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ACT Solutions

Flex-Plex Housing: Industry-Municipal Partnership for Innovation, CHBA-Victoria, BC

Issue

In the 14 municipalities that comprise Victoria, BC's Capital Regional District, house and land prices are so high that even middle-income families struggle to enter the market. Well-designed, well-built housing on smaller lots can make homes more affordable as proven, for example, in Surrey, BC¹. However, many municipal regulatory environments, along with traditional community expectations, tend to discourage this approach. Regulators are not part of the initial creative residential development process, so they can be cautious about accepting proposals that violate accepted norms.

Plan

The Canadian Home Builders' Association (CHBA)-Victoria received an ACT grant to work with the District of Saanich (the region's largest municipality) and BC Housing to challenge these norms and create regulatory changes that would help improve housing affordability. Together they

identified an undeveloped property, equivalent in size to about one and a half lots, on which to build an affordable housing project.

The proponents felt that a process in which the municipality has design input could help persuade other regional municipalities to identify land for affordable housing in return for similar involvement. The proponents also thought their project had the potential to identify zoning issues, recommend zoning changes and create new development standards for incorporation into official community plans.

Project team

CHBA-Victoria
District of Saanich
BC Housing

Results

In 2002, CHBA-Victoria called for expressions of interest from architects and chose Art Finlayson Architect and Dan Boot, Designer as the team to move this project



Architect's model of the five-unit project

Source: CHBA-Victoria

forward. They came up with an eight-unit townhouse design that fit the triangular lot and suited the neighbourhood. It included three legal secondary suites. The units were also accessible for disabled occupants and included age-in-place features, such as closets that could be transformed into chair lifts.

The site for the proposed multi-family housing was zoned single-family residential, so CHBA-Victoria spent about a year discussing the plan with community associations.

1. See ACT solution sheet *Developing Small Lot Zones*, Surrey, BC

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The associations expressed concerns about parking, secondary suites and owners flipping the units for profit. As a result of these consultations, CHBA-Victoria scaled back the project to five townhouses. It also agreed to investigate housing agreements to prevent flipping, kept parking to one stall per unit (the norm is 1.5 stalls per unit), and added a car share co-op option to minimize vehicular traffic. Most importantly, though, CHBA-Victoria preserved the three secondary suites which it wanted as mortgage-helpers to provide entry-level ownership opportunities for people of moderate income.

District of Saanich officials were directly involved from the project's early stages, participating in discussions about density and the type of structure most suitable for the site. They also saw the plans as they evolved and were represented on the Saanich Design Advisory Committee that eventually endorsed the plan.

Casey Edge, CHBA-Victoria's executive officer, emphasized the importance of early municipal involvement: "Creating regulatory change is important for innovative projects addressing major issues like housing affordability. We would never have done this project as a one-off. Industry repetition is critical for progress. This project is an example of how single-family zoning in the right location can be changed to accommodate multiple families, students, seniors and disabled."

Because the plan involved departures from normal planning and development standards (fewer parking spaces, set-back reductions and secondary suites, for example), it got tight scrutiny from municipal departments asked to approve it.

Finally, in November 2004 it received approval from Council's Committee of the Whole. This approval was conditional, however, on CHBA-Victoria drawing up an agreement to prevent flipping of the units.

CHBA-Victoria submitted a draft agreement in August 2005 but the District rejected it because it offered insufficient protection against profiteering. CHBA-Victoria had begun talks with Habitat for Humanity Victoria, and in March 2006, the two formed a partnership to build ownership homes on single-family lots. Habitat's method of qualifying potential homeowners and its affordability criteria gave the District the assurance it needed that the units could not be flipped.

In late spring 2006, the project obtained final municipal approval. It marked the first time that Saanich had endorsed zoning that allowed secondary suites.

A year later, BC Housing completed the land transfer to Habitat for Humanity, and construction finally proceeded, following a ground-breaking ceremony in August 2007.

Looking back, CHBA-Victoria feels this project exposed a need for municipalities to have an internal advocate for housing affordability who can shepherd innovative projects through the municipal approval process.

"There must be many innovative housing projects that never see the light of day simply because they are subjected to standard review procedures that don't know how to address innovation and don't see the project as a whole," commented Mr. Edge.

Related documents

Flex-Plex Housing Affordability Project (CHBA-Victoria, 2007).

This report is available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

Contact

Casey Edge,
Executive Officer
CHBA-Victoria, BC
cedge@chbavictoria.com
250-383-5044

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c/o The Federation of Canadian Municipalities
Tel: 613-241-5221 ext. 242
Fax: 613-244-1515
E-mail: info@actprogram.com

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