

Infill Housing Program



CASE STUDY | DECEMBER 2023



1. Background

The City of New Westminster has allowed secondary suites in all single-family residential zones since 1998. From 2015-2017, the City led its Housing Choice conversations as part of the OCP update process, aiming to provide an application process for the newly permitted infill units as soon as the OCP was adopted. A demographic and statistical analysis demonstrated a huge gap in ground-oriented multi-family housing in the community; conversations in neighbourhoods revealed that people were moving away to find ground oriented, family friendly housing. While the City's Family Friendly Housing Policy focused on getting two and three-bedroom units in apartment buildings, there was also a strong need for missing middle housing.

Policy/program

Infill Housing Program

Municipality

City of New Westminster
(2021 population: 78,916)

Gentle Density Types Involved

- Secondary suites
- Laneway houses/carriage houses
- Conversion of single-family lots to townhouses and rowhouses

During the OCP update engagement, the housing forms that generated the highest level of support were laneway houses, townhouses and rowhouses. While the OCP update was still underway, the City launched Phase One of the Infill Housing Program, which allowed laneway houses and carriage houses in almost all single-family zones. Lots in all single-family zones are permitted to have two accessory dwelling units – one attached (secondary suite) and one detached (laneway or carriage home). At the same time, a new zoning district was also created in order to facilitate single-family lots to be converted to infill townhouses or rowhouses. Infill townhouses are side-by-side, not stacked, and are strata ownership. Rowhouses are also ground-oriented and are fee simple ownership.



2. Key Players

Municipality

- City Council was a strong proponent of increasing housing supply, and the OCP update process focused significantly on housing choice.
- The City's land use planning team is responsible for housing policy; development planning group is responsible for approval; and social planning is responsible for homelessness initiatives. The building division is responsible for permits.
- The development of the laneway housing regulations involved consultation with development team and engineering; the land use team led those discussions.
- The land use planning team worked with infrastructure planning engineers to determine standard off-site improvement requirements for these infill developments (e.g., what are the "must-have" requirements) appropriate for the small scale of development.
- The work with the fire department resulted in a requirement for an access path from the front sidewalk to the new unit and updating addressing standards to make a consistent approach to benefit responders. Applicants are also encouraged to make their address clear at the ADU and the street to make their unit easy to find.

Stakeholders

- The City conducted one on one meetings with landowners to test development permit guidelines and zoning before adopting and pre-identify most common issues. These meetings also helped inform the development of the guide documents.
- The City reached out early to builders and invited them to a builders' breakfast meeting and provided draft guidelines for input. There were challenges with the first laneway houses as this type of development was new for many builders, but the builders have now learned and understood the process and design guidelines and the application times have significantly decreased. Similarly, staff also learned about processing this new form of application.

3. Description of policy/program/project

Laneway housing is allowed by right in all single-family zones (except Queensborough) and does not require a rezoning. Only a Development Permit is required, which has been delegated to staff for approval. The City has developed a laneway house guide for applicants that outlines the development permit process and applications requirements. Based on lessons learned since the adoption of the program the City is now developing a revised checklist that identifies what staff will look at during the development application process, and a statistical table that includes setbacks, floorspace ratio (FSR), height, etc.

A new land use designation, Residential-Infill Townhouse (RT), allows small scale, side-by-side townhouses and rowhouses that are compatible with areas of single detached housing and other lower-density ground-oriented multiple-unit housing. Townhouse and rowhouse developments are required to apply for rezoning (as a test before a pre-zoning is done) and development permit. The City waives all public hearings where an application aligns with the OCP.

The City is currently launching a development application process review to make the process more efficient. However, the City is already delegating everything that is allowed to be delegated, e.g., setback requirements are in design guidelines (reviewed by staff) rather than in the zoning.

The City's only heritage conservation area, Queen's Park, follows the same zoning as the City's main residential zone (RS-1) but includes an incentive package for additional density in the principal building and relaxations for detached accessory dwelling units (RS-4). Of the 300 homes in the area, there have been approximately 10 accessory dwelling unit applications since the program was launched in 2017.

Beyond the Queen's Park area, development on the approximately 150 designated heritage properties is guided by the City's Heritage Revitalization Agreement (HRA) program, which has been in place since 1998. HRAs are negotiated on a site-specific basis, and development applications are treated similarly to a rezoning (to be approved by Council). Applications need to demonstrate heritage value and be consistent with the OCP. Properties do not have to be designated heritage in advance of applying to the HRA program. Over the last five years, there have been approximately two to five applications per year at this scale, ranging from ADU to multiple dwelling conversions. Applicants are comprised of roughly 50% developers, and the other 50% are comprised of property owners wanting to add additional units for personal use and a small percentage of applicants whose primary goal is to preserve the heritage asset.



4. Outcomes

The City is exploring upgrading its technology to enable staff to track numbers and monitor outcomes more effectively. In the first years for the program, surveys were sent to owners to seek information about number of units, costs, etc., but owners are reluctant to share financial information. Surveys were also sent to builders and the neighbours

of projects to gain knowledge about the success of the program. Detailed records were kept for the first years in order to learn about what worked and what didn't. These learnings are now informing improvements to the program.

5. Lessons learned

Facilitators

- The City undertook significant community consultation during the OCP update process, much of which was focused on increasing housing supply and choice. This engagement was informed by background research to understand the community demographics and statistics, used lots of images to show examples of housing forms, and prioritized neighbourhood integration.
- City sought community feedback on increasing housing units vs parking vs greenspace. Residents clearly indicated they preferred increased housing and greenspace vs parking.
- The City undertook a scan of other municipalities, interviewed staff from those places to get the behind the scenes look at their programs, and did tours projects in other municipalities that were of most interest, often with the municipal staff or applicants and architects (and an interdepartmental team from our city).
- A community advisory committee provided guidance throughout the process. Committee members were taken on a tour of creative infill projects in New Westminster and in other neighbouring municipalities and provided their feedback on what they liked and what they would change about each project. Council was also taken on a similar tour.
- The delegation of authority and proper training of staff to process development applications helped simplify the approval process and speed up applications.
- Include as much as possible in the DPA as guidelines rather than in zoning as regulation, which gives more flexibility to respond to site specific contexts without requiring a Development Variance Permit.
- A single-family house plus laneway (and/or secondary suite) requires two parking spaces. Townhouses/rowhouses require only one stall per unit and no visitor parking.
- A laneway housing package that includes application review process, checklist, statistics table proved very useful as did working with builders to better understand their needs and to provide education on the infill requirements.
- With increasing pressure due to the housing crisis, there is more interest from community members to increase housing choice than initially expected.

Challenges

- The City estimates that the scale of resources required to administer these infill practices is not as intensive as a larger development, but still more intensive than a single detached dwelling given the Development Permit process.
- The small site size also becomes more complicated to accommodate more and more in a limited space – which adds complexity, and time to support applicants finding creative solutions.



6. Next Steps

Council just adopted its strategic priorities plan and staff is now aligning the workplan. The Infill Housing Program is re-launching and staff are moving forward with Phase Two, planning for more than what was originally planned for that phase. For example, the City will be looking at allowing up to six units per lot, rather than just four.

Plans for Phase Two include consideration of removing the development permit requirement when specific design requirements are met.

7. Resources

- | [Laneway and Carriage House Program](#)
- | [Laneway and Carriage House Streamlined Guidelines](#)
- | [Supplemental Guidelines for Accessible Laneway and Carriage Houses](#)
- | [Zoning bylaw](#)
- | [Queen's Park Heritage Conservation Area Guide](#)