



---

## DISCUSSION PAPER

### SECONDARY SUITES IN MOUNT TOLMIE

#### Introduction

Following are some Mount Tolmie Community Association (MTCA) interests in the initiative underway within the District of Saanich to study and move towards a legalization of secondary suites.

This has been prepared after reviewing a similar paper prepared by the Gordon Head Residents' Association. It is recognized MTCA has not developed its approach to secondary suites as thoroughly as GHRA. Gordon Head identified the topic as a priority over a year ago, sought the advice of other communities that were more experienced with suites and legalization, and held a lengthy general meeting on the topic.

In the present paper, the MTCA executive has considered the views developed by GHRA, adapted them and supplemented them with views arising from our neighbourhoods, and developed our own suggestions for Saanich in its deliberations about how to encourage the best qualities of secondary suites.

#### Overview – Secondary Suites

There are estimates that one in five Canadian houses contain a secondary suite, either within a residential dwelling unit or in an accessory building.<sup>1</sup> The present zoning and occupancy by-laws which would control suites in Saanich are not being enforced and may be unenforceable.<sup>2</sup>

Secondary suites are well established in Mount Tolmie neighbourhoods. As it adjoins the university, has a wide variety of services, and has good public transportation, Mount Tolmie is a desirable residential area, is particularly suitable for suites, and is most particularly suited for suites for students

Secondary suites have numerous advantages for residents and communities, but also present a number of disadvantages or problems. This paper reviews advantages and disadvantages of secondary suites in Mount Tolmie.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Eberle, Margaret and Debra Krause, The Impact of Secondary Suites on Municipal Infrastructure and Services, 1999

<sup>2</sup> This refers to Saanich's Zoning Bylaw, the Building and Plumbing Bylaw, the Minimum Property Maintenance Bylaw, and the B.C. Building Code.

### Advantages of Secondary Suites in Mount Tolmie

- Suites provide needed rental accommodation for many people (particularly younger and older people) who may not want more traditional forms of accommodation, or may not be able to afford traditional forms.
- The income derived from secondary suites helps make the ownership of a house affordable for young families and others of moderate means, or provides a valuable supplement for older homeowners, empty nesters. Mount Tolmie has the highest proportion of elderly residents in Saanich and includes many seniors who have suites in their homes.
- Some homeowners enjoy the security provided by having another person sharing their dwelling.
- Some homeowners use secondary suites to accommodate relatives (parents, children, other relatives).
- Because housing costs are very high in the Victoria region and secondary suites provide an affordable form of housing, there is a public policy interest in encouraging suites.

### Disadvantages and Problems of Secondary Suites in Mount Tolmie

- There are homeowners who oppose having secondary suites in their neighbourhood because of real or perceived problems they may entail.
- Some secondary suites do not meet standards of building construction, public health, safety or amenity. Such substandard suites may take advantage of inexperienced student tenants, or otherwise vulnerable people. Some of these problems are minor and some warrant serious concern:
  - Dwelling units must have adequate means of egress in the event of fire or other emergency.
  - Electrical wiring must be safe (not prone to starting fires because of overheated wires, arcing).
  - People should not live in moldy rooms (a problem that often occurs in basement accommodations).
- Secondary suites may contribute to problems with on-street parking:
  - Neighbours become upset when vehicles are regularly parked in front of their homes, limiting parking for their families and guests.
  - Parking of vehicles on narrow streets may pose a safety hazard to children and others who must walk on streets that do not have sidewalks. It also restricts traffic flow.
  - Some tenants park commercial vehicles on residential streets.
  - Garbage and service trucks and more importantly, emergency vehicles, may be impeded.
- Secondary suites may lead to increased noise levels in residential neighbourhoods.
  - Traffic noise – especially at night

- Party noises – young adults tend to party!
- It may be perceived that increasing neighbourhood density by the addition of suites puts additional burdens on municipal services such as roads, sewers, schools and transportation. Competent researchers studied these potential problems a decade ago in Surrey, and it was found that suites do not place excessive demands on community infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>
- It may be perceived that secondary suites lead to a decrease in property values in surrounding homes. This impact has not been supported by findings in the research literature on secondary suites.
- The historical lack of regulation of suites and enforcement of relevant codes and bylaws presents problems in itself. There may be heavy costs entailed in bringing existing suites up to standard, regardless of whether the homeowner or the tenant wants such improvements. Moving to an enforcement regime would add costs to municipal administration. Also, inspections would disturb the majority of households who do not have suites. If existing suites were legalized, as is sometimes suggested (citywide or in pilot areas) and if new suites are required to meet codes, the inconsistent treatment of the grandfathered properties would be widely frustrating and would probably be an unstable policy.

### Two Other Neighbourhood Issues Related to Secondary Suites

#### Suites that Turn into Apartment Houses

There are houses in Mount Tolmie where suites or individual rooms have been rented, and after some passage of time, the owners have moved out and the house has become an apartment rooming house. Unlike a boarding situation, or the case of a homeowner who rents out a suite, in these cases the landlord is absent and there may be less responsibility for the behavior of the residents.

- In many such houses, more than two boarders are living in a home, contrary to Saanich's requirements for a single-family zone.
- The residential density exceeds the neighbourhood norm.
- Parking of vehicles can become a problem.
- This may lead to more problematic rooming house situations that are seen in other jurisdictions
- There is the perception of decreased security on the part of neighbours. In single-family neighbourhoods, knowing one's neighbours tends to lead to a sense of security. This is especially important for seniors and for individuals living alone. Residents in rooming house situations may be more transient than others and in most cases; there is not a consistent presence of a responsible person in the home to whom neighbours can relate.

---

<sup>3</sup> Eberle and Krause, Op. Cit.

- These homes can be the scenes of large noisy parties

Also, it must be observed that some tenants in these houses live quietly in the neighbourhood and do not cause the type of problems described above. It is recognized that these homes do provide needed inexpensive, alternative accommodation for students and other young people.

### Accessory Suites

Accessory or auxiliary buildings are being constructed or renovated that appear to be designed more for living accommodation than as workshops or garages. While these structures are permitted under Saanich by-laws, their use for accommodation is not. Such buildings may be sited 5 ft. from rear lot lines and when used for accommodation may create privacy issues for immediate neighbours. They may not meet standards for occupancy, and they may exhibit other types of problems in the neighbourhood, all as discussed above.

### **MTCA Views on Improving the Situation**

MTCA agrees with GHRA that Saanich should mitigate the problems associated with secondary suites and other alternative housing while retaining positive aspects of these arrangements. Solutions should include public education about the merits of appropriate suites, bylaws designed to encourage them, and an effective program of fair and consistent enforcement of by-laws.

Some possible components of a solution are:

- Officially recognize that secondary suites, auxiliary buildings and even rooming houses provide needed rental accommodation. Educate neighbours and residents as to what is acceptable in terms of accommodations and behavior in the district of Saanich.
- Examine the extensive literature on secondary suites<sup>4</sup>, consult with experts on suites, in residential law, and property insurance. Identify issues in moving to a comprehensive program of encouraging suites, including legal and homeowner liability issues with regard to suites and alternative housing.
- Develop enforceable by-laws to regulate such accommodations and to control the worst abuses. Develop regulations and enforcement policies that address concerns about noise and parking. Consolidate and make public all bylaws and regulations. Bylaws must include fair but firm requirements that ensure landlords adherence to them;

---

<sup>4</sup> An illustration of the extensive Canadian literature on various municipalities' experiences with secondary suites is at [http://www.secondsuites.info/research\\_matrix.htm](http://www.secondsuites.info/research_matrix.htm).

- 
- Provide sufficient, appropriate staff to administer these policies. Appropriate staff would be teams including: fire officials to ensure egress and fire safety requirements are met; and building inspectors to ensure that suites meet basic requirements for clean air, natural light, heating, fresh water, toilet and cleansing facilities, safe electricity, food storage and preparation, privacy and mould suppression.<sup>5</sup>
  - It will take time to implement a program of encouragement for secondary suites. A 5-10 year development and phase-in period may be expected.

MTCA would welcome any comments, suggestions or enquiries about this paper. All input should be directed to Patty Mack, President or Marlene Bergstrom, Vice-President at ((250) 721-2497 or 250) 472-2246 respectively, or by e-mail at [info@mtca.ca](mailto:info@mtca.ca)

June 11, 2009

PM/Peter Spurr/ps

---

<sup>5</sup> The experience of many Canadian municipalities that have mounted programs to support secondary suites is that building inspectors tend to over-emphasize building code requirements, while fire officials take a more pragmatic, safety-oriented approach. The literature reports municipalities that began with a program based on building inspectors alone, evolving to mixed teams led by fire officials.