

West Vancouver highlights issues driving housing crisis

To understand why new homes aren't being approved for development, look no further than council meetings

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OPINION

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Barely a day goes by without a politician promising that they are trying to fix the housing crisis. They're working on all the angles: increasing supply, tempering demand and helping first-time buyers get financing.

In Canada, municipal or local government is responsible for land-use planning, zoning and authorizing development, after community consultation.

What's happening in my community of West Vancouver exemplifies some of the problems local governments have when it comes to negotiating a path between residents – who may be motivated by NIMBYism – and the broader public interest.

One of the richest municipalities in Canada, "West Van" has a reputation as a posh suburb. But its stark disparities are less well-known.

West Van is a beautiful place, and my family and I feel privileged to live here. With the North Shore mountains behind us, we are warmed by the sun as we look south at the Vancouver cityscape across the water. Unlike other parts of the region, we have no industry blighting our coastline.

In turn, West Vancouver depends almost entirely on property taxes to pay for services. That lack of an industrial tax base led to a financial crunch as far back as the 1950s. Municipal leaders responded by rezoning 50 acres of prime, waterfront land at Ambleside for high-rise apartments. This sparked a vigorous anti-development backlash that has dominated local debate and the agendas of many residents' association meetings ever since.

No wonder that today 90 per cent of West Van remains zoned for single-family homes (SFH).

The district's geography and exclusive reputation has been energetically fanned by realtors. Compounded by two recent home-price spikes, we're now left with an average house price of \$3-million. Home ownership is beyond the reach of most, certainly the middle classes. And rental? That's been in very short supply for at least 20 years.

The result is that three-quarters of the people who work in West Van don't live here, according to estimates by the district. Only 9 per cent of our municipal staff – including firefighters, police officers, bus drivers and librarians – live in the community. Among major employers, fewer than 10 per cent of workers with BC Ferries' Horseshoe Bay terminal in the west and less than a quarter of public-school teachers live in West Van, according to figures I received from the district.

All these commuters, of course, create congestion and greenhouse gas emissions.

The lack of affordable options also exacerbates problems for many existing residents. A 2020 district housing-needs report found that 30 per cent of homeowners live in dwellings considered unsuitable, inadequate or unaffordable. That figure is 60 per cent for renters. The report adds that seniors "are struggling to remain in the community as they age" and there are no housing or shelter beds for the homeless.

Census data show there has been a drop in the proportion of young families living in West Van. There are fewer children here now than there were in 2001, even as the district's overall population has grown by 6.5 per cent.

So what is West Van doing in response to this demographic challenge and the lack of affordable housing?

Local business, community and political leaders have for years declared that there is insufficient housing diversity in West Van, particularly accommodation at different price points. The Official Community Plan (OCP) – a blueprint for the community's growth and development that forms a key plank in the municipal planning process – was most recently updated in 2018.

Approved after four phases of

community engagement, 100 events and more than a thousand surveys and public submissions, the OCP called for a big expansion of the "missing middle" – alternatives to single-family homes and apartments.

According to the district's plan, that missing middle could take the form of "sensitive infill," which preserves the character of existing single-family-home neighbourhoods, with smaller houses on smaller lots, coach (or laneway) houses and duplexes. Triplex, townhouse and mixed-use buildings would be located close to transit and amenities.

The OCP called for 5,000 new housing units to be built by 2041, or an average of 217 a year. The mayor and council's strategic plan, updated late last year, is even more ambitious: targeting 250 new units a year.

Yet, in the past four years, just 501 new housing units have been approved – little more than half of what was called for in the OCP. Nearly all are apartments. Of the much talked-about "missing middle": six coach-houses, five duplexes and seven "infill" detached housing got the green light, but no townhouses or multiplexes.

So why isn't housing, affordable or otherwise, being approved?

The answer rests in the council meetings where development proposals live or die.

Take, for instance, the outcome of one recent project. A developer, Onni, applied to the district to add more rental units to an already-approved apartment complex. The building forms part of the 21-acre multiphase Evelyn Drive project, whose master plan was greenlighted back in 2007. After extensive discussions with the district's planning department, Onni asked council for permission to add 109 more units, of which 17 would be offered at below-market rents.

Citing blockages in the municipal housing approvals pipeline, senior levels of governments are starting to look at mechanisms to speed up things.

Mayor Mary-Ann Booth, who supported the plan, implored councillors to take heed of widespread frustration with local government. "When the whole country is saying we have a housing crisis, municipalities are tinkering, what they see as dawdling, and not meeting the needs of their own communities," she said.

The proposal was defeated by a 4-3 vote. It was the latest instance of development permits and rezoning applications rejected by the same four councillors.

The reasons given here, as with many previous applications: the project would interfere with sightlines for nearby residents; there wasn't enough community consultation; and it would exacerbate traffic congestion.

Peter Lambur is a councillor who voted against the proposal, one of a dozen housing development projects he has voted against since 2018. When I asked why he'd opposed the application, he said it didn't comply with the OCP, which he considers incomplete until Local Area Plans (LAP) are developed. LAPs are neighbourhood or village-level plans that supplement the broad outlines framed by the OCP, adding more detailed community-level guidance on the look, feel and function of future development. They take two to three years to complete, after extensive community consultation.

Mr. Lambur argues that LAPs offer the clearest vision of the community's wishes, even if completing them delays the development process. He says he believes concerns about a lack of housing projects being approved by council are overstated. "The [real estate] industry, for their part, has been pretty successful in pushing the narrative of a housing crisis," he tells me. "We have plenty of opportunities and projects to pick from."

But there is a clear tension between Mr. Lambur's approach and the sense of urgency that some other councillors say is required to meet the community's housing needs.

The problem, Councillor Craig Cameron tells me, is that councillors who vote against current proposals point to developments nearing completion to say everything is fine, ignoring that most of those projects took years to come to fruition.

A strong advocate for expanding housing, Mr. Cameron says



Positive Voices director Jatinder Sidhu – seen on June 9 in West Vancouver, where he lives with his family – says the housing issues facing his community exemplifies the problems governments have when negotiating between residents and the broader public interest. PHOTOS BY JIMMY JEONG/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

there's been minimal progress during the current council's term.

"There's a whole number of projects that never came forward because the proponents knew they weren't going to get a sympathetic or even neutral consideration," he says. He argues that opponents have been using "process" arguments to stall or reject projects, and placate a vocal minority.

But there are risks when municipal councils pay more attention to anti-development residents than the long-term interests of the community, he says. Mr. Cameron says he believes it's inevitable that the power to approve development will eventually be taken away from local governments.

Citing blockages in the municipal housing approvals pipeline, senior levels of governments are starting to look at mechanisms to speed up things.

B.C.'s Housing Minister David Eby has said that the province was considering legislation to override municipalities' planning decisions. "[Residents] are engaged in a Hunger Games-style struggle with others who are already having trouble finding a place to live here," he told the CBC in February.

And in its April budget, the federal government proffered a carrot, rather than a stick, to municipalities: \$4-billion to incentivize faster development.

Local officials have a duty to not only reflect residents' concerns, but also challenge them, Andy Yan, director of Simon Fraser University's City Program tells me. While it's important to acknowledge people's fear of change, "there are consequences of no change as much as rapid change," he says.

I put some of these thoughts to Heather Mersey, president of West Van's most influential residents' group – the Ambleside and Dundarave Residents Association (ADRA). She says the board is non-partisan and meets regularly with councillors to discuss housing issues.

Members' overriding concern is maintaining the village-like character of West Van's neighbourhoods, she tells me. She also points to high levels of immigration – targets set by the federal government – and argues that municipalities don't have the re-



A woman walks through West Vancouver's Dundarave neighbourhood in June. Heather Mersey, president of the Ambleside and Dundarave Residents Association, says members' overriding concern is maintaining the village-like character of West Van's neighbourhoods.



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sources to provide housing and services to hundreds of thousands of new residents. And, she says, it doesn't make sense to increase housing density to address that need in a place with very high land values, such as West Van.

Beyond immigration, I ask Ms. Mersey how West Van can meet the housing needs of existing residents and its local work force: teachers, police officers, first-time buyers and seniors needing to downsize, for whom we might feel a sense of responsibility. "It's a complex question ..." she says. "I don't have a magic solution."

I ask about ADRA's reputation among some in the community – it's mockingly known as the Anti-Development Resident's Associ-

ation. Ms. Mersey says it's a convenient misrepresentation.

"If you're going to have a scoreboard with developers versus residents' groups, I think you'd see developers winning most of the time," she says.

B.C. is heading into municipal elections in October and arguments over housing density and affordability – never far from people's minds – are likely to dominate once again.

Senior levels of government concerned about the lack of movement in creating housing supply should keep an eye on what's happening in races for council in communities such as West Van, which are ultimately where Canada's housing crisis will be solved.

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