



# City of Vancouver

**Talk Housing With Us**

**Renters Roundtable Report**

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## Introduction

The City of Vancouver and its partners are working to end street homelessness by 2015 and increase housing for low and modest income households. Rental housing is key to a healthy, vibrant city. As Vancouver changes and grows, the City is taking steps to ensure people have affordable rental housing options. The City of Vancouver is committed to protecting and expanding the supply of rental housing to meet the diverse housing needs of Vancouver's citizens.

On May 26, 2011, as part of an overall public and stakeholder engagement program, Talk Housing with Us, the City hosted the Renters Roundtable. The objective of this event was to gain a clearer understanding and build awareness of the challenges and benefits renters face related to rental housing in Vancouver. The format of the event was an informal, café-style discussion with a focus on listening to participants' comments and sharing ideas. Approximately 75 people participated in this event.

This Report provides an overview of the Renters Roundtable and a synopsis of the different views and opinions expressed by participants.

## Key Ideas

The major opinions and ideas emerging from the discussion are as follows:

- There was concern over rent increases; participants report that renovations proposed by their landlord are often cosmetic in nature and do not appear to really be needed
- Major rent increases often occur as tenants move out, resulting in similar suites in a building having disparate rental rates.
- Renters face a wide variety of discrimination – racial (in particular First Nations), age, mobility impairment, families (particularly with very young children) and pet owners
- Renters are concerned with market pressures continuing to force rents higher, some of this is attributed to: lack of rental supply and high condo prices which keeps people in the rental market
- Condo renters were concerned about absentee landlords and security of tenure
- There should be more protection and support for renters to help tenants understand their rights under the Residential Tenancy Act, as well as a body that will act in their interests and in disputes with landlords
- The City could help renters organize themselves to help bring more of a voice to renters' issues
- There should be ongoing communication between renters and the City to discuss issues and to provide input into City programs/policy directions
- More affordable and social housing is required

- Concern was expressed over the loss of affordable SRO units in the Downtown Eastside
- Providing more support to local area economic development groups could help address housing affordability for marginalized populations

## Roundtable Discussion Notes

The Roundtable utilized small group discussions focussing on a series of questions with some of the discussion highlights shared with the larger group – these proceedings were recorded by a note-taker. Following are the questions and the notes captured.

### 1. What type of rental housing do you live in? What do you like about this?

- I am one of fortunate who moved into the Olympic Village and it's like heaven
- I have lived here for 50 years and I've rented for 50 years; I was one of the first who fought for tenants rights
- I live in an old small building with 14 units; it was wonderful for the first 31 years but last 2.5 years we have new owners who want to renovate

*When asked, many of the participants reported that they live in older rental units – many over 10 years and many over 20 years old.*

- It's a wonderful community and we have done what we can to protect it

*When asked, approximately half of the participants reported that they felt a good sense of community in their rental accommodations.*

- In Ontario where I lived for many years, smaller communities, having a house was normal; in Vancouver it's extremely expensive
- You have to be in a position to buy and if you can't buy, the City has to be in a position to allow it to be affordable and less restrictive

### 2. Have you moved in the last five years? If yes - How often? Was this from other rental? Why did you move? If no - Why not?

- Unfortunately the renovation market exists but property owners expect a return on their investment
- I've been here 4 years and have a moving company – I rent but I understand that a landlord has to get a return on their investment, it's understandable but the issue here is social housing
- There are other fundamental problems that exist in the market – how do we get a sense of community? Often pay a lot in rent to get the kind of accommodation that gives a sense of community
- They give you an eviction notice for renovations; they slap a cheap coat of paint

up and put on a new door and you are out; the person coming in pays \$150 a more in rent

- If you are low income renter, there is no tenure security – we should be thinking of building and pressuring the government to have more social housing
- There are least four at this table who have been homeless – many have moved a lot
- With my two teenagers we moved every year for five years; it's just what you have to do when you are low income
- Owners can get extra money by high turn-over when all they might need to do is clean and paint; not keep increasing the rent by forcing people out for non-needed work
- I was in Mt. Pleasant and moved to the West End; I was at an apartment at Gilford and Haro, it had no view and I had silverfish; the superintendent didn't want to hear about it so I moved out
- I moved and am paying \$1,200 a month and it's my savings that go for this; the people living next door are paying \$1,120 a month and we are side by side; mine is more expensive because there was more movement in mine; as tenants move out, there is usually an automatic raise in the rent; one \$820 walk-up is now over \$1200 - because of the problems people kept moving out and each time they moved out the landlord increased the rent

*When asked, approximately half of the participants reported that they have experienced this effect in raised rents.*

**3. What are the most significant issues you have experienced in finding rental accommodation?**

- There is extreme discrimination regarding pets – dogs, cats, etc.; pets become like family but you get turned down or the rent is much higher
- There is discrimination between owners and renters - it is a 2-class system
- Sometimes it's hard to find a place to live if you have children, particularly a newborn and that is age discrimination
- We have a woman in our organization that has difficulty walking and she lives on the 7th floor and when the elevator was out of service last summer, she spent 4 weeks living in the lobby and they charged her rent for this time; now the elevator is broken again
- The competition is so great for space - my friends' strategy is to get there a half an hour before the landlord will show the place to be first in line
- I was lucky this time in finding a decent place, but the first time around it was a horrible experience
- I was evicted for a disability related reason because the footrest on my wheelchair scratched the wall when I locked it and I have been homeless for

over 3 years because I can't find affordable accessible housing

- There is racial discrimination and there is also "ageism" – a friend's mother wanted to move in and the landlord made it clear she wasn't welcome because of her age
- Racial discrimination exists with rental housing – at Carnegie Community Action Project we try to rent rooms and have gone with an Aboriginal person and it's \$800 a month but the landlord says they have no vacancies and then we have gone back with someone who looks like a student and the same landlord has said the rent is \$500 a month and there is a vacancy
- I have to state my personal experience working with Aboriginal specific families – the racism and discrimination we face on a rental search – being told the suite is vacant and the door closes in our face; this happens time and time again and many of us share the same experience; it's an unspoken thing yet it's a huge issue and it's a shame; I don't know what you can do about it; people have documented it, made complaints and the fact is it is still happening; it takes a whole community to change it, not just the Aboriginal population; we have to change the assumptions about us and be celebrated as part of the whole population

*When asked, several participants reported that they have either directly experienced or know someone who has experienced racial discrimination in trying to find rental accommodation.*

**4. What do you consider the most significant challenges are in keeping your rental accommodation?**

- Tenants do not have easy access to organizations that can help them fight for their rights and tell them what their rights are
- It would be good if the City could publicize the rights of tenants and encourage neighbourhoods to get organized

*When asked, most participants supported this suggestion.*

- Only a small portion of tenants know their rights under Residential Tenancy Act and even if they know them it's hard to get them enforced
- Challenge in DTES is that there are almost 4,000 SRO units and gentrification is pushing up the rent; welfare cheques are only \$610 – people are getting pushed out of the SROs
- There are challenges with being harassed by landlord or leaseholder
- I have had a lease and during the term of the lease, in good standing and not owing, they have harassed us, threatened overnight removal and I had to go to court right away to get an Order and showed I had a lease paid in full – this is

the fourth year I have had to deal with this; where would we go, we'd be homeless; each year the rent is raised and I continue to pay it; when the lease is over it will likely not be renewed; we have first option to buy

- I visited a friend in an SRO and in broad daylight we counted 21 cockroaches running around and it makes it difficult to keep a rental accommodation
- If your landlord won't pay for pest control or there is a negligent neighbour, you don't know that and there is only so much you can do

**5. As a renter, what are your concerns for your housing future?**

- Concerned in future there could be a monopoly of a few owners who own the majority of the buildings – that is happening in the West End and they will be in charge of setting the rents
- Concern with loss of private ownership – usually small owners are fantastic
- As a renter in the future, my concern is the supply of affordable housing
- I live in the West End and they aren't against development, they want smart development – they have been asking for a community plan for years
- The supply isn't in alignment with market forces – once we have more supply the rent prices will come down
- I am concerned about the future because tenant's rights have been weakened by the current government
- My neighbours pay \$300 more a month rent than I do; if the current government supports landlords we will be paying more
- My big concern is I live in East Mt. Pleasant and it's an island of affordability relatively speaking because of the old apartment buildings – but steps need to be taken to ensure they are kept up so you don't lose them
- I purchased a condo and developed for normal uses – we had someone come forward requiring wheelchair and we modified it – it was rented for 3-4 years and they decided to leave and once they were moving out the strata wanted to charge us for all the damage they felt she did in the building; I felt the person was a fantastic tenant
- I happen to be a landlord – when you speak I want to be a better landlord and maybe a solution is getting the two together
- Because there is little purpose rental housing built in the city what happens to seniors – as rents go up there won't be anywhere for them to go in the future
- I live in a rental house and my landlord lives offshore; I constantly think about the fact when my lease is up the house could be sold or torn down

- I am extremely fortunate in my renting situation and this evening is making me feel nervous about having to be out there looking again – tenants shouldn't feel that way
- I have a good rent and if the building changes hands I have to pay what others are paying and I will but I will have to work harder
- Financial pressures

**6. As a renter, what are your hopes for your housing future?**

- There is currently no mechanism whereby citizens of Vancouver can have an ongoing communication on this – I would like to see a 311 number to phone so we can raise issues; how many people are being evicted in certain areas; the City should organize this and so there is ongoing education of what is going on in this City
- We need a permanent way to support back and forth communication between residents and the City
- There's a section between Kingsway, Broadway and Main and there is a big development there; the City should look at transit and look at density ratios; we should be including the transit component in the housing and affordable rental housing issue
- Renters' issues should not be used as a political bowling ball as I see some party politics going on and I am disappointed to see that here
- Dream that everyone could have the same type of housing as I have – Co-Op housing; we have 17 committees that manage everything – when our incomes go down the rents go down; we need to pressure the federal and provincial governments for more Co-Op housing
- Lots benefit and profit from that type of housing and we need to think of having a city which has a certain percentage of social housing (e.g., Hong Kong)
- I have had to adjust my hopes for the future and let go of the idea of home ownership – we have good jobs but are living in the rental market which takes away rental market for those who have no choice – even having a place for us becomes a question
- All areas within the city should have social housing in their plans
- The biggest challenge is that renters are half the city's population and they are not involved as much – set up economic development corporations and get them involved
- In May 1989 the then Mayor was told we needed affordable housing and it could be done with 3 levels of government – Mr. Campbell listened and he built more housing but it wasn't affordable housing - here we are in 2011 and we still don't have affordable housing
- Tenant's rights should be peace, enjoyment and quiet



- When you are good tenants you should have a place to live
- Germany has managed to keep their housing prices affordable around the rate of inflation – learn best practices from other countries
- The City could be more strategic in some of its decision making – it juggles a lot of priorities and it should take on fewer priorities
- The City could invest in housing and realize a return on their money
- Our tenant's rights that we had voted for have been weakened by the government
- Build more social housing without stigma attached

**7. As a renter, how connected do you feel to the community you currently live in? Do you get involved in community issues? If yes - Which ones? How? If no - Why not?**

- The gardening thing and recycling that is going on right now in town for communities – people are becoming healthier generally; people stop and say hello when you are gardening; it's so simple and having a local food supply is an amazing thing; gardening is how you get people together and it's positive; we need people from all the neighbourhoods in Vancouver and Greater Vancouver involved in this
- There is apathy among many people not wanting to get involved and it should be much broader and more involved in this
- Getting direct input into the City Council will help
- I have a very strong comment about fear – it's apathy and it affects many people, particularly around elections – it was expressed at our table; someone said there should be 2-3 times more people here; I live in the Downtown Eastside and the question is community – do we have community there; I used to live in Kitsilano; people in DTES know me by name and there is a community there; it's a really good one; you should all come down you would be surprised; I do the best I can to reach out to others – I live in the Yukon building and have been living in that building for a 16 years and have stayed active living; most of the people that have asked me to come here are ashamed to become public and be associated with the rest of the people here because they lack confidence to face strangers and discuss issues with stranger; I encourage them to come and they are ashamed of their poverty, the clothing they wear, their disabilities and they prefer to have someone who is not afraid to speak out and project a public image for them; to motivate them I show compassion and I don't take written notes – they ask me to come to take my concept of what happened here and then speak to them; most of the people I speak to are afraid to speak out

**8. As the City moves forward on policies and actions to preserve the existing supply of rental housing and increase the supply of rental housing, what is the best way for the City to engage you in future discussions and initiatives?**

- As a follow up perhaps if you identified the main themes and get people to vote/prioritize the issues
- Don't shut out the people who aren't on the website
- I get worried about the fact we get a lot of information and then it just goes up on a website and it's hard to do real analysis on it; someone should find common themes and digest the information – I would like to see that happen
- I hope you mention the City of Vancouver's website and that this information will go there – the website is a terrific source of information; project by project the plans are there and there is usually an opportunity to voice your opinion there as well
- This is what we did at our table – how few people in this room are in their 20s; we wondered what are the people in their 20s and 30s doing – they are following the Canucks but surely the future should be at least as important; we have to engage an entire range of younger people
- With youth you need to go where they are – they aren't here because they don't do that; you need to have pub and social nights and engage them in the conversation to get them involved; include social media in that
- Earlier on I proposed we have neighbourhood based economic development corporations but as a starter they can reach out to the neighbourhoods comprehensively and consistently
- In terms of resources the City has financial and persuasive means
- The aging population can be a challenge and opportunity given there will be a tremendous turn-over of wealth and you could have neighbourhood community foundations

**One participant requested to speak to the group and provided the following thoughts:**

- I have been a tenant for 50 years and I have been involved in fighting for tenant's rights; it was the NDP government that gave us tenants' rights and the next government threw it out
- We stole Expo lands and invited foreign investment without protecting the people who live here and pay taxes
- As a taxpayer I resent the fact I am paying rent because I am not as rich as property owners
- We should limit foreign investment like they do in China and Australia; all the investment hasn't benefitted us – we have homelessness; why do we need foreign investment if it doesn't benefit us; make sure any foreign investment

protects the people who live here and pay taxes; we don't want our real estate values to increase so all foreign investment can take all the profit out of the country – keep the profit here and reinvest it for us

- Failure to act now creates more problems for the future
- If you are voted in by renters, do things for renters
- Social justice will prevail in the end no matter what; my message to City Council is create social justice and you may even be re-elected in November

## Feedback Forms

Feedback forms were provided for all participants to complete following the Renters Roundtable. Following is the information provided on these forms.

**Total feedback forms submitted 22**

Renters	19
Non-renters	3

**Housing situations**

Apartment	12
Secondary suite	2
Condo	1
Co-op	1
SRO	1
House	2

**Current residence (years)**

Average	7.2
Minimum	0.2
Maximum	22.0

**Length of time as renter (years)**

Average	30.2
Minimum	10.0
Maximum	68.0

**Rate of Change Regulations**

*Familiarity*

Yes	8
No	12

*How Heard*

- internet
- media coverage
- planning mtgs.
- research
- newspaper

*Comments*

- bad idea - prevents construction of more supply
- need to apply to DTES
- I am opposed to "tall" buildings in the West End

**Short Term Initiatives for Rental Housing (STIR)**

*Familiarity*

Yes	13
No	7

*How Heard*

- internet
- WEN
- housing mtgs.
- City web-site
- media
- newspaper
- community involvement
- research
- learned about at Roundtable

*Comments*

- bad idea - only increases land cost
- rents in these buildings aren't affordable for low income people
- not affordable for 50% + of senior West End renters
- not enough units to lowers rents or vacancies
- I don't think this addresses the problem for affordable rental housing

**Secondary Suites Expansion**

*Familiarity*

Yes	12
No	7

*How Heard*

- internet
- Cable 4 coverage of City Council
- City web-site
- research
- newspaper

*Comments*

- bad idea - puts density in the wrong places
- OK

**Laneway Housing**

*Familiarity*

Yes	17
No	2

*How Heard*

- seen in West End
- internet
- Cable 4 coverage of City Council

- City web-site
- research
- media
- newspaper
- followed last election

*Comments*

- bad idea - can't make affordable units
- too expensive for low income population
- good idea
- interesting, but limited solution
- yes, great, do more!

**Feedback on how the City should continue with ongoing Renter engagement**

- more forums, community centre open houses, on-line discussions
- pay attention!!
- by paying attention to/implementing these suggestions
- give me a single point of contact person at City Hall
- keep me advised via my e-mail address
- please invite me to future events
- more meetings and e-mails
- actually put words into meaningful, real actions - by engaging high-risk, vulnerable populations like Aboriginal & new immigrant groups
- invoke a sense of trust - convince me that the councillors and staff truly want to help fix the problems created by a wealth driven market economy, over social issues
- discussions similar to the one held today
- I am active in following events online
- be democratic for a change!
- as a volunteer willing to assist in activities/events whenever possible
- online forums are awesome

**General Comments**

- keep developers from putting up "tombstone" condos in the West End (most heavily populated area in Canada)
- I value the diversity of my neighbourhood (West End) and feel that affordable rental housing must be addressed if this is to be maintained
- focus is always on social housing - affordable housing is also needed for those who can't afford to buy
- Put more regulations in to protect tenants' rights. (I'm surprised renters are the majority in the city - but seem to have less clout than homeowners)
- City should buy 10 sites/year for social housing in DTES; work for homeless action plan goal of 800 social housing units/yr. (not a mere 1200 before 2020)
- enact inclusionary zoning with % to reflect % of poor people in city - at least 26.6%
- replace 5000 SROs in DTES
- lobby province for: speculation tax, effective rent control, law prohibiting "non-

- resident housing ownership" & more \$ for social housing
- discuss with provincial & federal organizations to curb foreign investment that escalates prices out of reach of regular Vancouverites
- we need wards making community responsible against tax speculations
- interested in the suggestion that the City could think of implementing strategic, intermediate processes of "investing" in purpose built rentals; surely not STIR - too costly for the city's most vulnerable renters, who are leaving the city in droves; can't build enough STIRs to actually impact the negative impact of market forces in real estate - therefore won't lower the rents or increase vacancy rates in any significant way
- there's been a housing crisis in Van. for the past 10 yrs. and successive city governments have made things worse by allowing changes in re-zoning tall & very tall buildings, silencing and overlooking the needs of the population that rents in favour of developers and market driven excessively expensive rents
- tenants need better protection and to be involved in any policy changes
- I thought Jean Swanson's comments about exploring all aspects of a non-profit co-op program were excellent - who benefits, who profits etc.
- support for co-op housing could be a potential solution
- maintain standards for rental housing (especially low-income)
- help create a renters union/other mechanisms to work with those that are being discriminated against; promote knowledge of renters' rights
- we need to have more co-housing developments & co-op housing
- tax foreign investors - use the money to put into building rental housing
- love the idea of building public housing on city owned land
- social housing is very important to the City
- very informative - most arguments well-addressed. Helps in my outreach efforts in communications with people with disabilities and seniors
- we need purpose-built, affordable housing - from used containers? housing not just affordable for the poor, but medium earners, who are having to compete with 30,000 ESL students!
- I attended on behalf of TRAC to listen to feedback from tenants with regards to rental issues they were facing
- good discussion
- letting people vent their gripes is fine, but it doesn't help in finding solutions
- food was great

## Renters Roundtable – Participant Map

The graphic below shows where participants identified they lived.

