

Illegal suites in majority after 30 years of debate

Legalize a suite per single-family home, GVRD chair advises planners, politicians

By FRANCES BULA
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It's hopeless for municipalities to try to deal with illegal suites.

Instead, the provincial government should do what the NDP did in Ontario — make it legal across the province for every single-family house to have a suite, a senior Surrey councillor and head of the Greater Vancouver regional district told a group of politicians and planners Friday.

Marvin Hunt, speaking at a conference organized by Smart Growth B.C. on secondary suites, said Surrey has lost the battle when it comes to the suites issue.

"We've tried everything under the sun to absolutely no effect," he said.

After almost 30 years of debate over the issue, Surrey has between 18,000 and 20,000 illegal suites. And, in spite of creating a bylaw to create a process for legalizing them, there are only 200 legal suites in the city.

The municipality is at the state where it now puts out a brochure called *A Guide to Unauthorized Secondary Suites*. And Hunt said the city really only goes after houses with multiple illegal suites. It doesn't bother with the single-suite houses any more.

Hunt said that, even though municipalities have been grappling with the issue for decades, the main problem is that building-code requirements are so onerous and complicated that most owners prefer to keep running their suites illegally than try to comply with them. Hunt estimated the average cost for a homeowner to meet the cost of upgrading is about \$10,000.

That leaves municipalities in an impossible position.

If they don't try to force owners to meet building-code rules, they run the risk of being held liable if there is a life-threatening problem. If they do force owners to legalize, they run the risk of creating a housing disaster as landlords are forced to shut down what has become a major source of affordable housing.

"If we shut them all down tomorrow, we would have a huge crisis in affordability," Hunt told about 200 conference attendees. "And these people are an important part of our workforce and local economy."

He also said that illegal suites create an enormous planning problem for cities.

In one area of Surrey — a heavily immigrant-populated section of Newton — Hunt said that two schools ended up having to be built side by side after double the number of students that planners had projected appeared in the

new neighbourhood.

"There were so many secondary suites in the area, we had twice as many students as we expected."

Hunt's comments about the failure of legalization efforts were echoed by North Vancouver city Councillor Craig Keating.

Keating said the city has only had 125 owners legalize their suites and there are another 1,500 illegal suites in the municipality.

He said people like his neighbours consider the ability to have suites as key to being able to afford to buy a house.

But, like Hunt, he said the demands of the building code make it financially impractical for many of them to legalize.

"It's very difficult for houses of the 1920s, 1930s vintage to have a suite that meets 2003 standards."

Smart Growth executive director Chee-ying Ho said the group, a non-profit organization focused on improving land-use planning in the region, arranged the conference on secondary suites because they will be a significant factor in whether the region can incorporate new population without drastically altering neighbourhoods or sprawling further.

Politicians and planners from 24 municipalities came out to the conference.

Municipalities throughout the region have wildly differing policies on suites.

A report card issued by the Tenants' Rights Action Coalition in the fall gave the city of North Vancouver a B-minus for its efforts to acknowledge and incorporate secondary suites into the housing system. Surrey got an F because, said TRAC, secondary suites "are only permitted in certain areas and the process to legalize them is very onerous. Nevertheless, the city charges arbitrarily set utility fees for suites whether legal or not."

TRAC estimates there are as many as 70,000 secondary suites in the whole region, accounting for about a quarter of all rental housing.

In Vancouver, there are 3,800 legal suites and likely well over 20,000 illegal ones. The last time the city did a rough estimate, in the 1980s, there were 18,000.

Vancouver was supposed to phase out its illegal suites by this decade. The current Coalition of Progressive Electors campaigned on a platform of legalizing suites throughout the city.

Currently, they are only legally allowed in neighbourhoods that voted in favour of having them, although in reality they are spread throughout the city.

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