



Building Better Homes and Communities

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Affordability and Choice Today

ACT Solutions

Barriers & Solutions: Secondary Suites Smart Growth BC, British Columbia

Issue

While most citizens dream of owning their own homes, that desire becomes impractical for many in high-price markets. A revenue suite to help offset mortgage and upkeep costs is essential to make the economics of home ownership work, or to allow a family to buy a home closer to work downtown instead of in outlying areas.

In the past, secondary suites tended to be rejected as undesirable for a number of reasons. Improved communications with stakeholders, a persistent and growing demand for this form of housing and positive outcomes in many communities have helped create a receptive climate for such housing.

Secondary suites can play an important role as a private sector response to the creation and maintenance of affordable housing. Smart Growth BC, dedicated to creating more liveable communities, believes promoting

the secondary suite option is one way to meet these challenges.

Plan

As part of its strategy to advance secondary suites, Smart Growth BC developed a half-day workshop for practitioners from several municipalities to discuss different approaches and success in their communities.

Project team

Smart Growth BC included a major developer and representatives from BC communities and organizations in organizing and delivering the event.

Results

Barriers & Solutions: A Secondary Suites Workshop, held in Vancouver in 2003, was attended by 140 participants, including representatives of 24 local governments (planners, engineers, elected officials), community activists and development professionals. Four key areas were discussed:



Houses with secondary suites have become the norm in many communities

Source: City of Vancouver

- legal liability, health and safety, and regulatory issues;
- financing of secondary suites, mortgages, utility fees and municipal cost recovery;
- design solutions; and
- community acceptance.

The resulting proceedings provide a very informative resource document for any municipality looking at its secondary suite policies and related issues.

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For example, discouraging illegal suites can require resources beyond a municipality's capacity. Port Coquitlam decided to use incentives rather than penalties to encourage legalization of its suites. To that end, it charges only an additional 40 per cent in utility fees, whereas homeowners of non-registered suites are charged the full rate. A 1999 study showed that secondary suites in three BC municipalities increased usage for municipal services by no more than 30 to 40 per cent.

In the session on community acceptance, it was noted that opposition is often based on misinformation, conflicting values, past experience (with the housing form or developer) or personal grudges. The typical planning process does not allow sufficient time for resistance to be expressed and to encourage curiosity about possible solutions. Workshops, focus groups or means other than public hearings (which can easily become confrontational) are better for airing resistance and finding ways to move forward.

Subsequent to the workshop several Lower Mainland municipalities have become models for other BC municipalities regarding the development of secondary suites. Smart Growth BC continues to use the report generated from the workshop as it promotes housing initiatives around the province.

In March 2004, Vancouver City Council formally approved bylaw changes and relaxed various building code standards to facilitate construction of a secondary suite in any detached single-family home in Vancouver.

While the City of Vancouver already had some legislation to encourage secondary suites,

discussion at the workshop may have influenced Vancouver's decision according to Vancouver's Co-Director of Planning Ann McAfee. Legislation enacted in the late 1980s permitted secondary suites in about half of the city, a move McAfee feels increased community acceptance.

"Council was supportive of the change in that they reduced some of the onerous provisions on secondary suites," she said, noting that after more than a decade-long phase-in period public opposition was basically a non-issue.

"We have not had a witch-hunt policy," McAfee said, explaining the City will generally investigate secondary suites only in the event of a complaint and will assist the homeowner to apply for the proper permits.

Maintaining a supply of secondary rental suites remains a challenge in expensive housing areas. Increasingly, more affluent single-family homeowners use those spaces to house family members in nearby, but separate, accommodation. McAfee expects demand for secondary suites to remain high as it continues to be a very affordable ground-oriented housing form.

Related reports

Barriers & Solutions: A Secondary Suites Workshop (Smart Growth BC, Vancouver, 2003)

The proceedings are available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

CMHC Socio-economic Research Highlight 97: *Impact of Municipal User Fees on Secondary Suites* (OPMIS #62749). Available at www.cmhc.ca

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Vancouver's 2004 bylaw changes facilitate construction of secondary suites in single-family dwellings

Source: City of Vancouver

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