

What's Happening with Secondary Suites? Questions and Answers

Councillors Joanne Ronsley and Peach Akerhielm

Why Is Council Legalizing Secondary Suites?

Secondary suites are widely recognized as an affordable housing choice, helpful to seniors, singles, and young couples and families. They can help draw younger people to the Village, and boost our volunteer base. Secondary suites have been built by many homeowners in Lions Bay and more secondary suites will be built in future. They are built both for rental income to help cover the costs of buying and running a home, and in order to accommodate younger or older family members. An amendment to the Zoning bylaw to legalize the construction of secondary suites has been called for in two successive Village Official Community Plans and is in our action plan for Greenhouse Gas reduction. Lions Bay is almost alone in the Lower Mainland (including small municipalities) in not yet having taken the legislative step of legalizing the construction of secondary suites.

Why Are Secondary Suites Illegal Now?

Lions Bay is zoned mainly for single family residences. The “legal use” of a single family residence – that is, what you can use your home for - is defined in a municipality’s Zoning bylaw. Our Zoning bylaw has never defined or recognized secondary suites as a legal use of a single family residences. So although the Village contains a considerable number of secondary suites, all were illegally built.

What is Involved in Legalizing Secondary Suites?

Two thrusts are involved. One thrust is for Council to pass a Zoning bylaw amendment similar to those in other municipalities, setting out basic regulations under which secondary suites can be built in homes. The other thrust is for Council to establish Village Policy on Secondary Suite Administration. It will lay out how these regulations will be administered/enforced, how a secondary suite registry will operate, and a surcharge to be paid by owners of residences with suites.

What Will the Zoning Amendment Bylaw Do?

On its own, the Zoning Amendment Bylaw will have the immediate effect of making construction of new suites legal. Then, as new suites are built, homeowners can apply for a building permit for them and they can be inspected by the Building Inspector. They are currently being built without such inspection because building suites is still illegal. This can lead to unsafe building practices, putting tenants and all residents of Lions Bay at risk of fire, for example. The Zoning amendment bylaw will encourage residents installing suites to come forward and work with the Village to do the construction safely and legally, meeting the requirements of the BC Building Code.

What Will the Village Policy on Secondary Suite Administration Do?

The Village Policy will lay out the “map” in three main areas:

a) how existing suites will be treated as the new regulations come into effect, e.g. whether existing suites will be required to comply with the new regulations and if so, which ones. Councils can make choices of this kind in view of a municipality's resources and its needs. *(NB: The current recommendation from the two Councillors putting forward the bylaw amendment is to "grandfather" existing suites. That is, not to require inspection or upgrade of existing suites, in the interests of keeping affordable housing in the Village.)*

b) a suite registry as called for in one of the new Zoning regulations, and

c) a surcharge to be paid by owners of suites as called for in the Official Community Plan, to make a "fair contribution to the cost of Village services". The level of the surcharge and whether certain kinds of exemptions will be allowed fall under this discussion.

Where Are We Now?

In regard to the main Zoning Amendment Bylaw, Council gave first and second reading to the draft bylaw on May 17th, and the next step will be a Public Hearing to occur on June 23rd. In regard to the Village Policy on Secondary Suite Administration, this will be presented at a Public Meeting on May 29th at 10 AM in the Village Hall, for resident feedback. It will be carried forward to the Council meetings in June and July, again bringing forward resident feedback. The plan is for both pieces, the Zoning amendment Bylaw and the Policy, to be passed at the same time in July.

What Are Other Residents Saying?

For issues and questions raised by residents to date on this topic, watch the Village website.