

Building in housing affordability

Langford allows builders to increase the density in return for building affordable homes. Qualified residents can get a new home for \$150,000, but critics say other buyers end up subsidizing the costs.

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Times Colonist

Wednesday, July 05, 2006



CREDIT: Debra Brash, Times Colonist

To keep the new homes that Limona is building within Langford's \$150,000 limit for affordable housing, the interior will have fewer extras, says builder Mike Baier. For example, instead of two and a half bathrooms in other homes, these will likely have only one and a half baths.



CREDIT: Debra Brash, Times Colonist

Developer Mike Baier, of Limona Construction, says his company will build nine affordable homes in its 93-unit Turnstone subdivision in Langford. The \$150,000 homes, to be provided to the

The Municipality of Langford is addressing the challenge of affordable housing in the Capital Region by offering houses to qualified residents for \$150,000.

Under its 16-month-old affordable housing policy, every rezoning of 10 or more single-family residential lots has to have a 'small lot/small house affordable lot' measuring approximately 3,329 square feet (300 square metres).

Developers are then required to build one affordable housing unit of between 893 to 980 square feet (83-91 square metres). The finished house is then offered to buyers selected by the Langford Affordable Housing Committee.

Unlike subsidized housing, which simply augments rent for low-income applicants, these houses are registered and owned by the residents. A housing agreement is registered on the title of each house that restricts the resale of the houses until after 25 years, when the house can be sold at market value.

Langford's approach runs counter to prevailing methods of funding affordable houses, such as including it as part of homeowner's taxes. Its ability to do so is based on the fact that the municipality currently possesses the largest amount of serviced land available in the Capital Region.

Housing activist Herman Rebneris, for example, is not impressed with Langford's policy.

"It's just a form of 'bonus density,' " says Rebneris.

He explains how that works: By relaxing density requirements for a project, a developer is allowed to squeeze 10 per cent more plots into a development. These 'extra' plots are then set aside for affordable housing.

"Langford is simply making new home buyers subsidize affordable housing," says Rebneris.

Langford Mayor Stu Young is not fazed by Rebneris' comments. "We all have to start somewhere (on affordable housing)," says Young.

Since the policy's inception in April 2005, the municipality has only filled three houses. Despite the slow start Young is optimistic.

"If I had started this policy 30 years ago, there would be 1,000 affordable houses in Langford right now," he says.

municipality for sale to qualified buyers, will look no different on the outside than others in the development, he says.



CREDIT: Debra Brash, Times Colonist
Limona's subdivision offers a mix of options that will include high-end kitchens such as this one above, or more affordable ones.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist
Housing activist Herman Rebneris would like to see Langford change its affordable housing strategy.

Young says that he has had excellent co-operation from the development community and, with the current rate of construction, the municipality may see up to 30 affordable units being built this year. "I am happy with that," says Young.

Although Henry Kamphof, executive director of the Capital Region Housing Corporation, applauds Langford's action on affordable housing, he would be happier if the municipality also contributed to the regional housing trust fund.

Created in July 2005, nine local municipalities have allocated a portion of property taxes -- running approximately \$12 to \$15 per household -- to a housing fund. The fund, currently sitting at \$900,000, is leveraged on a 14:1 ratio by contributions from different levels of government and the private sector.

"Langford's affordable housing policy fits with the overall housing strategy," says Kamphof. "But their policy does not take advantage of the leveraging possible from government sources," he says.

Using the above formula, Kamphof calculates that if Langford were to contribute \$55,000, raised through taxes, to the fund, the Housing Corporation would be able to parlay that to \$770,000 towards affordable housing.

Mayor Young is not sold on that approach. "With our (housing) policy we get affordable houses built instead of money being wasted in a government bureaucracy," he says. "I don't believe that (Langford) taxpayers should have to do it," says Young.

Kamphof is still hopeful that Langford will come around and join the other municipalities. "It's just the most effective approach," he says. Compared to Langford, the regional fund has been able to fund the construction of 31 units for this year.

"(Langford's policy) sounds like an interesting solution," says University of Victoria housing researcher Catherine van Mossel.

"But it's just a tiny drop in the (affordable housing) bucket," says van Mossel.

Developer and builder Mike Baier of Limona Construction is building the first phase of a 93-unit subdivision named Turnstone, located just off Happy Valley Road in Langford. It will include nine affordable homes. The project offers eight different 'Arts and Crafts' designs mated to three different lot options.

One of the challenges of affordable housing is how to design it to look like market-rate housing in a community. So Baier is making it simple -- he will make them look exactly the same. "From the street you will not be able to tell the difference," he says. The subsidized units will be interposed within market-rate houses. Although the interior appointments might not be the same -- perhaps one and a half bathrooms instead of two and a half for example -- he insists that they will be finished and warranted just like any other house.

Baier sees the policy as a trade-off, as the relaxed density requirements help him defray the cost of putting up the affordable homes. "It's just a cost of doing business these days," says Baier. "But it does hit a pretty good note knowing I am providing real affordable homes," he says, emphasizing the word 'real'.

We toured a sample 1,647 square foot (153 square metres), two-storey house with three bedrooms and a single car garage. A traditional front verandah offers welcome shade on a hot day. A tiled foyer serves as a major intersection of the house with access to the garage, family room, living room and a curved stairway to the upper level.

The formal living room in the front of the house is set apart from the rest of the living area, giving the area extra privacy. An open plan design sees the family room, dining room, kitchen and powder room grouped together. Wall-to-wall carpeting is used for the family room, engineered hardwood flooring for the dining room and kitchen. A gas fireplace is found in the family room. An outside patio area is accessed via the dining area.

The faux maple cabinets in the kitchen are set off against cappuccino coloured laminate counter tops and a tile backsplash. An island separates the kitchen from the rest of the living area while serving as an informal dining and food preparation area.

Three bedrooms are found upstairs, with the master bedroom benefiting from a walk-in closet and ensuite bathroom. Of note is the location of the laundry facilities in the upper hallway, a trend that seems to be gaining popularity.

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AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN LANGFORD

Criteria to qualify for Langford's affordable housing program:

- * Applicants cannot be related to anyone on selection committee, city staff, councillor or mayor
- * Minimum of two people to live in home
- * No current real estate holdings
- * Maximum annual household income of \$50,000
- * Pre-approved for mortgage
- * Canadian citizen or landed immigrant
- * Resident of Langford for a minimum of two years prior to application

For a copy of the affordable housing applicant criteria, call the Langford municipal office at 474-6919.

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HOUSE DETAILS

What: Subdivision of 93 homes, with 10 per cent affordable houses, 946 Thrush Place, in the Happy Valley area of Langford

Builder/ Developer: Mike Baier and John Sercombe, Limona Construction

Lot sizes: 3,272 to 4,994 square feet (304 to 464 square metres) Show home 3,886 square feet (361 square metres)

House size: 1,647 square feet (153 square metres), three bedrooms, 2.5 bathrooms

Price: \$344,900 - \$395,000 (plus GST); showhome \$375,000 (plus GST) with nine homes to be sold to qualified buyers for \$150,000

Interior Designer: Simona Baier & Deb Kennett

Title: Fee Simple

Schools: Happy Valley Elementary, Dunsmuir Middle School, Belmont High School

Information: Lyle Pelter or Larry Jeff, Re/Max Camosun 744-3301

Website: www.turnstonehomes.com

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