

Let's legalize illegal suites

Published in the *Calgary Herald*, June 28, 2006

Last Wednesday, Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart woke me up. She was on the *Calgary Eyeopener* talking about illegal suites and implored all good neighbours to "rat out" every suite on their street.

By the end of the week, she was talking about the need to legalize and regulate these suites. Whether she was misquoted or whether she had a change of heart after examining the issue, she has cast a very useful light on one of the most perplexing, but easy-to-solve, concerns facing the city.

These suites need to be normalized, as soon as possible. There is no question there has been a profusion of basement suites and other forms of secondary housing on the market.

Now and then, bylaw officers will go into someone's basement and haul out the stove, but the suites operate largely unnoticed and unenforced. Indeed, they are so common that real estate listings have largely abandoned the euphemistic "mother-in-law suite" and just straight out say "illegal suite."

This has caused concern for some neighbours. Complaints to the city, mostly about parking and noise, are increasing. Colley-Urquhart also suggested these suites "disrupt the community fabric" and may lead to "transients," both well-used code phrases for bringing more poor people into not-poor neighbourhoods.

These complaints should not be discounted, but the benefits of secondary suites for the community outweigh them.

At the Better Calgary Campaign, we realize secondary suites serve several important needs: first, they help densify existing neighbourhoods and combat sprawl. Second, they help diversify neighbourhoods, bring in younger people, students and, often, children to fill under-subscribed neighbourhood schools.

Most important, they exist because they serve a market need for affordable housing. Not only do they give students, people just starting out, and newcomers to Calgary an opportunity for a decent

roof over their heads, they also increase affordability among a different segment -- the landlords.

I have several friends who want to make a sustainable choice to live in the inner city.

They drive less, if at all, and cause much less strain on the civic infrastructure. However, in this market, they are finding it difficult to afford homes in areas where this is possible.

As a result, taking in a tenant is an important part of helping them afford their mortgage payments. The only difference between having a roommate and a secondary suite is one stove in the basement.

Still, the city makes having a legal secondary suite next to impossible. Your lot must be zoned R2 and you must meet all the safety requirements of a duplex or an apartment.

In an existing home in most neighbourhoods, this is daunting, if not impossible. The city seems to have no idea how daunting, or the scope of the issue. The nice gentleman who answered the phone in the planning department suggested it's no big deal, and that there are "hundreds of thousands" of legal secondary suites in Calgary.

Quite an accomplishment in a city with about 300,000 households total!

The city needs to act on this as soon as possible. British Columbia and Ontario have already done so, with no ill effects. In fact, a special committee of the Alberta government, headed by MLA Moe Amery, reported on this issue last year, and also recommended normalization.

Their common-sense approach suggested minimal regulation is better. Legalize the suites, and require a few basic safety measures: every bedroom needs a window, smoke detectors must ring both upstairs and downstairs, and the furnace must be walled off from the suite.

Council should adopt these recommendations soon, just as the Alberta government should move forward with safety code changes

So, what to do if the suites are normalized and you have one next door? Stop by and introduce yourself to the tenants. Find out more about them. Make friends, even.

If they party all night or litter the neighbourhood, call the cops. If they always park in front of your house, do what my dad did with the folks in the basement next door: ask them politely not to.

Usually, they'll listen. It's all part of the reciprocity of being a good neighbour, about how to get by living in a community in a big city. Try to remember that you didn't buy the street when you bought the house, and that, even in Alberta, it's not yet illegal to be poor.

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will launch in August.