

HOUSING

Future is in the garage

Lorrie Williams has a two-car garage that's big enough for a nice little suite. However, it has no plumbing, and at this point, laneway houses aren't allowed in New Westminster, where Williams has been a city councillor since 2002.

She acknowledged, though, that it's generally known that a number of residents have illegally converted detached garages into dwelling spaces.

"We sort of know that they are," Williams told the *Georgia Straight* in a February 3 phone interview.

It's probably not just older garages. Some of the new ones are also likely being lived in.

Because the city's zoning bylaw is silent on how many plumbing fixtures are allowed in an accessory structure, a person can install an unlimited number. And when there's a sink, a shower, and a toilet, it's livable.

"Everybody's got this notion now that they're going to make this extra little house," Williams said about the situation.

In order to plug this hole, Williams and her colleagues on city council approved on February 2 a staff recommendation to limit plumbing fixtures in new detached accessory buildings to a sink and a toilet.

A staff report that was included in the February 2 council agenda noted that over the past two years, city hall has received 139 building-permit applications for accessory buildings. Fourteen percent, or 20, of these contained two or more plumbing fixtures.

Staff also went on to cite as an example one active building-permit application for an 871-square-foot accessory building with four plumbing fixtures. In addition to a toilet, a sink, and a washer and dryer, it also has a bathroom that has an extra feature: a dog shower.

The report was coauthored by Jackie Teed, manager of planning for the City of New Westminster.

"We've been seeing an upswing in building applications that have multiple plumbing fixtures in the detached accessory buildings, and at the same time, we have a lot of interest from our community in whether laneway houses or detached accessory dwellings are permitted, which they're currently not,

Teed told the *Straight* in a phone interview.

"And so our concern is that we want to put something in our zoning bylaw that helps to prevent that," Teed continued. "Our concern is that it's too easy to convert your accessory building into an accessory dwelling if you're able to have as many plumbing fixtures as you would like."

The planning manager pointed to safety concerns about accessory buildings, because they aren't built to standards required by law for homes.

The conversion of garages into dwelling units also affects parking. "When we look at allowing more units on a site, we generally look at the impacts to parking in the neighbourhood," Teed said. "So if the detached accessory building is not originally intended to be a dwelling but then later becomes a dwelling, it puts additional pressure on parking in the neighbourhood that has not been considered."

Teed said that in the next few weeks, staff will bring forward a bylaw amendment on the one-sink, one-toilet rule for approval by council.

For those who want an extra home on their lot, however, it looks like it's just a matter of time.

According to Williams, council is looking at the idea of changing the city's official community plan to allow laneway homes. "We're going to go neighbourhood by neighbourhood. It's not going to be one-size-fits-all for New Westminster," she said.

Infill houses go by various names. Depending on the Lower Mainland jurisdiction in which they are located, they're called laneway houses, coach houses, carriage houses, garden cottages, or garden suites. In Richmond, they're known as granny flats.

"If people are putting in garages right now that may be converted into laneway housing [later], it's fine," Williams said. "It's part of the densification that we expect to happen."

As the long-time councillor noted, this may be a desirable option for "older folks wanting their kids to live in the big house, and then they want to have just a little place in the back".

Williams added: "We have to get realistic that, [housing] prices being what they are, maybe this is a way a family can stay together and help each other out." ♦

Real Estate
Carlito Pablo



With reference to the article above describing New Westminster's experience with garage infill conversions, what can we learn for Oak Bay?

Our Provincial Government and the Union of BC Municipalities recommend three types of "infill" densification:

1. **Invisible** from the street, such as basement suites.
2. **Hidden** from the street, such as lane-way suites and converted garages.
3. **Gentle** – where new apartments are added above existing shops in shopping precincts already well served by transit.

It has been estimated that Oak Bay already has over a thousand (illegal and not-to-building code) suites dating back to the 1990s rental apartments shortage, however Council is not looking for solutions to deal with this unregulated situation. Instead our council is currently not only buying into and promoting Government "Invisible and Hidden" Infill recommendations in single family neighbourhoods but, is going further by stepping up easing zoning rules - rather than encouraging the real sensitive "Gentle" (the long term solution).

Our council is not alone in pushing "Invisible and Hidden" strategies while ignoring "Gentle Strategies" as most BC municipalities began this same process a decade ago. You may think that Oak Bay therefore need simply copy the most successful strategies/zoning rules that have already been implemented and proven in similar municipalities. The problem is that so far no strategy in any municipality has been lauded as a success by their existing residents - although the developers who lobbied hard for the strategies are well pleased. A good question for our council is – Which municipality are you using as a successful example/ model?

Ask yourself – Is garage and basement accommodation really what is needed by the existing residents of Oak Bay? In other countries this kind of band-aid accommodation is triggered in times of emergencies and dislocations. One reason so many families move to Canada is to escape from living in crowded, garage-like accommodation.

An analysis of the last sentence in the article reveals just how naïve the Council member who made this statement is: *"We have to get realistic maybe this is a way for a family to stay together and help each other out"*. The reality is (not hers) that this type of accommodation is very unsuitable for families or multiple residents besides imposing on adjacent property owners.

Infill is a business and rents for infill units such as converted garages tend to be high so as to pay back the landlord for the cost of "to code" construction, and for the personal inconvenience. The "mortgage helper" reasoning often quoted by our local politicians to promote infill, is subject to Canada Mortgage and Housing Commission mortgage qualifying rules – that seem to reverse every few years. In other destination communities, many landlords have stopped renting their suites to locals because there is more money to be made from renting them, via the internet, for short term stays by Vacationers. This booming business opportunity has created a regulation and enforcement quagmire throughout Canada and the United States.

Which points out the critical issue of Oak Bay's inadequate funding staffing and resources for municipal bylaw enforcement. Oak Bay lacks the ability to enforce the existing suites to comply with the current rules regarding safety, fire, code, and zoning. Can residents expect that the proposed wider, relaxed infill bylaws will be enforced, or will all suites, existing and new remain unregulated, unsafe and untaxed?

Oak Bay's (Official Community Plan) OCPs design standards and housing objectives are clear: *"Respect the privacy of adjoining properties"* and *"Address concerns parking, traffic, noise, affects on other properties."* To comply with the OCPs requirements means that garage-suites must be limited to very large lots (such as those in the Uplands), and there needs to be strict limits on the number of garage suites per given street. Such limits are required because there is no way of knowing how many occupants and cars will be present at the new garage suite - another difficult enforcement issue.

OakBayWatch has noticed that Designer and Architectural Magazines constantly print articles about big spacious homes, with large kitchens and walk in closets, but never articles about garage or basement suites. Some communities are now allowing shipping-containers that are converted to suites. Yes, you read that correctly and in addition some communities also permit multiple suites, (basement, attic, garage) on small single-family lots. **Is this the next stage of Oak Bay Council's planned infill development?**