loss

Cities outside Vancouver don't have the power to stop demolitions

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As Metro Vancouver continues to grapple with ways to address the affordable housing crisis, the City of Vancouver has announced it will build 400 new affordable homes on four parcels of city-owned land.



NICK PROCAYLO New construction overshadows older apartments in Burnaby, where the mayor has called on the province to let cities zone for rentals.

That announcement this week, which calls for more SROs (single-unit occupancy) as well as seniors' and family units, comes as **Metro Vancouver municipalities are under attack for allowing the demolition of older, three- and four-storey apartments in favour of high-density condominiums**, especially around SkyTrain stations. But it also raises the question of who is responsible for providing affordable rental housing, with municipalities and the province each pointing fingers at the other.

Indeed, while Vancouver moves ahead with developing the four city-owned sites, worth a total of \$50 million, in partnership with developers, it still requires financial support from the provincial and federal governments to ensure it can keep the costs low enough to accommodate the low- to middleincome people who need it.

For instance, the city expects to build 130 rental units for working families and singles on a lot at 2221 Main St., with rents between \$850 to \$2,000 per month. But it would need an additional subsidy of \$25 million from senior government or other partners to ensure it can achieve those rents, and another \$45 million from provincial and federal governments to bring them even lower.

Mayors have lobbied for decades to get senior levels of government to inject more money or incentives to boost the rental housing stock. Ottawa has announced it will create a federal housing strategy, but the province has yet to take similar measures.

The province, which was asked at the Union of B.C. Municipalities last year to create a housing program to stimulate rental housing and maintain existing stock, replied that it is up to cities “who are responsible for planning, zoning and development regulation, to use the tools at their disposal to support the province’s efforts and further the creation of new housing supply.”

The situation has led to a hodgepodge of measures across the region, which needs 18,200 new housing units per year — one-third of those purpose-built rentals — over the next decade, according to a recent Metro Vancouver report. Two-thirds of those purpose-built rentals should be earmarked for very low or low-income households, the report states.

Vancouver, which has its own charter, can instill special provisions against the demolition or loss of single-room occupancy housing. It insists on one-on-one replacement for all units lost to redevelopment, for instance, and is developing a tax on empty homes, which is slated to be in place next year. The four city-owned sites are also the first of 20 that will become part of the city’s first Community Land Trust. Vancouver has pledged to add 2,500 more units by 2021.

“We are moving ahead with the sites, but they need to come to the table with funding so we can get deeper affordability,” Mayor Gregor Robertson said. “We’re doing everything we can do. We’re continuing to push the pace on this.”

Other municipalities don’t have those powers. Under the Local Government Act, a city is unable to withhold a demolition permit, which means a developer can knock down an existing rental building and replace it with condos as long as it complies with the existing size and zoning.

It is conundrums like this, Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan says, that make it difficult for cities to protect rental housing. Corrigan, who has taken heat over the bulldozing of three-storey apartment buildings in Metrotown, has called on the province to allow cities to zone for rental housing, but the province has refused.

New Westminster has taken a different tack by not supporting rezoning requests that would see existing rental units converted to condos. Although the city can’t stop a developer from knocking down an existing building and putting up condos, Bev Grieve, the city’s director of development services, said most developers abide by New West’s wishes.

As a result, that city, which also offers relaxed parking restrictions and higher density in exchange for rental units in a project, has seen a loss of no more than three per cent of rental units.

Corrigan argues that with no protection for rental units, he would rather allow developers the option to build higher density because then at least the city can get more money, or amenities such as daycares and swimming pools, in exchange. Otherwise, he said, the developer can just knock down a three-storey rental building and build a high-priced three-storey condo instead.

“We’re trying to get units built. We’ve tried every possible avenue to try and help, (but) ultimately it comes down to the province and the feds not doing anything,” he said.

“We’re forced into this terrible choice: I’ll shut the door. We won’t have any more development, but you have to say we’re not taking any more people.”