

NO: R134

COUNCIL DATE: June 7, 2010

REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: **Mayor & Council**

DATE: **June 7, 2010**

FROM: **General Manager, Planning and Development**

FILE: **3760-15**

SUBJECT: **Public Opinion Survey Regarding Secondary Suites**

RECOMMENDATION

The Planning and Development Department recommends that Council receive this report as information.

INTENT

The purpose of this report is to advise Council about a public opinion survey that is being undertaken with respect to the subject of secondary suites by Ipsos Reid on behalf of the City based on questions as documented in Appendix 1.

BACKGROUND

The issue of secondary suites is not a new issue. It has been considered many times over the last 20+ years by various Surrey City Councils without full resolution. Other local governments in the Region have moved in new directions over the course of the last few years to recognize and create more flexibility in relation to the establishment of secondary suites. These shifts in approach across the Region, the current lack of clarity in Surrey with respect to secondary suites and the changing needs of society are all sound reasons for the City to re-engage in a process to resolve this important matter on behalf of the residents of Surrey.

At the Regular Council Meeting on December 14, 2009, Council received Corporate Report No. R235. This report provided an update on the process leading to a Housing Action Plan for the City. One of the key issues identified by stakeholders in consultation sessions conducted for the Housing Action Plan was to conduct a review on potentially allowing one secondary suite in all single family dwellings.

Mayor's Housing Focus Group

The Mayor has established a Housing Focus Group to consider and make recommendations regarding adjustments that the City should consider in relation to its by-laws, policies and regulations related to single family housing, including the matter of secondary suites. The Focus Group includes representation from the following organizations:

- Greater Vancouver Home Builders' Association;
- Surrey Ratepayers Association;

- West Panorama Ridge Ratepayers Association;
- Fleetwood Community Association;
- Surrey Association for Sustainable Communities; and
- Fraser Heights Community Association.

The Focus Group endorses the survey recommended in this report as it will inform the on-going work of the Focus Group. It is expected that the Focus Group will be providing recommendations to City Council in the next few months.

The City of Surrey currently permits secondary suites, under certain conditions, in several residential zones, including the:

- Single Family Residential Secondary Suite (RF-SS) Zone,
- Single Family Residential (12) Coach House (RF-12C) Zone;
- Single Family Residential (9) Coach House (RF9-C) Zone; and
- Special Single Family Residential (RF-9S) Zone.

There are approximately 1,800 properties zoned to permit secondary suites in the City. The vast majority of single family homes in the City are in zones that do not permit secondary suites. Although relatively few properties are zoned to permit suites, it is evident that many unauthorized secondary suites exist in Surrey. The City has taken a unique approach in dealing with unauthorized secondary suites, including the recognition of "registered" suites through its Secondary Suite Cost Recovery program. Under this program, single family homes containing suites are identified through BC Assessment data or by By-laws & Licensing Services. When an unauthorized suite is identified, the property owner is advised that an annual utility fee will be charged to the property to cover higher infrastructure and utility costs associated with the suite. In 2009, utility fees were collected from approximately 14,400 homes with unauthorized suites. These fees recover City costs for the delivery of water and wastewater services to homes that do not have a water meter installed to measure consumption, and for solid waste and recycling collection. In 2009 the secondary suite utility fee was \$695.00 per year for homes without water meters, and \$106.00 per year for homes with water meters, reflecting only the cost of garbage and recycling collection.

DISCUSSION

Secondary suites are a reality and an important component of affordable housing in Surrey for both homeowners/landlords and renters. The large number of unauthorized suites in the City indicates that this is a pressing housing issue. Unauthorized suites provide a significant stock of rental housing but do not offer secure tenure. For example, tenants in unauthorized suites may be reluctant to exercise their rights under the *Residential Tenancy Act*, fearing that the suite may be closed. Unauthorized suites can be a source of tension between neighbours and their unauthorized status may jeopardize the continued provision of rental units for tenants, and the reliability of a "mortgage helper" income for homeowners.

Most local governments in the Lower Mainland have addressed the issue of secondary suites through a process of bringing unauthorized suites into conformance with zoning. Staff has surveyed 18 municipalities in the Lower Mainland and has found that all (with the exception of Delta) permit secondary suites in a broad range of residential zones. Delta is currently in the process of reviewing its policies on secondary suites with a community Task Force.

Secondary suites provide a range of benefits to both homeowners and renters. Suites can be important "mortgage helpers" for homeowners, particularly young families and households moving into home ownership. Suites also provide housing flexibility as household compositions change over time, allowing extended family, elderly parents, and newly formed family households to be accommodated. Suites provide a significant reservoir of affordable, ground-oriented rental accommodation for many segments of the rental housing market in Surrey, including young persons, couples, students, single parent households and seniors.

There are issues associated with secondary suites. One key issue is the provision of sufficient parking for the suite. Bringing existing suites into conformance with current BC Building Code standards can be difficult and costly. Finally, homes with secondary suites impose a higher cost on the local government to deliver services such as domestic water and wastewater, solid waste and recycling collection. While the City of Surrey's current practice of assessing a utility fee on known secondary suites partially addresses this issue, it is dependent on incomplete information.

The issues related to secondary suites are complex. It is, therefore, important to gather reliable and comprehensive data on public opinion to inform a "made in Surrey" policy for second suites as part of the Housing Action Plan. It is also important to understand whether there are geographical patterns to the public's opinions and attitudes on this complex issue, so that the policy can address particular situations in different parts of the City.

Staff has interviewed a number of reputable public opinion research firms and is proposing to retain Ipsos Reid to conduct a random sample of 600 Surrey households. This sample size is sufficient to derive statistically reliable data. The proposed survey questions documented in Appendix 1 have been developed in consultation with community representatives from the Surrey Association of Sustainable Communities and the Surrey Ratepayers Association. These questions focus on key policy variables derived from a comprehensive survey of policies in 18 municipalities across the Lower Mainland.

In addition to the telephone survey to be conducted by Ipsos Reid, any member of the public may also participate in a web-based survey on the City's website. This web survey will include the same questions as the telephone survey. While the results of the web-based survey will not be statistically valid, they will provide additional resident input with respect to secondary suites that will be useful in policy development.

The surveys will be conducted during June and early July with the results reported to Council once the survey information has been analyzed.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

The proposed public opinion surveys on second suites respond to a number of the socio-cultural goals contained in the City of Surrey Sustainability Charter, in particular:

- SC9—Adequate, Appropriate and Affordable Housing; and
- SC12 – Adapting to Demographic Change.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the development of a policy for secondary suites in single family zones is a key part of a Housing Action Plan. These rental units provide affordable, ground-oriented rental accommodation for a range of tenants and provide a "mortgage helper" to homeowners in an expensive housing market. Suites provide flexibility as family and household compositions change. Unauthorized suites can be a source of tension between neighbours and may not offer security of tenure for tenants and security of rental income for homeowners who depend on this income to pay their mortgages.

Understanding the views of Surrey residents on secondary suites and on key policy issues and options related to such suites is a first step toward developing a policy that is appropriate to Surrey and responsive to resident concerns. The subject surveys will provide valuable data to inform the development of such a policy.

Original signed by
Jean Lamontagne
General Manager,
Planning and Development

DL:saw

Attachment:

Appendix I Proposed Survey Questions

City of Surrey Secondary Suite Survey
DRAFT (May 28, 2010)

Hello, this is _____ calling from _____, a professional public opinion research firm. We are not selling anything. Today we're talking to a random sample of Surrey residents about issues affecting your community. Please be assured that this survey is completely confidential.

(IF NECESSARY, ADD: The survey will take about 8 minutes to complete.) (INTERVIEWER NOTE: If inconvenient timing, schedule a call back).

May I please speak with the person in your household 18 years of age or older who most recently had a birthday? Is that you?

Yes **[CONTINUE]**

Don't know **[ASK AGAIN, IF STILL DK/REF THEN THANK AND TERMINATE]**

No

May I speak to that person? **[READ INTRODUCTION]**

A. First of all, do you or does anyone in your household work for **(READ LIST)?**

[RANDOMIZE]

The City of Surrey

An advertising agency

The media, that is a radio or TV station or a newspaper or magazine

A market research firm

[ALWAYS LAST] (DO NOT READ) None

[IF 'NONE' IN QA, CONTINUE. OTHERWISE, THANK & TERMINATE.]

B. To confirm, do you live in the City of Surrey?

Yes

No

[IF 'YES' IN QB, CONTINUE. OTHERWISE, THANK & TERMINATE.]

C. Which of the following best describes the community you live in? **(READ LIST – STOP READING WHEN ANSWER PROVIDED)**

[RANDOMIZE]

Cloverdale

Fleetwood

Guildford

Newton

South Surrey

Whalley/City Centre

[IF 'DK/REF' IN QC, THANK & TERMINATE.]

RECORD GENDER (DO NOT ASK)

Male / Female

SUPPORT FOR SECONDARY SUITES

This survey is about secondary suites, also known as basement suites.. A secondary suite is a separate, self-contained living space located within the structure of a single family home. It typically has a separate entrance, cooking, sleeping, and bathroom facilities.

Currently, secondary suites are only permitted in the City of Surrey if the property is properly zoned and the homeowner has obtained the appropriate building, plumbing, and electrical permits. Secondary suites are not permitted in the majority of residential zones in the City.

1. Prior to this survey, were you aware that secondary suites are permitted in some zones in the City of Surrey?

Yes
No

2. Do you generally support or oppose allowing secondary suites in all single family homes in the City of Surrey? (Is that strongly or somewhat support/oppose?)

Strongly support
Somewhat support
Somewhat oppose
Strongly oppose

[IF 'STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT SUPPORT' IN Q2, ASK Q3. OTHERWISE, SKIP TO Q4.]

3. Why do you support allowing secondary suites in all single family homes in the City of Surrey? Any other reasons? **[ACCEPT 2 MENTIONS]**

[IF 'STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT OPPOSE' IN Q2, ASK Q4. OTHERWISE, SKIP TO Q5.]

4. Why do you oppose allowing secondary suites in all single family homes in the City of Surrey? Any other reasons? **[ACCEPT 2 MENTIONS]**

ATTITUDES TOWARDS SECONDARY SUITES

[ASK ALL]

5. I'm going to read you some statements about secondary suites and would like you to tell me the extent to which you agree or disagree with each one. The first one is **[INSERT ITEM]**. (Is that strongly or somewhat agree/disagree?) How about **[INSERT ITEM]**? **[REPEAT LIST IF NECESSARY]**

[RANDOMIZE]

Secondary suites are a good way of meeting the need for rental housing

Secondary suites help make homeownership more affordable for homebuyers

Secondary suites give homeowners who live alone a greater sense of security due to the proximity of a second person in the residence

Secondary suites help families stay together by providing a home for an adult child or elderly relative

Secondary suites put increased pressure on crowded streets where parking is already limited

Secondary suites increase traffic congestion in local neighbourhoods

Secondary suites have a negative impact on the look and feel of local neighbourhoods

Households with secondary suites do not contribute fairly to utility billings or property taxes
Secondary suites are a good way of increasing density without changing the character of neighbourhoods
Secondary suites make it difficult to plan for the number of residents using local schools and parks

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree

VIEWS ON SPECIFIC REGULATIONS

6. Most municipalities in the Lower Mainland allow secondary suites in most single family homes. The bylaws regarding secondary suites vary from municipality to municipality. I'm going to read a number of different restrictions regarding secondary suites. For each one, please tell me if this is something you would support or oppose in the City of Surrey. The first one is **[INSERT ITEM]**. (Is that strongly or somewhat support/oppose?) How about **[INSERT ITEM]**? **(REPEAT LIST IF NECESSARY)**

[RANDOMIZE]

All single family homes are allowed to have one secondary suite
All townhouses are allowed to have one secondary suite
Only single family homes in some neighbourhoods are allowed to have a secondary suite
Single family homes in some neighbourhoods can have more than one secondary suite provided that Council has provided approval for multiple suites in that residence
A neighbourhood can only have a certain number of secondary suites
All new single family homes must have plumbing and electrical rough in for a secondary suite regardless of whether or not the homeowner intends to have a secondary suite
Owners of a single-family home that has a secondary suite must live either in the principal residence or the secondary suite
Secondary suites are prohibited in single family homes which also contain a home-based business such as a daycare.

Strongly support
Somewhat support
Somewhat oppose
Strongly oppose

As mentioned, secondary suites are only permitted in the City of Surrey in certain zones and if the homeowner has the appropriate building, plumbing, and electrical permits.

7. Homes with secondary suites have a higher utility usage and result in added costs to the City's water, sewer, and garbage services. To help offset these costs, the City of Surrey charges homeowners with a legal or an unauthorized secondary suite an extra secondary suite utility fee.

Do you agree with this approach? (Is that strongly agree or disagree?)

Strongly agree
Agree
Disagree
Strongly disagree

8. Rather than continue to tolerate unauthorized suites, do you agree that the City should strictly enforce its bylaws and instruct owners of unauthorized suites to either rezone their property and bring it up to building code standards, or to close down the suite?

Strongly agree
Agree
Disagree
Strongly disagree

The BC Building Code includes specific provisions for secondary suites and looks at things such as ceiling heights, heating systems, ventilation, fire safety, and sound controls. Upgrading existing suites to meet the BC Building Code can cost over \$5,000.

9. In your opinion, should secondary suites in Surrey be required to meet all aspects of the BC Building Code or should a City inspector have some flexibility in deciding what is acceptable provided that all health and safety standards are met?

Should meet all aspects of the BC Building Code
City inspector should have some flexibility in deciding what is acceptable provided that all health and safety standards are met

10. If the City were to permit secondary suites, should they be permitted in all parts of the City, or only in certain neighbourhoods?

[RECORD CHOICE]

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

11. If permitted by the City, would you support allowing secondary suites in all single family homes in your neighbourhood?

Yes
No

12. Does your house contain a secondary suite? **(If “Yes” ask:)** Does it contain more than one suite?

Yes
No
More than one suite

13. If secondary suites were permitted, how likely are you to install a secondary suite in your house in the next two years? Would you say **(READ LIST)**?

Definitely will
Very likely
Somewhat likely
Not very likely
Not at all likely

DEMOGRAPHICS

Finally, I just want to ask you some questions for statistical purposes.

14. In what year were you born? **(RECORD YEAR)**

[RANGE 1900 TO 1992]

15. How many years have you lived in the City of Surrey? **(RECORD NUMBER OF YEARS) (IF LESS THAN 1 YEAR, ENTER 0)**

[RANGE 0 TO 100]

16. Do you own or rent your current place of residence?

Own
Rent

17. What type of housing do you currently occupy? **(READ LIST) [ACCEPT 1 MENTION]**

[DO NOT RANDOMIZE]

Detached house

Duplex, triplex, or semi-detached

Apartment

Townhouse or rowhouse

Secondary suite

(DO NOT READ) Other [specify] (NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT SAYS 'CONDOMINIUM', ASK: Do you mean an apartment, townhouse, or duplex?)

[THANK THE PARTICIPANT FOR THEIR TIME AND CONCLUDE THE INTERVIEW].

[ASK ALL]

Which of the following categories best describes your household's income? That is, the total income before taxes of all persons in your household combined? Please stop me when I've reached your category. **(READ LIST)**

Under \$30,000

\$30,000 to less than \$60,000

\$60,000 to less than \$90,000

\$90,000 or more

Lastly, in order to know how to classify your responses, can you please provide me with your postal code? (IF NECESSARY, ADD: I assure you that this information will remain completely confidential. We only use it for classification purposes.)

On behalf of myself, Ipsos Reid, and the City of Surrey, thank you for helping us to complete this survey!