



Photo: The Government of Manitoba

Secondary Suites

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In order to provide housing that meets the growing and diverse needs of the aging population new housing solutions are required. The City of Winnipeg's An OurWinnipeg Direction Strategy, states that the City should work with different levels of government, private and not-for-profit developers, and the community to ensure accessible and affordable housing. As the housing shortage and lack of rentals worsens in the city, policy must support housing renewal and infill development. Bi-laws and policies must be reviewed to allow and even promote development of varied housing stock including secondary suites. Allowing secondary suites is one way the City can meet the shifting demographic population's needs by providing additional affordable housing while utilizing the existing housing stock and infrastructure.

Maintaining
independence
& privacy in a
neighbourhood
of your
choice for an
affordable
price.

A secondary suite is a smaller dwelling unit within, attached to, or on the property of a primary single detached home. It has its own entrance, kitchen, bathroom, and living area. The use of secondary suites can be beneficial to everyone involved as they increase affordable housing options that can help stabilize the rental supply for the city and provide affordable options in a typically more expensive low-density areas often allowing access to more desirable amenities. They provide opportunity to ensure housing conditions are up to code. The existing infrastructure is used more efficiently. With increased density the opportunity for better transit options can be provided and as mobility is a significant concern for the aging population this can be an important asset to a community. A suite can also offer extra income for home owners to help meet mortgage payments/approval and keep up with maintenance.

Specifically to meet the needs of the growing aging population, the use of secondary suites can improve **affordability** and choice while supporting **aging in place**. It can allow seniors to maintain their independence and privacy while remaining in a neighbourhood of their choice and/or close to family. This enables social inclusion and **facilitates caregiving**, often offering an alternative to assisted living. A suite can also allow seniors to downsize from the financial burden of a larger home without leaving the familiarity of the neighbourhood and can even supplement a fixed income.

Many Cities are dealing with similar housing problems and have already adopted new legislation to allow secondary suites as part of their housing strategies. The



cases below show overall positive outcomes confirmed by the continued effort by local and provincial governments to encourage the private construction of secondary suites and the legalization of existing suites.

Edmonton:

In 2006, Edmonton’s City Council set out a comprehensive two phase program to usher in the development of secondary suites. The first phase allowed secondary suites within single detached residences and in or above garages limited mainly to the suburban areas surrounding the universities and colleges where many illegal suites were concentrated. The second phase, completed in February 2009, removed most location restrictions and allowed the addition of single storey units detached from the main home. During both phases extensive public consultation was used. The feedback received combined with information gather through monitoring was used to help refine regulations and correct any problems before implementing phase 2. The phased program allowed the city to help homeowners bring existing secondary suites up to code and avoiding displacing residents.

Seattle:

The City of Seattle has allowed secondary suites within a primary home since 1994 but it was only in September 2006 that units separated from the main home were allowed in specific areas of the city. In 2008 the City’s Department of Planning and Development surveyed the areas concluding overall positive results with 83% supporting the policy. (The City of Seattle, 2008, Pg1) The survey indicated that residents did not believe that the suites changed the characteristics of the area or had an impact on parking or traffic. Further changes to allow detached secondary suites citywide were adopted December 2009. The ‘Backyard Cottages Annual Report’ released April 2011 by the City again found overall positive results.



Photo: The City of Seattle

Although there is limited recent empirical research available on senior specific use of secondary suites, we can look to the experiences of other cities in order to guide the process and ensure that every effort is made to harness the potential of using the suites to meet the needs of Winnipeg’s the aging population. By



Photo: The City of Seattle



Photo: www.grist.org



Photo: Santa Cruz Sunset Magazine

The Government of Manitoba offers a forgivable loan for 50% (up to \$35,000) of the cost of construction of a secondary suite if it is leased to low income tenants.

example, it can be seen that a city’s implementation strategy should begin with a housing needs assessment to determine what concerns should be address in a specific neighbourhood. In the above cases, there was a lack of ‘age-friendly’ consideration and rather focus was on preserving neighbourhood character with regulations set to ensure visually compatibility, height and size restrictions, set back measurements, shared outdoor amenity space minimums, and dedicated off street parking. Parking requirements often ignore the actual usage and ownership of vehicles by the aging population.

In order to successfully implement secondary suite policies and fully take into consideration the needs of all, the use of public engagement and a good promotion strategy is key. Many cities have a very vocal negative minority opinion charged by ‘NYMBY’ ideas, the stigma of ‘renters’ and other concern of parking, traffic, noise, and negative impact on property values. The Edmonton case study shows how a well-developed public consultation strategy can enable the city to address concerns and clear up misconceptions from the start of the process and allow a smooth transition to changed policy.

The use of incentives are also important for secondary suites implementation. In the case studies some form of grants or financial incentives have been used to promote suite building and legalization. Senior homeowners have been less likely to build suites as they often lack the capital, are not interested in dealing with the finances due to difficult application process. The responsibility of the renovations or being a landlord may also not be appealing. For seniors there is a gap between interest in building a suite and being capable of taking on the project. (Gratton, M, 2011) Having available help and information, such as Edmonton’s ‘enforcement team’, could allow more seniors to take advantage of secondary suites.

The City must recognize and address that conventional housing is not always easily adaptable. **Age-friendly designs** for new housing must be flexible in order to better meet seniors’ needs and should be able to support the add on of a secondary suite. Success is dependent on accessibility and design, access to funding, ease of permit process and good public consultation. In order to ensure accessible and affordable housing, that meets the diverse need of the aging population, the City of Winnipeg must support, promote, and act proactively to create a variety of housing options including secondary suites.

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