

Policy will help deliver affordable housing

The newly-minted Affordable Housing Policy of the Bowen Island Municipality is a made-on-Bowen approach to begin addressing the housing crisis. Tim Wake, an affordable housing consultant, crafted the document with direction and input from the Affordable Housing Working Group (AHWG), a committee the municipality struck one year ago. Council adopted the policy in June.

The purpose of the Affordable Housing Policy is to provide clear direction to municipal staff, the public and developers, identifying expectations related to the delivery of affordable housing. Staff will consult the policy in conjunction with rezoning applications and other opportunities that have the potential of affording amenities for the community.

"It's a guide," explains Wake. "It will create an environment whereby the municipality challenges developers to create a more inclusive neighbourhood."

The goal, as outlined in the policy, "is to establish a level playing field so that all development contributes to affordable housing solutions on Bowen Island in a meaningful, beneficial and equitable way." The intended result is the construction of a mix of affordable rental and affordable housing from studio to three-bedroom suites, apartments and townhouses to semi-detached and single-detached homes.

This will be achieved by the stipulation that any new development or redevelopment project must reserve 15% of the gross floor area for affordable housing. Smaller rezoning applications will be considered case by case.

The municipality's strategy is a "straightforward approach", said Wake, whereby a number of conditions are created to deliver affordable housing. It involves the municipality acquiring land at little or no cost, such as property transferred through development contributions, or attained from private donations. Quality housing for rent or ownership is built on a cost neutral basis. That is, the units will be sold for the amount of money they cost to build, including design and construction.

With the target cost of producing a home for \$200 per square foot, a home of 1,000 square feet could be offered for purchase as low as \$200,000. Once determined, the value of the home will not significantly increase, as it will be subject to covenants held by the Bowen Island Municipality or a municipal housing organization.

Bowen's municipal planners will encourage housing that is located within walking distance of Snug Cove, accessible to amenities, transit and services. The design and construction must meet or exceed green building standards.

Though only a few months old, the policy is already influencing negotiations between municipal planners and development proponents. Proposed developments, such as the Belterra project, civic lands (the "Surplus Lands") intended for sale for residential development and the Cape Roger Curtis Neighbourhood Plan include plans for affordable housing.

The next step and task of the Affordable Housing Working Group is to establish a municipal housing organization. That body will exist as an effective and essential mechanism for facilitating, managing, acquiring and building perpetually affordable housing.

Council has approved a \$25,000 budget for the start-up funding of this arms-length organization. Wake, continuing to consult with the Working Group, hopes to see it up and running by early 2009. He'll be presenting the municipality with an organizational framework and business plan that includes a sustainable funding model.

This is the third in a series of articles presented by the municipally appointed Affordable Housing Working Group. The next article will focus on the proposed municipal housing organization. To view these articles, please visit the website of the Bowen Island Municipality, at www.bimbc.ca. The topic of Affordable Housing is listed under the "Current Events" heading on the left side of the homepage.