

Secondary Suites

CityPlan

Riley Park/South Cambie RPSC

Secondary Suites in Vancouver

Secondary suites provide an important housing option within the city. They offer rental housing which is frequently affordable and which is often located adjacent to schools, parks, and services. The units are ground oriented and may provide access to a yard important to families with young children. The rent from the suites can help make a homeowner's mortgage affordable.

Background

Currently, between 15,000 and 25,000 secondary suites exist in the City of Vancouver. The lower number is based on BC Assessment data and City of Vancouver permit data; however, the higher number is generally acknowledged by staff. Of the existing secondary suites, only 4,300 are currently legal or legal non-conforming.

Many suites exist in areas of the City that up to now did not permit permanent secondary suites. In the late 1980s, Vancouver City Council faced calls to either enforce the then existing by-laws, which could have required large numbers of renters to vacate the suites, or to modify the single-family RS-1 zoning to better accommodate existing and new suites.

Therefore in 1988, as part of the Vancouver City civic election, a plebiscite question asked voters if they were in favour of a review to discuss allowing secondary suites in RS-1 zoned areas in their neighbourhoods. 76,000 people responded to the question and 76% of the polling districts voted "yes" to a review.

Following the thorough review on a polling district level, 47% of the City's

RS-1 zoned properties were rezoned to RS-1S.¹

Property owners in the RS-1S zone could choose to:

- phase out an existing suite over a period of years;
- legalize an existing suite;
- build a new suite in an existing dwelling; or
- build a new suite as part of a new dwelling.

"Phase-out suites" were also permitted in other single family zones. In addition, owners in non-suite areas could at any time conditionally develop a legal "family suite" which could be used for a specified period of time by a defined list of relatives or caregivers.

Secondary Suites in all Residential Area

In March 2004, Council adopted significant changes to secondary suites regulations. In response to concerns over closure of approximately 2,200 "phase-out suites" and a relatively low number of suites that had been legalized, the following changes were approved and will lead to subsequent amendments to various bylaws:

- Allow secondary suites as a conditional use in all areas of the city which allow single-family dwellings.
- Change zoning and building regulations to minimize the hurdles faced when legalizing the suite.
- Focus enforcement on fire, life-safety, health and maintenance standards, as well as on the closure of multiple suites.

Due to relaxed building standards and to ensure that secondary suites remain

an affordable form of rental housing, suites cannot be strata-titled.

The proposed new building standards contain, among others:

- The requirement for sprinklers in existing houses has been eliminated. Instead, hard-wired interconnected smoke alarms are required. In new construction, sprinklers have to be installed.
- The minimum ceiling height for a secondary suite in existing basements has been reduced to 1.98 m, or 6'6" (from previously 2.08 m, or 6'10").
- All new construction has to be "suite-ready", including electrical service sufficient to handle the main dwelling and the suite. This will also apply to homes that do not include a finished suite at the point of construction.

It is important to note that with the new regulations, not all suites are automatically legal. Property owners still require the necessary permits. For more information on building standards and legalizing a suite, please contact the Permits and Licenses Secondary Suite Program at 604-873-7945.

Secondary Suite in RPSC

In RPSC, a total of 660 acres, or 38% of the area is zoned for single-family use and does now permit secondary suites.

According to BC Assessment data, approximately 2,240 secondary suites existed in RPSC in 2001. This number is generally assumed to be a close reflection of the actual number of suites in the area. Between 1991 and 2001, 125 new houses with suites have been built.

Sources

"Secondary Suite Guide" (December 2002) - Permits and Licenses
Department Secondary Suite Program,
City of Vancouver.

"Secondary Suites" Policy Report,
Development and Building, January
2004, City of Vancouver.

BC Assessment data, 2001.

Notes

1 Other zones permitting permanent secondary suites were subsequently introduced. With the creation of the RS-5 zone, some of the former RS-1S zoned areas were rezoned to RS-5S. In other areas, the former RS-1A and RS-2 were replaced with the RS-7S.