



Made-in-Calgary solution needed for illegal suites

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Fourteen months ago, a comprehensive study on the city's **secondary suites** urged council to stop "turning a blind eye to existing (illegal) suites," advising they "acknowledge the elephant in the room.

"There are thousands of renters living in **secondary suites** that may not meet the Alberta Building Code and may be unsafe or unhealthy," said the report, prepared by Vancouver's CitySpaces Consulting Ltd.

Aldermen ignored the advice and passed up a chance to recognize existing suites through the land use bylaw.

Basement suites, also known as granny suites, carriage houses or other secondary apartment-type housing, have operated for years out of private homes. They're mainly illegal though, because they're in established neighbourhoods in the inner city, zoned for single-family dwellings only.

No one knows for sure how many exist, but estimates run as high as between 50,000 and 80,000. As long as officials pretend they're not there, there's no legal framework from which to inspect them or ensure they meet basic health and safety standards.

While some may be quite nice, others aren't fit for a dog.

Now, two people are dead and the owner of an illegal boarding house has been charged with 29 fire code violations.

It's beyond shameful. The men lived in rooms, some of which had windows nailed shut from the outside and there were padlocks on the doors.

How safe is that -- even if they had warning before a fast-moving fire ripped through the old building, which has since been condemned. There was allegedly only one smoke detector in the house -- in the basement -- and it's unclear if it was even working.

Although zoned as a single-family residence, eight men were living in the 1,200-square-foot, two-storey home. They each had a fridge and a hot plate in their rooms, which police say contributed to the high load on the electrical system.

While rooming houses fall under their own murky category, the bigger picture is the same. The city's housing shortage has led to deplorable conditions for many of society's poorest and most vulnerable citizens. They're cramming themselves into living quarters that are often in disrepair, some even unfit for habitation. Tenants are so desperate for a roof over their head, they are afraid to complain for fear of being kicked out.

Buried in the Calgary Fire Department's news release announcing the charges in the fatal fire is one line

foreshadowing even more potential tragedy. "Many of the illegal rental facilities (rooming houses/boarding houses) which may exist are not inspected because they are not known to officials," it said.

Calgary's deputy fire chief of community standards vowed to "send a strong message that these types of living conditions will not be tolerated," said Brad Lorne. But the fact of the matter remains:-- slum landlords are getting away scot free while responsible ones face onerous costs in complying with provincial building codes. In many cases, it isn't even possible to bring the suites into compliance because of basement heights, entranceways and other structural issues having to do with how older houses were built that conflict with today's building code.

"Right now people don't have a choice. They're forced to live in these situations and they're unable to speak out because they have no rights," says Ald. Druh Farrell, a proponent of legalizing existing suites. "They're often people who need our protection most."

Illegal suites are only inspected if someone complains. Shutting them all down, however, isn't the answer as that would remove valuable housing stock for lower-income earners. We need them. We just need them to be safe and in compliance with codes, not the fire-traps they often are.

The city needs a made-in-Calgary solution. There is no reason why it can't develop its own alternative construction standards for **secondary suites**, focusing on health and safety.

Saskatoon did it -- it recognized the cost of upgrading to the full extent of the national building code was prohibitive. So, by developing an alternative, the city encouraged landlords to upgrade illegal suites to acceptable health and safety standards.

As for neighbours' concerns about parking and noise, the city needs to address those issues.

Permit parking should be made available to those who can prove they're living in the neighbourhood, but are not provided with a spot by their landlords. The permit should be good for several streets within a reasonable radius, so there's room for everyone to park, as is done in Toronto.

Noise and unkempt properties should be dealt with by the city's bylaw officers (who instead are too busy ticketing cyclists for speeding on the bike paths).

An education campaign is needed to sell communities on **secondary suites**, showing them the evidence from other cities.

"Basement suites are by far the most common form and have virtually no impact on the character of a neighbourhood," concludes the report.

"With the proliferation of illegal basement suites already in established neighbourhoods, efforts to bring them into compliance are generally viewed positively by communities."

Someone please buy council members new glasses. They're still not seeing the metaphorical elephant in the basement.

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