

LETTER: Langley's housing crisis started a long time ago

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A group is concerned about the lack of citizens involved in the planning process for housing an amenities. (Heather Colpitts/Langley Advance Times)

Dear Editor,

[\[Re: LETTER - Stop building highrises, Langley Advance Times, April 18\]](#)

In a recent letter a long-time Langley resident outlined concerns with high rise developments, and wants buildings higher than 12 storeys to be prohibited entirely. Along with other reasons, she cites Brentwood

Park's unaffordability as a primary justification for such a restriction.

It's important to start by saying we shouldn't ignore how the towers in Brentwood have added to the overall housing supply in a very dramatic way. Canada has the lowest number of homes per capita in the G7, and even if the prices for an apartment in Brentwood right now are comparable to an equivalent single family home, the bottom line is these towers have created more homes for people to live in, which we do desperately need.

At the same time, the author's concerns with Brentwood Park's towers, and high rises in general, aren't entirely without merit. The impacts of these kinds of hyper-dense developments are difficult for communities to absorb and, because they are expensive to build, not particularly affordable when new.

The question we have to ask ourselves is why is this happening? The reason is largely due to the multitude of ways we have constrained incremental change in our cities for so long.

In the past, towns and cities would form organically, starting as a cluster of small buildings and growing and changing incrementally over time. When a town is forming, someone might start a business, and other businesses and homes would follow and cluster around them. Someone looking to start a coffee shop might decide to open their cafe opposite an existing restaurant and soon other businesses and homes would congregate, which is how we ended up with the Main Streets and public plazas we see in older towns.

Today, new neighbourhoods are usually instead sold as a "product" or "lifestyle". A large developer will work with the city and develop land-use plans that maximize their return on investment. There is no organic collaboration with residents and business owners making small bets on their town anymore, but instead mega-projects from mega-developers.

Because residents have been sold a product, instead of living in a place that has been built up over time, there is an impulse to restrict change in an attempt to preserve it. This was demonstrated last year when an alteration to the Latimer Heights plan was proposed to add a tower next to a mid-rise building; disgruntled new owners expressed how they believed they had bought into a mid-rise community and wanted it to stay that way. The tower was cancelled.

This kind of preservation permeates every neighbourhood. Up until the province's multiplex legislation comes into effect, zoning rules restrict single family lots as having only detached houses. Not all areas allow secondary suites, and in the ones that do, we don't allow both a garden or laneway home and a basement suite on a single property. Even adding a modest extension to a house requires expensive permits, architectural drawings, and structural and drainage engineers to be involved. And these restrictions extend to all forms of incremental community city building – for example if someone wants to turn the bottom of their house into a retail business (something incredibly common, accepted and

encouraged in many places around the world) we prohibit it. We have squished incremental change in favour of developer profits and the financialization of real-estate.

By preventing this kind of incremental change, limiting density, and also restricting sprawl with the agricultural land reserve (which has the same effect as a greenbelt), Metro Vancouver has become a pressure cooker for housing demand, and the result is mega-towers – bursts of hyper-density that pop out in a mostly low-medium density suburban landscape.

In Burnaby, possibly in response to the towers in Brentwood, the local government is starting to recognize this, and their staff has made proposals that embrace and maximize how they implement the province's small-scale multi-unit homes legislation, soon making it possible for some types of townhomes to be constructed on every existing single family lot. If we want fewer towers, permitting this kind of gentle density everywhere is the answer to helping relieve the pressure of housing demand. It also empowers the community and smaller builders to help meet this demand, reducing our dependence on big developers.

The author of the letter concluded their argument by recognizing that row houses, townhouses and lower apartment buildings are an alternative to towers. However, we have to go further than just permitting some denser types of development on a select number of parcels in each neighbourhood.

We have to allow these denser forms of housing to evolve everywhere. We have to update our zoning codes so that neighbourhoods across Langley, like the towns and cities of the past, can incrementally adapt and change to meet the needs of current and future residents. With the right approach we can even do it in a way that makes our neighbourhoods more livable, more affordable and more interesting places.

James Hansen, Walnut Grove, on behalf of Strong Towns Langley

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