



CITY OF RICHMOND

REPORT TO COUNCIL

**TO:** Richmond City Council

**DATE:** September 8, 2004

**FROM:** Cllr. Bill McNulty, Chair  
Planning Committee

**FILE:** 08-4057-12

**RE: SECONDARY SUITES: AN OVERVIEW**

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The Planning Committee, at its meeting held on Tuesday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004, considered the attached report, and recommends as follows:

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION – (Cllrs. Barnes and Steves opposed)

- (1) *That, as per the report (dated September 2, 2004 from the Manager, Policy Planning), the City maintain its current approach to existing secondary suites; and*
- (2) *That staff provide further comment on:*
  - i) *enforcement methods (through the Community Outreach Department); and*
  - ii) *appropriate charges for utilities where a secondary suite exists (through the Engineering and Finance Departments).*

Cllr. McNulty, Chair  
Planning Committee

Attach.

VARIANCE

That, as per the report (dated September 2, 2004 from the Manager, Policy Planning), the City maintain its current approach to existing secondary suites.

## Staff Report

### Origin

On November 4th, 2003, Planning Committee requested that staff prepare a report to provide an overview regarding secondary suites.

#### Synopsis

This report discusses secondary suites including:

- existing City practices;
- current municipal policies and practices from around the region;
- shifts in public and political attitudes about secondary suites;
- the implications of Richmond's current approach to secondary suites,
- options to accommodate secondary suites and their implications.

#### Conclusion

The report recommends that the City maintain its current approach to secondary suites, as:

- it generates few complaints, and
- exploring alternate approaches would likely generate controversy, be time consuming and take limited staff resources away from higher City priorities including processing development applications RAV, 2010 Olympics, West Cambie and City Centre planning.

## Findings Of Fact

### Provincial Legislation

The Local Government Act provides local governments with the authority to license and regulate secondary suites (including the authority to register them and charge fees for registration), but the Act does not allow for a local government to charge for, or issue a business license for secondary suites.

### Definition of a Secondary Suite

The Richmond Zoning Bylaw defines a secondary suite as *"a self-contained area located with a residential building having complete provision for residential living by the occupants of such area, including living, sleeping, cooking and toilet facilities."*

The City addresses secondary suites based on the following City Procedural Policy endorsed by Council on September 27, 1989:

*"On receipt of a complaint, our bylaw enforcement officers will apply two basic tests to a property zoned for single family residential use.*

*First, the bylaw enforcement officer would check whether the property complies with the test of being a single family unit. While this test involves some interpretation and judgement, the key aspect is internal access. If a property allows for access throughout the residence, so that it appears and functions as an integrated whole, then it will likely pass the test even though there may be second bathrooms and/or kitchens and locks on bathrooms and individual bedrooms. If, however, the property is divided so that there are two parts to the house, each of which can and is clearly intended to operate as independent living quarters, and between which access is interrupted by an internal barrier, such as a lockable door, which can and clearly is intended to prevent regular access between the two parts of the property, then it will probably fail the test.*

*The second test is that of occupancy. There are two parts to this test. First, does the principal household meet the definition of a single family, that is all members are related by blood or marriage, or if not, then the household numbers no more than six persons. Secondly, in addition to the principal household, are there no more than two boarders or lodgers."*

#### Definition of a Secondary Suite in Other Municipalities

In other GVRD municipalities, a secondary suite is defined as a non-strata titled dwelling unit contained within a principal dwelling (e.g., single family dwelling, duplex or multi-family development) usually, but not always, located in the basement or lower floor. The enforcement of secondary suites is based on the number of kitchens permitted in a single family house (e.g., one kitchen per legal dwelling unit).

#### Estimates of Secondary Suites

##### □ In the Region

An inventory of secondary suites in the region, completed by the GVRD in November 2000, indicates an estimated number of 54,000 to 69,000 secondary suites in Greater Vancouver (source: *"Review of Secondary Suite Policies in the Greater Vancouver Regional District"*, GVRD, March 2002).

These suites represent:

- Between 19% - 25% of the region's renter households (280,180 households) (source: *1996 Census*).
- A significant component of the region's rental housing stock and a component which is increasing as suites continue to occur with high frequency in new housing, particularly single family housing.

##### □ In Richmond

- The total number of residential units in Richmond = 59,084 (source: *2004 City Tax Assessment Data*).
- According to GVRD estimates, Richmond is estimated to have between 2,175 to 5,235 secondary suites, or 4% to 9% of total number of residential units in Richmond (source: *"Municipal Inventory of Secondary Suites Within GVRD"*, GVRD, November 2000).
- The total number of single family dwellings in Richmond = 27,920 (source: *2004 City of Richmond Tax Assessment Data*).

#### Municipal Approaches to Managing Secondary Suites

Generally, the past decade has seen two clear trends in municipal policy approaches regarding secondary suites:

1. *A movement from lenient enforcement - to the legalization of suites as determined in municipal bylaws.*
2. *A movement from accommodating secondary suites on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis - to accommodating secondary suites on a municipality-wide basis.*

These trends imply that public and political support for the legalization of suites with or without conditions is increasing. Those municipalities which have adopted bylaws to permit secondary suites report no increase in community complaints, or in staff resources required to address suite-

related issues (source: *“Review of Municipal Secondary Suite Policies in the Greater Vancouver Regional District”*, GVRD, March 2002).

Municipalities have cited limits in the rental housing market in Greater Vancouver as having contributed to this growing permissiveness. Over the past decade, the proportion of renters in this region has remained at over forty percent, but the absence of new purpose-built rental housing, the relative unaffordability and instability of tenure in newer forms of rental housing (buy-to-rent condos), the continuing decrease in renter household income and the growing gap between owner and renter household wealth (e.g., fewer first time home buyers among renters), and low vacancy rates, all contribute to the importance of protecting the existing affordable rental housing stock in Greater Vancouver. Secondary suites represent a significant component of this stock.

**Attachment 1** shows the GVRD municipal approaches to managing secondary suites.

#### Public Opinion on Secondary Suites

There are opinions of public opposition and support for legalizing secondary suites.

**Attachment 2** presents the most common views expressed (source: *“Secondary Suites Staff Report”*, City of Vancouver, January, 2004).

#### Secondary Suites as Affordable Housing

Secondary suites provide accommodation for low or modest income renters, and thus contribute to the affordable housing stock.

Where municipalities do not accommodate secondary suites, a significant amount of the affordable housing stock can be at risk. Because of the illegal status of secondary suites, tenants may fear that their suite may be closed, particularly if they complain about inadequate or unsafe conditions. In turn, property owners may not wish to make any necessary improvements.

#### Utility Fees

Most municipalities in the region currently charge utility fees for properties with secondary suites, irrespective of whether those suites are permitted through zoning (source: *“Review of Municipal Secondary Suite Policies in the Greater Vancouver Regional District”*, GVRD, March 2002). The amount of the utility levy varies ranging from an additional 100% of the standard single family utility fee to 40% of the standard utility fee.

The City of Vancouver charges \$88 for water consumption in secondary suites.

The District of North Vancouver in 2001 adopted a program requiring homes with suites to pay an annual \$260 water and sewer fee for secondary suites.

The City of Surrey charges extra utility fees (approximately \$500 per dwelling) for water, sewer and garbage services for all known secondary suites recorded by the Bylaw & Licensing and Taxation Departments. The onus is placed on those single family owners to prove that they don't have a secondary suite, by asking the City to inspect their house to remove the additional utility fee.

The City of Surrey does not have a City wide secondary suite policy nor does it currently enforce the legalization of secondary suites. In the early 1990s, Surrey did establish certain areas where new zones did permit secondary suites. Approximately, 1,500 houses were built to permit legal suites. In the mid 1990s, the City did try developing a policy on secondary suites on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis; however, Council at the time did not support the policy direction as they believed that such a policy would facilitate increases in legal and illegal secondary suites in the City. Presently, a few special small lot zoned areas have been permitted to allow legal secondary suites. However, no City initiative to permit secondary suites is being pursued.

The issue of the consumption of utilities and services lies at the heart of the “equity issue” when communities discuss secondary suites. Proponents of additional fees for utilities and garbage collection for properties with secondary suites believe that these suites generate an additional burden on utilities and services.

Within the region, fees may be based on:

- Consumption amounts (metered);
- Estimated consumption amounts used to generate a flat rate for secondary suites; or
- A flat rate per dwelling unit (regardless of the dwelling unit having a secondary suite or not).

Recent CMHC findings indicate that the presence of a secondary suite does generate additional utility use, and that incremental increases in utility use differs significantly between suites in urban and in suburban municipalities. This difference is directly related to the average number of persons per household.

#### Existing Richmond Practice

1. The OCP encourages a variety of housing types and affordability.
2. Regarding suites in new developments, recently a few new residential zones (i.e., Coach House District R/9) have been established to enable secondary suites to be accommodated.
3. Currently, there is no policy as to where the City may encourage legal new secondary suites.
4. The Flex House Demonstration Project was successful in providing a housing model that can accommodate a suite. The next Council approved step is to consider establishing a City-wide policy regarding where this type of housing may be permitted. This work will be started in the Fall 2004 and completed in February 2005.
5. Currently, these new zones are considered within the City subject to developer and community acceptance.
6. The current Richmond practice is to investigate secondary suites on a complaint basis.
7. If the City were to more fully accommodate secondary suites, the following issues would need to be addressed:
  - Definition,
  - Where in the City,
  - In new buildings only, in existing buildings only, or in both
  - Community acceptance,
  - Utility and services fees,
  - In what type of buildings,
  - Owner’s presence,
  - Under what conditions (e.g., building, parking, life safety issues: fire and building requirements),

- Other, as necessary.

### Considerations

In considering secondary suite issues, the following staff comments are relevant:

#### □ Policy Planning

##### General Comments

- The City is currently permitting new secondary suites in certain residential zones.
- There are few complaints with the existing practice.

##### Implementing the Policy

- Exploring alternative approaches to secondary suites would be controversial, take time and draw limited staff resources away from current City priorities (e.g., processing development applications, RAV, West Cambie, City Centre planning, 2010 Olympics).

##### Cost of the Policy

- Additional staff resources would be required to develop and implement a new policy.

#### □ Development Applications

##### - General Comments

If secondary suites are legitimised, new zones or text amendments to existing zones in the Zoning Bylaw would be required.

##### - Implementing the Policy

Whether on a neighbourhood, or a City wide basis, the legalization of secondary suites would require extra staff time and public consultation.

##### - Costs of the Policy

There will be additional staff costs to administer this policy. There may be an opportunity for the City to recover a portion of administrative costs through rezoning fees.

#### □ Building Approvals

##### General Comments

- The key concern is building code compliance and life safety in existing dwellings. Having all suites in compliance with the building code would be a benefit. Legalization would not likely achieve this due to the costs faced by the homeowner (as per the Vancouver experience) and the number of suites may be reduced, as some may be unable to be upgraded to building code.

##### Implementing the Policy

- Allowing secondary suites under certain zonings and ensuring compliance of new construction would likely be the best approach, rather than seeking to legalize existing suites.

##### Costs of the Policy

- If the estimate of 2,175 to 5,235 secondary suites in Richmond is correct, two additional full-time inspectors may be required for three to four years at a total annual cost (salaries, benefits, equipment) of approximately \$200,000. Depending on how the enforcement is structured, the costs may be recoverable through inspection fees.

□ Fire Rescue

General Comments

Legalizing secondary suites:

- May obstruct emergency vehicle access on local streets brought about as a result of additional parking on some public streets.
- Reduce perceived life and fire safety issues brought about by improper construction, electrical or natural gas services.
- Increase the water consumption rate, affecting available water supplies for firefighting.

Implementing the Policy

- Most existing buildings with secondary units may not be capable of providing a reasonable fire separation between the upper and lower fire compartments, given no fire alarm and detection system. Vancouver and other jurisdictions have required sprinklers in all new residential buildings, including those with secondary suites.
- May need to include a secondary suite section in our Fire Bylaw to help control street addressing, parking, water use, smoke alarms, storage and the use of hazardous materials. Again, this will impact Fire Rescue's resources to enforce.
- Should the dwelling units be structured one over the other, traditional egress routes may be exposed to fire or radiant heat from unit below.

Costs of the Policy

- Fire Rescue has insufficient staff resources to patrol, or inspect secondary suites on a regular basis.
- Complaint driven inspections can be managed, both on the telephone and in the field.

□ Community Bylaws

General Comments

- Community Bylaws regularly receive telephone calls relating to secondary suites throughout the City, although the number of complaints are not unusually high (i.e., 2002: 44 complaints; 2003: 30 complaints; 2004 [to date]: 15 complaints).
- There is an apathy among the public who may potentially complain but realize that there appears to be very little action that the City takes against people who have such suites in their houses. This is primarily due to the definition of secondary suites and the need for clarity to permit enforcement, if enforcement is the preferred course of action.
- Bylaw staff have difficulty with single family homes that contain 4 or 5 suites versus just one secondary suite.

Implementing the Policy

- A clearer definition of secondary suites or legitimizing secondary suites would make the enforcement of secondary suites more effective.

Costs of the Policy

- Community Bylaws would not expect any additional staff costs in enforcing secondary suites requirements, as long as it is enforced on a complaint basis and in priority with other City bylaw cases.

□ Engineering

General Comments

- Generally, legalizing secondary suites is a good idea in that it identifies high users of the City's sewer and water systems. This gives the City better information for long term planning on future sewer and water system needs.

Implementing the Policy

- With respect to legalized suites, Engineering would require that all single family homes be metered as is the current practice for newly constructed homes. The homeowner would be responsible for the cost of a water meter and would pay for water and sewer based upon metered rates. Therefore, as the occupants in the home consume more water and discharge more sewage, the annual charge for the water and sewer utilities would increase based upon usage.

Costs of the Policy

- The City's procedures and standards already include the metering of single family homes and utility bills based upon metered rates. Therefore, current staffing levels in the Engineering Department are sufficient in accommodating the metering of single family homes with legal secondary suites.

□ RCMP

General Comments

RCMP's concerns on secondary suites are:

- No rules surrounding proper house numbering of the secondary suites. This can lead to confusion when having to respond to emergency situations.
- More people living in secondary suites means more vehicles associated with one address and this can cause parking congestion.
- More people living in neighbourhood residences can escalate situations in instances where we may be responding to a house party or a street disturbance.
- The fact that with secondary suites there are more people living in close proximity may cause increase incidents of neighbourhood disputes.

Implementing the Policy

Legal suites would be a benefit in that it would:

- Establish clear house numbering of the suites for better emergency response and consideration of additional parking requirements.
- Provide for improved landlord/tenant dispute resolution channels to resolve issues, reducing the necessity for police intervention.
- Provides for a more accurate account of households and population planning future RCMP resourcing needs.

Cost of Policy

- Although there is no foreseen impact to the RCMP, additional administrative staff resources may be required to enforce legalizing secondary suites.

□ Transportation

General Comments

- Transportation's concerns about secondary suites are related to parking and establishing a parking space standard as illegal secondary suites increase parking needs without City control. A byproduct of introducing a formal requirement for additional parking is likely to be the loss of landscaping and an increase in impervious surface in front yards.

Implementing the Policy

- Should secondary suites be legalized, then appropriate parking requirements should be in place to support the bylaw.

Cost of the Policy

- No additional staff cost is expected should City legitimize secondary suites in single family dwellings.



**Analysis**

Secondary Suite Management Options

The management options show:

1. Continue Status Quo, or
2. Address the issue of permitting secondary suites with conditions either:
  - a) on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood policy basis, or
  - b) on a City wide policy basis.

Based on the review of other municipal approaches to the management of secondary suites, the following options are presented:

Options Secondary Suite Management	Conditions
<p><b>Option 1: Status Quo</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>New suites</u>: Continue allowing new suites in new zones in new construction in some areas of the City on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Existing suites</u>: Continue the illegal status of secondary suites in existing and new buildings within the City,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Enforcement</u> Address on a complaint basis</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pro:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary suites occur within the City</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less community controversy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No policy work required</li> </ul> <p><b>Con:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Uneven community benefit</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Partial support for affordable housing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Continues unsafe housing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Problems continue (e.g., some single family dwellings will continue to have illegal secondary suites)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Option 2: Permit Secondary Suites with Conditions</b></p> <p>Establish City policies to permit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>New Suites</u>:                     <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1)accommodate new suites in new buildings</li> <li>(2)accommodate new suites in existing buildings</li> </ol> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Existing Suites</u>:                     <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1)attempt to accommodate existing illegal suites in existing buildings</li> </ol> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Policies would address</u>:                     <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) existing suites</li> <li>(2) new suites</li> <li>(3) city wide &amp; neighbourhood accommodation options</li> <li>(4) the following issues for both new and existing suites:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- City acceptance</li> <li>- Neighbourhood acceptance</li> <li>- Additional services ( e.g., parking)</li> <li>- Detached suites</li> <li>- Owner occupancy</li> <li>- Meeting building, life safety and fire standards</li> <li>- utility fees</li> <li>- other, as necessary</li> </ul> </li> </ol> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Enforcement</u> addressed on a complaint basis</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pro:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Best accommodates new and currently illegal suites</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Increases affordable housing stock</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provides for accepted building and fire standards in secondary suites</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Allows for community involvement in the development and approval of secondary suites policy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provides some revenues to cover the costs of increased utilities</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less enforcement problems likely</li> </ul> <p><b>Con:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not all existing suites may meet health and safety conditions to become legal, and therefore City enforcement may be required</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not all neighbourhoods may support new suites and the legalization of existing secondary suites</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> May become quite controversial</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Will take time to establish policies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Extra staff time and resources to study, consult, develop and implement the new policy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Will draw staff resources away from other City priorities (RAV, City Centre planning)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Will likely require increased City enforcement of new policies</li> </ul>

Proposed Secondary Suites Management Considerations

If Option 2 was to be pursued by the City, new zoning changes, building standards, and inspection and enforcement considerations would need to be discussed resulting in a recommended proposal being presented to Council. **Attachment 3** provides a discussion about these considerations.

Secondary Suites Implementation Approaches

The accommodation of secondary suite can be undertaken either on neighbourhood by neighbourhood, or on a city-wide basis.

Secondary Suite Implementation Options	Approaches
<p><b>Option 1: Neighbourhood by Neighbourhood Basis</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Discussion undertaken on a neighbourhood basis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary suites acceptance by neighbourhood</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pro:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provides for secondary suite acceptance on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Allows for community involvement</li> </ul> <p><b>Con:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Likely controversial to establish</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Takes longer to establish policies over whole City</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Requires more staff time and resources to develop and implement the new policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Option 2: City – Wide Basis</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Discussion undertaken on a City-wide basis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary suites acceptance City-wide, with conditions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pro:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Likely quicker to establish</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maybe less controversial than on a neighbourhood basis</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Allows community involvement</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provides a level playing field across the City</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Follows the trend of other municipalities in the region</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Requires less staff time and resources to develop and implement the new policy</li> </ul> <p><b>Con:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not flexible to specific neighbourhood views</li> </ul>

Possible Building & Fire Requirements to Permit Legalized Suites in Existing Housing & New Construction

**Attachment 4** presents possible changes to a building that may be required should secondary suites in new and existing single family dwellings be permitted. However, further discussion will be required before final recommendations can be presented to Council.

A policy change could:

- Encourage and support the establishment of more suites – an option not available in the City under the current practice; and
- Moderate intensification within the existing housing stock and existing neighbourhoods, in a manner more consistent with the City’s Official Community Plan objectives.

Summary

The City:

- (1) receives few public complaints regarding secondary suites,
- (2) already permits secondary units in certain new residential zones, and

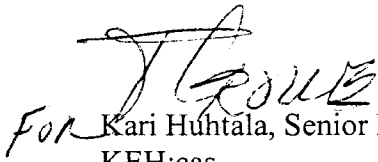
(3) is highly committed to other City priorities (e.g., RAV, West Cambie, City Centre planning, 2010 Olympics) and does not have existing resources to commit to a large scale initiative, at this time.

Staff believe that the City should maintain its current approach to existing secondary suites.

**Financial Impact - None**

**Conclusion**

The City's current approach to secondary suites should continue as it generates few complaints and in light of the City's current priorities.

  
For Kari Huhtala, Senior Planner, (4188)  
KEH:cas

### Municipal Approaches to Managing Secondary Suites

1. Municipalities permitting suites in all single detached houses.

Secondary Suites in All Single Detached Houses	Municipalities
No conditions on suites	Anmore, Belcarra, Coquitlam, New Westminster, Vancouver and Port Coquitlam
Require the owner to reside in the building	Maple Ridge, City of North Vancouver, and District of North Vancouver

2. Municipalities permitting suites with conditions that relate to the property.

Secondary Suite Conditions	Municipalities
In law suite only (parents of owner residents)	Burnaby, West Vancouver, Port Moody and Pitt Meadows
Additional parking	Coquitlam, Maple Ridge, New Westminster, City of North Vancouver, District of North Vancouver, and Vancouver (new construction only).
Neighbourhood specific	Surrey

3. Municipalities prohibiting suites, although a few of the municipalities do permit coach-house units or garage suites in certain neighbourhoods.

Municipalities that Prohibit Suites	Municipalities that Permit Coach-House Suites or Garage Suites
Delta, City of Langley, Langley Township, Lions Bay, Richmond, and White Rock	Delta, Langley Township, and Richmond

Source: "Review of Secondary Suite Policies in the Greater Vancouver Regional District", GVRD, March 2002.

## Common Public Views on Secondary Suites

<b>In Opposition</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Some owners of single-family houses feel that a premium was paid to live in a single-family area. Secondary suites are seen as an infringement on the quality of enjoyment and the value of their home;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tenants of suites increase overall neighbourhood activity levels, create a shortage of street parking and increase noise in the neighbourhood;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Problem suites impact the enjoyment of nearby residents;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Properties with suites do not pay their fair share of utility and service costs.</li> </ul>
<b>In Support</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Suites are seen as an essential component of the affordable rental housing stock, noting that almost a quarter of the houses in the single family areas of the city have one;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary suites provide reasonably priced rental housing for students, young adults, older individuals, couples, families and those on low incomes;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Suites provide a top up of income for home buyers who might not otherwise qualify for a mortgage in a city where housing costs are acknowledged as the highest in the country;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Suites provide a secondary source of income for seniors and others which allows them to remain in their house when diminishing income may require a move;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A secondary unit in a home occupied by a senior provides an added sense of security;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Suites provide for modest density increases without significant changes in neighbourhood character;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tenants may feel they are not in a position to register complaints against the owner of an illegal suite, for fear that the suite will be closed – permitting suites reduces the possibility that a suite will be closed; and</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Enables people and families to live in a building through their life cycle.</li> </ul>

Source: “Review of Secondary Suite Policies in the Greater Vancouver Regional District”, GVRD, March 2002.

## Secondary Suite Management Considerations

### Zoning Change

**One Suite For Each House** (i.e. principle residence and secondary suite) in single-family zoned areas is a feasible way to permit a second residential unit. The owner must choose between residing in one of the two units.

**New Definition of Secondary Suite:** A definition to reinforce the City's intent of allowing an interdependent principal dwelling unit and a 'secondary' suite along the following lines is recommended.

"One Family Dwelling with Secondary Suite", which means a building containing only two dwelling units, one of which is smaller than the other, with internal access between the two units, but which does not include a two-family dwelling, multiple conversion dwelling, or infill one-family dwelling.

**Extending Secondary Suites City-wide:** This opportunity throughout the city, in essence will permit any one-family dwelling to have a secondary suite in all residential zoning districts.

**No Strata Title Policy:** While allowing strata-titling may have the benefit of providing the opportunity for more affordable home ownership, suites have traditionally been viewed as providing affordable rental stock where the need is much greater. While the City has control over the strata title conversion of previously occupied buildings, the City has no control over the registration of a strata title plan for new construction prior to occupancy. This process will require the owner to register a covenant preventing strata title registration when a new one-family dwelling with a suite is approved. The covenant must remain a condition of approval.

**Parking:** Increased on-street parking problems generated by suites is a significant concern for neighbourhoods and local residents.

Parking is a multi-faceted problem. While parking spaces may be required and provided on a site, the City has no control as to whether property owners actually use them. Garages are often used for storage of household goods or recreational vehicles, or used as workshops. Homes without a suite may have many vehicles, one for each parent, plus vehicles for young adults and teenagers. A survey undertaken in the District of North Vancouver in moving to legalize suites in the mid-1990s provides some interesting insights to tenant attributes:

- Generally lower incomes;
- Rental payments of about \$100 less in rent than those in apartments; and
- Often did not own cars.

It is expected that parking will continue to be one of the more significant issues. Secondary suites may contribute to increased congestion along with households with multiple car ownership. However, weighing the need to provide for affordable housing against on-site parking, additional parking may not be required on-site for secondary suites in existing houses (houses built before the enactment of the changes proposed in this report).

New one-family dwellings with secondary suites will be required to provide two parking spaces, as will applications involving the addition of a secondary suite to a new one-family dwelling approved after the date of the enactment of the proposed changes. For buildings constructed after adoption of the current Zoning By-law, staff will stipulate that the required parking be restored if it is not being used for parking.

### Building Standards

Permitting secondary suites in single-family areas city-wide in itself is unlikely to result in a rush of owners coming forward to actually legalize suites. The 1998 statistics in Vancouver showed that about 78% of suites in areas where suites can be made legal, remain illegal. However, allowing for suites and reducing

the costs of legalization should increase the number of legal suites and gradually improve the minimum safety standards and quality of suites over time.

The reasons for the continuance of illegal suites, even in areas that allow for suites, are seen as mainly financial considerations, including:

- The additional costs of upgrading a suite to meet building safety standards may be viewed as unrecoverable by the owner struggling to finance ownership, or by others as sufficient to negate the financial benefit of operating the suite; and
- Legalizing a suite has other cost implications including reporting rental income for income tax purposes, and the possibility of increased property assessment property taxes, and utility fees. Uncertainty about these costs can act as a significant impediment to legalization.

The latter point is seen to be particularly important in the case of new one-family dwellings which can easily meet the building standards, but suite approval is not sought as part of the original permit. Often two secondary suites are installed after final inspection, which is also likely a deterrent to legalizing the one suite. As an option, an occupancy review may be considered.

**Cost Considerations:** The process of legalizing a suite can involve a variety of costs, depending on the age, condition and quality of the existing house. While building permit fees are nominal, the owner may face significant costs in meeting building code requirements such as minimum floor-to-ceiling heights, fire separation, electrical upgrades, smoke alarms, plumbing, gas and sprinklers. Installing a sprinkler system costs between \$3,000 to \$5,000. Raising a house or lowering a basement to increase floor-to-ceiling height plus finishing the space can cost up to \$50,000, according to the construction industry. It is understandable why in some cases the homeowner of an older home does not legalize a secondary suite.

**Floor to Ceiling Height:** For houses built prior to 1956, ceiling heights pose the most significant obstacle and costs to secondary suite legalization.

The normal minimum requirement is 2.3 m (7'6") over prescribed minimum areas. The current City standard when upgrading an existing secondary suite is a minimum of 2.08 m (6'10"). The minimum for existing basements can be reduced to 1.98 m (6'6"), with allowance of 1.93 m (6'4") under ducts and beams. A minimum 1.98 m (6'6") height over 80% of the suite and in all areas along the exit path from the suite, which are not essential to emergency exiting from a suite can be considered.

**New Construction:** While there are no statistics, on a regular basis owners of new one-family dwellings install suites, often two on the ground floor, after the final inspection by the City. This is seen to be an increasing problem.

To encourage owners to seek approval of a legal suite at the point of original construction, the installation of utilities and other fire and life-safety requirements should be part of all new one-family dwelling construction (to make them "suite ready" for the one suite). This includes electrical service sufficient to handle both the principal dwelling and the secondary suite. Smoke alarms and sprinklers are already required. There will be a marginal cost increase related to these requirements. This also provides for more flexible use of housing stock as the needs of the owner change.

The notion of providing two parking spaces for new one-family dwellings should be considered at the outset; because many new one-family dwellings are built with a two-car garage.

### **Inspection and Enforcement**

**Permits and Fees:** The permit fees can be retained with no change other than that anticipated as part of the normal fee review

**Enforcement:** To date, the policy of enforcement only upon complaint by a tenant or neighbour has been successful in penalizing property owners who do not adequately manage tenants or maintain properties.

Tenants are less likely to complain under the current policy out of fear that the unit will then be removed. Making suites possible, or "legalizable", will reduce the possibility of closure.

For the most part, the City has chosen not to undertake an aggressive enforcement of suites, but has generally limited enforcement to a complaint based system. Considering staff resources and legalities this approach is sensible.

**Inspections:** For applications to add suites to existing buildings, the primary focus of inspections and improvements would be on the suite. In the past, the entire house has been included. Staff could deal with serious fire, life-safety and health issues obvious elsewhere in the house, as well as utilities related to the suite, such as electrical service panels, existing furnaces and boilers, and hot water tanks which may be located in the main dwelling unit. This inspection is needed to ensure that such services are adequate to avoid fires due to electrical overload and to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning, and that installations have not been compromised by the unauthorized construction which created the suite.

In the case of new construction, all new one-family dwellings could be inspected 12 months after occupancy to determine whether or not suites have been illegally added.

**Utilities:** Water service, sewer and recycling services are estimated at about \$155 a year for a secondary suite, or about \$13 a month. This to be a minor consideration overall and recommend that secondary suites pay these costs.

Sources: *"Secondary Suites Staff Report", City of Vancouver, January, 2004* and *"Review of Secondary Suite Policies in the Greater Vancouver Regional District", GVRD, March 2002.*



**Possible Building & Fire Requirements  
To Permit Legalized Suites in Existing Housing & New Construction**

<b>Measure</b>	<b>New Construction</b>	<b>Existing Building (To be Suite Friendly)</b>
<b>Limit of two residential units</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Parking Requirement</b>	Two spaces	None for suite, required parking for existing dwelling to be provided
<b>Code up-grade</b>	n/a	Suite only
<b>Floor to ceiling height</b>	7'6" required; 8'0" normally provided	6'6" minimum over 80% of the suite area, and in all areas of egress from the suite
<b>Fire separation for suites</b>	Install at point of construction	Accept existing gypsum or plaster separations
<b>Sound separation</b>	Install at point of construction	Not required
<b>Electrical service capacity for one-family dwelling including one secondary suite</b>	Install at point of construction	Required
<b>Electrical outlet provisions</b>	Install at point of construction	Not required to meet current code regarding number and location
<b>Hard-wired smoke alarms interconnected throughout and between the principal dwelling and the secondary suite</b>	Install at point of construction	Required
<b>Building Permit requirements</b>	Needed if suite not installed under the permits for original construction	Building Permit Required
<b>Strata Title Covenant</b>	Required for new construction with suite, with release after 12 months	Not required
<b>Inspection</b>	Follow-up inspection to occur after 12 months for all one-family dwellings	n/a

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