

## Planners ask city to halt loss of rental units

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Faced with a wave of condo development that is eroding Vancouver's stock of affordable rental apartments, city planners have made a radical recommendation that council impose a temporary near-moratorium on redevelopment in the city's apartment zones.

They say the city's 43,000 units of purpose-built rental housing -- half of them built before the 1960s -- are an increasingly valuable resource for the city's renters, who make up 56 per cent of the population.

"We're critically worried about the loss of affordable rental housing stock," said Rob Whitlock, one of the two planners who wrote the report going to council Tuesday. Council will be asked to approve a recommendation to go to public hearing on the issue and then will vote.

If approved, any demolition or conversion to strata would have to come to council for approval. While the door is left ajar for developers who come to the city with creative proposals to build replacement housing, it would be shut for anyone who simply wants to tear down old rental apartment buildings to replace them with strata-title condominiums.

The policy would cover every apartment zone in the city, including Marpole, Mount Pleasant, Grandview-Woodlands, East Hastings, and Champlain Heights, as well as the three neighbourhoods that have traditionally been under the most threat: the West End, South Granville and Kerrisdale.

For renters like Greta Wenckebach, a policy like that would be a huge relief.

Wenckebach, 73, has rented the same apartment on 14th, between Granville and Oak, for 37 years, when she moved to an area that worked well for her because it was close to buses and shops.



CREDIT: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun

Greta Wenckebach, 73, says saving rental units would be a relief to her. She has lived in the same apartment for 37 years.

"If this passes, it means I won't have to worry," said Wenckebach, who has had more than one acquaintance in the area evicted and forced to move in recent months. "I'm relieved that I could live out my remaining days here."

The city's older apartment stock is facing development pressure that it hasn't seen since the late 1980s, when Vancouver was in an uproar over demolitions and redevelopment in the West End and Kerrisdale.

At that point, the city encouraged developers to go elsewhere by opening up land in industrial areas and allowing more apartments over stores on commercial streets. It also introduced some control on demolitions and conversions by requiring council approvals once the number of units being lost exceeded a certain level in the West End, South Granville and Kerrisdale.

But now a lot of the previous development room has been used up and developers are turning again to old apartment buildings for redevelopment into condos, especially in South Granville and Kerrisdale, where seven buildings have been torn down recently for new condo projects.

The city has already had to issue demolition permits for 260 rental housing units this year alone, because the current policy only requires council notification if the number of units demolished represents more than five per cent of the existing stock in the neighbourhood.

Whitlock's report makes it clear that city planners see the apartment stock as a precious reserve for the city's low-income population, which consists mainly of the young and the elderly. They face record low vacancy rates, stagnant incomes and general lack of new affordable housing coming on to the market.

They note that although 15,500 of the city's 57,000 condos are rental units, condos tend to rent for 20 per cent or more than an apartment of the same size in an older, purpose-built block.

Advocates for low-cost housing were surprised and thrilled with the dramatic recommendations in the city report.

"This is just very good. And it certainly reflects how nervous governments are getting about the lack of affordable housing," said Martha Lewis, executive director of the Tenants Rights Action Coalition.

NDP MLA Gregor Robertson, who took up the issue on behalf of his Fairview constituents who were being threatened with eviction last fall, called the staff report a "creative approach" that allows developers to come forward with some suggestions for replacement.

He said having certainty will help everyone, both renters and developers.

But Jan Robinson, chief operating officer for the B.C. Apartment Owners and Managers Association, said the city's potential restriction on apartment changes is worrying.

"Replacement housing is a fact of life. There are a lot of older apartment buildings

where it's more appropriate for them to be torn down."

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## COST AND SCARCITY MAKE FOR A RENTAL CHALLENGE

Over 50 per cent of Vancouver households, and over 80 per cent of younger households, are renters. They face a triple whammy: Rapidly rising condominium prices price low-income earners out of home ownership; redevelopment of rental buildings is eroding the housing stock; and income growth is not keeping up with increasing rents. City council will be considering the issue this week. These charts are part of a staff presentation:

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