
MEMORANDUM

April 20, 2015

TO: Mayor and Council

CC: Penny Ballem, City Manager
Sadhu Johnston, Deputy City Manager
Janice MacKenzie, City Clerk
Lynda Graves, Manager, Administration Services, City Manager's Office
Rena Kendall-Craden, Director, Communications
Mike Magee, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Kevin Quinlan, Deputy Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Braeden Caley, Director, Policy and Communications, Mayor's Office
Mukhtar Latif, Chief Housing Officer
Abi Bond, Assistant Direct, Housing Policy

FROM: Mukhtar Latif
Chief Housing Officer

SUBJECT: Vacant Housing Unit Research Study

Dear Mayor and Council,

PURPOSE

This memo provides Council with an update on the work completed to date by the Vancouver Affordable Housing Agency on the issue of vacant housing units. In addition to a review of existing studies and potential data sources, an RFP has been issued for consultant assistance in investigating this issue.

BACKGROUND

There is significant public interest in the issue of homes being left vacant given affordability challenges across the housing continuum and very low rental vacancy rates together with the potential impact on vibrancy of neighbourhoods.

There are multiple reasons for properties being left vacant. Through our research, we have identified the following reasons although this list is not meant to be exhaustive:

- a) Development timing (housing units that are vacant prior to demolition or following new construction pending sale and initial occupation)

- b) Property is in the process of being sold or rented
- c) Property has been vacated in anticipation of being renovated
- d) "Flipping" (housing units that are bought, renovated and sold in a short period of time, with no real ability for rental prior to sale)
- e) Domestic investment property - pending decision whether to rent or leave vacant for a later sale
- f) International investment property - pending decision whether to rent or leave vacant for a later sale
- g) Probate
- h) Hoteling (owner works in the city but has a long commute so has purchased a property to reside in during the week and is in primary residence at other times)
- i) Sabbatical/Snowbirds (through work, retirement or other reasons, owner is travelling or working abroad)
- j) Owner is in hospital or in care

Council has expressed a desire to understand the extent of the issue given the demand for housing and the importance of keeping neighbourhoods vibrant.

There are limited research and data sources available, the two most recent studies relate only to vacant condominiums:

- Urban Futures: 2011 Census: 6.7% of COV apartment dwellings (condos and purpose built rental) are unoccupied (6.2% in metro overall and 7.0% across all Canadian metro areas)
- Bing Thom Architects (Andy Yan): 2009 Hydro Study: 5-8% of downtown condos "Dark"

We have had difficulty in identifying data sources that can provide the exact numbers of vacant single family homes, length of time properties are being left vacant and reasons for why they are vacant. CHMC are also in a similar position and we are in discussions on how best we can work together to understand the issue.

We have identified BC Hydro data as a potential source of information for single family homes that are vacant. This data will not provide cause but will establish the denominator of homes which appear to be vacant for prolonged periods of time.

In addition, we have obtained a customized order from the 2011 National Household Survey which we are using as an initial proxy in determining the number of vacant homes.

We are also working with City of Vancouver Communications and 311, and with community groups to develop a digital site where the public can report vacant homes in a coherent fashion, thus allowing us to potentially match it up with BC Hydro data.

The Vancouver Affordable Housing Agency has issued a request for proposals from qualified consultants to assist with the investigation of the vacant housing unit issue. The RFP will close May 12 2015 and it is anticipated that the consultant will begin immediately following the decision to award the contract.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or clarifications.

Mukhtar Latif

Chief Housing Officer

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