

Little Mountain to be redeveloped

Frances Bula

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VANCOUVER - The city's oldest public housing project is headed for a massive redevelopment that will transform it into a mix of private and social housing, with significant anticipated profits for the province.

It is the first of what some anticipate will become a provincewide approach to replacing postwar social housing and generating money for new projects.

Vancouver city planning director Brent Toderian confirmed this week that the province has approached the city about a redevelopment for Little Mountain social housing, which would increase the site's density by at least six times, if not more.

Little Mountain, built in 1954 and home to about 800 people, sits on six hectares of prime land near Queen Elizabeth Park in central Vancouver.

"The province has made clear its aspirations," said Toderian. "And it is certainly thinking about opportunities that may exceed the current zoning."

Toderian, city councillors and housing advocates all say the idea of redevelopment is exciting and needed. But they all want to see the province meet certain conditions in order to do it.



CREDIT: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

IT'S 'THE BEST' PUBLIC HOUSING IN THE REGION: Little Mountain housing complex at Main & 37th has lots of green space for both people and the birds.



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Magdalena Ayala and her daughter Alicia live with their family at Little Mountain housing at Main & 37th. Neighbour Ingrid Steenhuisen is in the background.

That includes providing at least as many social-housing units as exist now, if not more; building a complete new neighbourhood with amenities; and making sure that existing tenants are housed during any dislocation, with the right to move back.

Housing Minister Rich Coleman has been talking for months to various parties, indicating he would like to sell off portions of the land that B.C.-owned social housing now sits on in order to finance the redevelopment of its aging stock.

Toronto recently decided to redevelop its largest social-housing project, Regent Park, although it is maintaining control of the land. But private developers will rebuild the massive project one phase at a time, with the end result that 2,083 social housing units will be replaced by a mix of about 2,000 social housing units and 2,500 market ones.

Little Mountain, the oldest social housing project in B.C. and also the one with the least existing housing and most available land, is the first and prime candidate in line for that kind of redevelopment.

B.C. got control of Little Mountain last June, when the federal government handed over the 17,300 social housing units in its portfolio to B.C. as part of its 15-year effort to get out of social housing.

Coleman, who has talked about putting as many as 2,000 units on the land, did not return a call from The Vancouver Sun Tuesday.

However, Toderian said the city is preparing a report to respond to the province's proposal, scheduled to come to council by mid-April.

The city's housing centre director, Cameron Gray, said the six-hectare site now has only 225 residences. Current zoning would allow up to about 1,000 units in buildings of no more than four storeys.

Going to 2,000 units would require a rezoning.

Toderian said that kind of redevelopment will only happen if the new, dense neighbourhood provides a benefit for the city.

"I would be disappointed if we weren't taking this opportunity to create a sustainable community," he said.

Coun. Suzanne Anton, the city's biggest advocate for its EcoDensity initiative,



CREDIT: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun
Alicia Ayala has grown up with her family in Little Mountain housing.

said she believes the province should be asked to put in more social housing units than now exist.

"I think we should maximize the social-housing component," she said. "Given the history of the site, we should have more than the status quo."

Alice Sundberg, executive director of the B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association, said people in her sector are watching this development closely.

They want to see the province not just replace existing units, but make sure those units go to the same mix of people they did before.

"A big problem to us is that [provincial politicians] don't care about family housing any more.

"Our association has always been in support of redevelopment and intensifying sites to pay for that redevelopment. But what's going to happen to the families that used to live there?"

Sundberg said the B.C. government has moved increasingly to providing housing only for people who have special needs, not low-income families, except through rent supplements, which she says don't work well in a tight housing market such as Vancouver's.

That's something Magdalena Ayala knows about.

Ayala has lived at Little Mountain for 19 years. She and her husband and four children live in a three-bedroom townhouse, paying about \$900 a month rent when none of their children is working.

That \$900 is 30 per cent of the income in her household, between her job as an office cleaner and her husband's construction job at the Concord Pacific towers going up over Costco downtown.

"Everybody says to me, 'Magdalena, where you live is the best.'

" It's peaceful, there is shopping, everything nearby."

She can't imagine finding anything with the kind of space she has now (the townhouses include a basement) in the neighbourhood or, in fact, anywhere else in the Lower Mainland.

Her neighbour, Ingrid Steenhuisen, agrees.

Steenhuisen, whose family moved into the complex when she was a baby in 1957, said it's always been the kind of housing that worked well for families, giving them a chance to get on their feet economically and well designed for families.

All the kitchens look out over children's play areas so parents can watch over their children while making meals.

Steenhuisen hasn't been able to get any information from B.C. Housing about what will happen to Little Mountain.

"It has all been rumour. I've been trying to get answers since last June.

"This has always been a great place to live for families and we would like to keep that."

fbula@png.canwest.com

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