

DNV mulls incentives for those who create new housing

BARRY RUEGER

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District of North Vancouver staff will be investigating ways to make it easier for homeowners to add a secondary suite to their homes. Following a motion presented by Councillor Jim Hanson, and approved unanimously, staff will explore options for easing regulations or even offering financial incentives to homeowners who can create new housing. Hanson's motion was one of three Council motions intended to ease some of the shortage in affordable housing on the North Shore.

The District estimates that there are currently 4,300 suites located in single family homes, with staff projecting that another 2,600 units could be created by 2030. It is already the case that 75% of new build and rebuilt homes include secondary suites. These estimates are inexact because many secondary suites aren't registered with the District. These suites are home to some of the 25% of District households who rent rather than own their homes. According to Statistics Canada, rents in the District have increased by more than 42% over the last decade, and currently nearly half of renters are paying amounts for housing that CMHC (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) considers "unaffordable".

Hansen's focus on secondary suites comes from his own experience as a District homeowner. Several years ago, at a time when his family was getting smaller, leaving extra space in the family home,

MAYOR WALTON POINTED OUT THAT ANY CASH INCENTIVE WOULD ALSO LEAD TO PROPERTY OWNER PAYING MORE IN TAXES OR UTILITIES – WHICH IS ONE REASON WHY MANY SECONDARY SUITES AREN'T REGISTERED. MATHEW BOND, WHO LIVED WITH HIS FAMILY IN NORTH SHORE BASEMENT SUITE FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS, SUPPORTED THE MOTION, BUT WARNED, "I WOULD WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'RE NOT, AS COUNCIL, RELYING ON BASEMENT SUITES TO SOLVE OUR RENTAL CRISIS. I THINK WE'VE BEEN DOING THAT FOR TWENTY YEARS. WE STILL NEED HAVE A STRONG FOCUS ON PURPOSE-BUILT RENTALS."

Hansen was approached by a neighbour asking if he could take in a second cousin who needed a place to stay. There was expense involved for renovation, but his experience of adapting his own home, and sharing it with another family, has made him a supporter of secondary suites.

"We're downsizing, but we don't have to leave" says Hansen. "And we have additional revenue to help support our children as they go out in the world."

What Hanson is looking for is some relaxation in the regulation of secondary suites – especially the requirement for added parking – and for the District to improve the ways that they support homeowners. For instance Hansen suggests there should be a staff member designated to explain the sometimes confusing permit process, and an education campaign to teach homeowners what rules they need to follow. Hansen

would also like to see some form of "expedited" permitting to make it faster and easier for homeowners to add suites. Outgoing Mayor Richard Walton acknowledged that parking is always a concern in residential neighbourhoods, but also pointed out that the enforcement of the existing regulations requiring on-site parking is weak, in part because it is unlikely that tenants will want to press the issue with their landlords.

Housing and development are likely the biggest issues in this year's election, with supporters of increased density and new housing construction squaring off against residents who fear increased traffic and the loss of neighbourhood character. Hanson describes a voting public that is divided on these issues "....It's dividing New Democrats, it's dividing Liberals, and it's dividing Conservatives. It's creating whole new alliances." According to Hansen the

financial case for supporting secondary suites is straightforward. "An affordable housing unit created by the District is going to cost us \$100,000 one way or the other in foregone DCCs, CACs, and District land. If we put forward a \$5000 interest-free loan program it would be far cheaper in terms of creating affordable housing."

Mayor Walton pointed out that any cash incentive would also lead to the property owner paying more in taxes or utilities – which is one reason why many secondary suites aren't registered. Councillor Mathew Bond, who lived with his family in North Shore basement suite for a number of years, supported the motion, but warned, "I would want to make sure that we're not, as Council, relying on basement suites to solve our rental crisis. I think we've been doing that for twenty years. We still need have a strong focus on purpose-built rentals." Hanson acknowledges that secondary suites aren't a perfect solution to the North Shore housing shortage. They're less secure than purpose-built housing, and are seen by some as "second-class" accommodation, but says "on the other hand, in the kind of environment we have today with the vacancy rate of zero, people (are) literally having to leave the North Shore just to find a bed to sleep on. It seems to me it's any port in a storm; this has the potential, on an interim basis anyway, to address the housing crisis." With only four more meetings are scheduled before this fall's elections, it is expected that the staff report will be presented to the new, incoming Council.