

The fate of secondary suites

CONSTRUCTION

Regulation has been an issue at council for years

Kathy McCormick

It was one of the major points in the platform of the fresh new face running for mayor in 2010 — and after being elected for the third time last month, Naheed Nenshi's campaign promise still has not been fulfilled

Secondary suites have been an issue with various Calgary councils for years.

How to regulate them, how to ensure they are safe, how to make sure they aren't too costly for people to be able to build them, and especially how to deal with the illegal ones already in place, which are estimated to be anywhere from 16,000 to upwards of 50,000.

As well, councils have grappled with how they are approved. Now, each must go through a lengthy process that ends with city council deciding their fate — an unwieldy, often burdensome and gut wrenching ordeal for those asking for them and a grinding, often tedious chore for council members who may have as many as 100 to sift through at one sitting.

It is "unfair, immoral and unethical," Nenshi said in an



Matisse Homes just finished building a two-storey home in Montgomery with a backyard suite above the garage. CONTRIBUTED

interview in 2014. People are required to plead their case — often with intimate and embarrassing details — on the reason for wanting to have a suite constructed.

Since 2005 there had been as many as 30 reports on the issue going to the various councils.

Yet little has changed. In 2011 council did OK the creation of secondary suites in the new neighbourhoods, but people still have to get permission from council for individual applications in existing

communities — something that irks many. Some of the fees and rules have been relaxed in recent times to make it easier for legal suites to be built.

What has gained some attention is the backyard suites, which have been variously called garage suites, carriage suites, tiny houses, or laneway homes, depending on where they are built. These are, simply, a separate dwelling unit that is in the backyard.

To date, just over 200 back-



yard suite building permits have been issued, just over 40 per cent of those in Currie and McKenzie Towne. This year is on pace to have 36 permits throughout the city.

A strong proponent of the suites is the general manager of urban strategy at the City of Calgary.

"There are misconceptions about secondary suites," says Rollin Stanley. "It's about empowerment. It's about enabling people to position themselves or their kids to improve their lives. It's the

door to homeownership for some people."

Secondary suites not only provide affordable housing to those in need, but benefits for the homeowners as well — especially with the changing demographics and tight economic challenges of the past few years, he says.

"We've got to keep pace with what's happening today. The decisions we are making today are about the future."

Secondary suites allow people to supplement their income, helping them be able



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to afford the mortgage payments; secondary suites allow grandparents or older children to have an independent place to live close to family; and the construction of secondary suites helps keep trades employed.

In traditional neighbourhoods, where old homes might be run down, the new construction is welcome.

Matisse Homes, for example, just finished building a two-storey home in Montgomery with a backyard suite above the garage.

"The neighbours were happy," says builder Kelvin Choy. "We are improving the area."

The addition of a backyard suite will add value to the home, says Stanley. "In other cities, the assessment values went up."

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Other myths about the suites he dispels include:

- Renters won't look after a unit. "Just as many people who own properties don't look after them, either."
- Parking will be a problem. "Many owner-occupied homes have more than two or three cars."
- Too many people will be living in one place. "You can't limit how many people can live in a home, no matter if it's rental or owner-occupied."

He says the city has made strides in helping to ease the burden of applying for a permit to build, but says more needs to be done. Perhaps with the newly-minted council, that will happen.

CARRIAGE HOUSE

Adding value

Matisse Homes' president Kelvin Choy is a proponent of adding value to an older neighbourhood while keeping the history of the area intact.

He has just built a 2,018-square-foot two-storey home in Montgomery with a 675-square-foot carriage house over the detached, three-car garage in the backyard.

"We salvaged the wood from the

original weathered cedar fence that was here — and put it in as features in the home, on the wall in the dining room and over the fireplace in the living room," Choy says. "It belongs here — it's part of the history of the area."

That philosophy extended to the rest of the plans for the home, including adding a backyard suite over the garage.

"The suite could be an extension of the living space — a home art studio or home office, for example. Or it could be a place where an older child or aging parent could live. Or it could be rented out to help the family with finances."

The options are limitless, and each is a positive for the neighbourhood,

Choy says. "The neighbours were happy — we're improving the area."

Backyard suites have slowly grown in popularity in Calgary, says Cliff de Jong, senior special projects officer for Calgary Building Services Planning and Development.

"Over the last three years permit levels are remaining stable at an average of 37 per year. 2017 is on pace for 36."

The first area — McKenzie Towne — was the first zoned specifically to allow backyard suites in 2009 and since then a total of 202 permits have been issued with the majority in McKenzie Towne and Currie. To date, some 50 of those are still under construction.

"Because the lot was so big, we

were able to construct a three-car garage in the back with a single garage separated from the double for the suite," Choy says. "The mechanics for the suite are tucked under the stairs to the suite and accessed from the single garage."

The suite has the same high-end specifications as the house, with the exception of the hardwood in the house, which has been replaced with vinyl planking in the suite adding another layer of insulation from the garages below.

The unit has double drywall as well to protect it from the garage and for sound attenuation.

For more information, visit matissehomes.com.

KATHY MCCORMICK



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