

City of New Westminster

Affordable Housing Acceleration Initiative

Pre-Zoning for Non-Profit Housing

October 2024



What We Heard Report




Land Acknowledgment

We recognize and respect that New Westminster is on the unceded and unsurrendered land of the Halkomelem speaking peoples. We acknowledge that colonialism has made invisible their histories and connections to the land. As a City, we are learning and building relationships with the people whose lands we are on.

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1.0 Engagement Snapshot

| HOW WE INFORMED | |
|--|--|
|  <p>927 Be Heard page visits</p> | <p>8 Social media posts</p>  |
| <p>4 Citypage e-newsletters</p>  | <p>26 posters distributed to non-profit housing providers and residents' associations</p>  |
|  <p>2 Be Heard e-newsletters</p> | <p>14 invitations and information sheets sent to non-profit housing providers</p>  |

| HOW WE ENGAGED | |
|---|--|
| <p>2 online discussion forum questions, with 8 responses</p>  | <p>35 participants at our virtual community discussion</p>  |
|  <p>8 questions from the community (received by City staff)</p> | |
| <p>9 interviews with non-profit housing providers</p>  | <p>50+ comments and questions collected throughout virtual community discussion</p>  |

2.0 Background

In response to the affordable housing crisis, the City of New Westminster (the City) is launching the Affordable Housing Acceleration Initiative (the initiative). Through this initiative, the city-wide Zoning Bylaw and Official Community Plan (OCP) will be amended to reduce some of the regulatory barriers to delivering non-profit housing projects.

Project structure and timeline

Two phases are proposed for the Affordable Housing Acceleration Initiative:

- **Phase 1 – launched Spring 2024** – exploring city-wide changes to the Zoning Bylaw to identify “pre-zoned” sites. This phase will include consultation and outreach through the summer and fall, and council consideration of the proposed changes in early 2025. This is the scope of the City’s current project work.
- **Phase 2 – early 2025 onwards** – exploring potential changes to the OCP to further increase the viability of affordable housing.



Communication and engagement objectives

Throughout Phase 1, engagement with key interest groups and the broader community was carried out. To allow more meaningful engagement, different tactics and objectives were used for engagement with these key audiences.

The following communication and engagement objectives were designed to activate collaboration and meaningful engagement with each audience. The key objectives were to:

Interest Group Engagement

- Consult and involve non-profit housing providers, including Indigenous non-profit housing providers, to understand barriers and challenges they face in facilitating the delivery and operation of affordable rental housing to help refine the Zoning Bylaw changes.

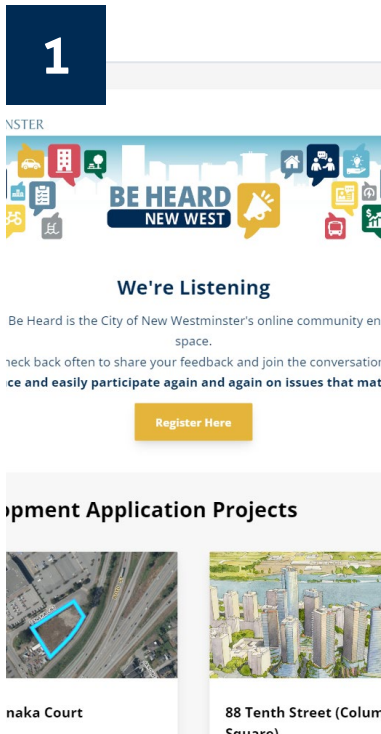
Community Engagement

- Consult with community members to understand any questions and/or concerns they may have about affordable rental housing projects.

Overall Engagement

- Inform non-profit housing providers and the community about the initiative, its purpose, and the changes being proposed through timely and **accessible** communications.
- Ensure non-profit housing providers and the community have sufficient understanding to provide **informed** and meaningful input into the engagement process.
- Consult with non-profit housing providers and the community on how to better integrate affordable rental housing projects into neighbourhoods in New Westminster.
- Gather input that represents the **diversity** of interests and opinions in the community, within the resources and time available.
- Maintain a **transparent** and **responsive** process by reporting what has been heard through the engagement and actively responding to requests for information.

3.0 How We Informed



Be Heard Page

A dedicated project webpage was launched on the City’s public engagement platform, Be Heard New West, on June 7, 2024. The webpage featured an overview of the initiative, details on the opportunities to get involved, and FAQ section. There were 927 visits to the Be Heard page between June 7 and October 1, 2024.

Six (6) newsletters featured information about the initiative: two (2) Be Heard Newsletters (on June 28 and September 11, 2024, sent to those who signed up for this newsletter on the Be Heard Page), and four (4) Citypage Newsletters (on June 13, and September 13, 20, and 27, 2024). The newsletters provided an overview of the initiative, promotion of the virtual community session, and calls for input via the Be Heard page.



Social Media

The initiative was also promoted on the City’s social media platforms. Information about the initiative and the virtual community discussion session was shared on three (3) Facebook posts, three (3) Instagram stories, and two (2) X (formerly Twitter) posts.



3

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY DISCUSSION



We want to hear from you!
Join us online on
Tuesday, September 17,
from 6:00-7:30pm

What's happening?

We are holding a Virtual Community Discussion session to share more information about the Affordable Housing Acceleration Initiative (Pre-Zoning for Non-profit Rental Housing) and hear your thoughts.

At this session, you can:

- Hear directly from City planners to learn more about the initiative, its purpose, and the zoning changes being proposed.
- Ask any questions you may have about the initiative.
- Share your thoughts on how we can better integrate affordable rental housing.

Posters

Posters promoting the virtual community discussion session (described below) were distributed to 12 residents' associations and 14 non-profit housing organizations.

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Information Sheets

Information sheets were distributed to 14 non-profit housing organizations, providing background information about the initiative and a list of proposed interview questions. The information sheets were intended to help prepare members of the organizations for interviews (described below).



4.0 How We Engaged

Be Heard Page – Questions Tool and Discussion Forum

The Be Heard page featured a questions tool, allowing community members to submit questions about the initiative to be answered by members of the project team. Three (3) questions were submitted and answered through the tool.

A discussion forum was also available on the Be Heard page, allowing people to share their thoughts and ideas about the initiative for other community members to “like” or comment on. There were two (2) discussion threads on the forum, one (1) open from June 7 until July 7, 2024, and one (1) from September 6 until October 1, 2024. While the discussion threads are now closed for further comment, the questions and answers are publicly available to view.

DISCUSSION THREADS

[Discussion forum – thread 1](#)

[Discussion forum – thread 2](#)

Interviews

A total of 14 non-profit housing providers across New Westminister were invited to share their thoughts through virtual interviews. Throughout September 2024, nine (9) individual, virtual interviews were held with non-profit housing providers, including several Indigenous non-profit housing providers.

Virtual Community Discussion

A virtual community discussion was held on September 17, 2024, via Zoom. The session was open to the community and key interest groups, including the non-profit housing providers invited to interview, and New Westminister residents’ associations. There were 35 attendees, including three (3) representatives of non-profit housing providers.

The session provided information about the initiative, its purpose, and the changes being proposed. There was also an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback, through a Q&A component and during small-group breakout discussions (documented on Mural boards). During the breakout discussions, community members were consulted on how to better integrate affordable rental housing projects into New Westminister neighbourhoods.

5.0 What We Heard

Key Themes Summary

Several key themes were heard across engagement methods:

- Common **barriers to delivering affordable housing projects** include:
 - » Limited land;
 - » Securing funding;
 - » and the long rezoning process making it difficult to meet funding deadlines.
- There is broad **support for the initiative** from non-profit housing providers – pre-zoning would make it easier to deliver affordable housing projects.
 - » The proposed definition of affordable housing development makes sense.
 - » The proposed eligibility criteria would be helpful.
- There is strong interest from non-profit housing providers in going beyond 6-storeys - **greater heights and densities** are generally considered more viable.
- Proximity to **transit, services, amenities, and greenspace** are key locational considerations for integrating affordable housing projects into neighbourhoods.
- There is general interest in **reducing minimum parking requirements**, but there is still some demand for parking in affordable housing projects, especially family households, and projects far from transit.
- There is also some demand for **bike storage**, but a need for flexibility in those requirements (i.e., storage spaces should accommodate bikes and other personal items).
- Housing providers and the community share an interest in **additional complimentary uses** such as daycares, healthcare services, and community spaces being included on the ground floor of affordable housing projects.

Be Heard Page – Questions Tool and Discussion Forum

Questions Tool

Three (3) questions were submitted through the questions tool, two (2) were answered publicly and one (1) privately. The first publicly answered question related to higher density areas identified in the Official Community Plan, and whether they would include areas designated for townhomes or ground-oriented infill. The second asked how many buildings are currently owned and operated by non-profit housing providers in New Westminster – as of June 2024, there were 55 buildings.

Discussion Forum

Two (2) questions were posted for general discussion and engagement with the public on the discussion forum. [The first discussion question, available here](#), was:

“New affordable rental housing allows existing residents to keep living in New Westminster while welcoming new ones, supports job creation and retention, and contributes to a healthy mix of housing options.

Despite this, the City has heard some concerns from community members. **As such, how can we integrate new affordable housing projects so that they can add to the qualities and character of your neighbourhood, while addressing your concerns?”**

The City received six (6) responses to this discussion question, including general support for the initiative, and thoughts around balancing the protection of heritage buildings with the need for affordable housing.

[The second discussion question, available here](#), was:

“New affordable (non-profit) rental housing allows existing residents to keep living in New Westminster while welcoming new ones, provides economic opportunities and growth, and contributes to a healthy mix of housing options.

How can we make sure these projects align with the qualities you appreciate about your neighbourhood, and what potential challenges should be addressed in the process?”

There were two (2) comments in response to this discussion question, one (1) noting the importance of infrastructure keeping up with housing development, and one (1) suggesting broader pre-zoning eligibility criteria. The commenter noted that limiting the initiative to non-profit housing providers could be too restrictive, especially given the challenges that these providers face in securing funding for affordable housing projects.

Interviews

Nine (9) non-profit housing providers participated in virtual interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to:

- Understand the barriers and challenges that non-profit housing providers face in facilitating the delivery and operation of affordable rental housing,
- Collect input that will inform the Zoning Bylaw changes being explored,
- Learn how to better integrate affordable rental housing projects into various neighbourhoods in New Westminster, while addressing the concerns of existing residents.

Common themes heard throughout the interviews have been summarized below.

Barriers and challenges in delivering affordable housing

Generally, interviewees described their relationship with City of New Westminster positively, noting appreciation for the work they do and their advocacy for accelerating affordable housing. However, interviewees described several common challenges working with existing City policies and processes surrounding the delivery of affordable housing.

Interviewees noted that **limited available land is a significant barrier** to achieving the action needed to meet the City's Housing Needs Report targets. Several interviewees noted **challenges securing funding and aligning financing with arduous processes**. Rezoning is a time-consuming process, and long timelines can make costs accrue. Additionally, some interviewees noted **challenges around engineering or transportation requirements being uncertain until later in the development process**, when their funding model has already been established.

Other strains on housing providers included an apparent slowdown in affordable housing projects being approved both provincially and federally, the rising cost of concrete and mass timber, and the need for flexibility to accommodate creative engineering solutions.

Definition and eligibility criteria for affordable housing development

There was general agreement among interviewees that the initiative is valuable, the definition of affordable housing development makes sense, and that the proposed eligibility criteria would make it easier to deliver affordable housing. It was noted several times that any/all pre-zoning would be helpful.

Height and density

Most interviewees considered developments up to 6-storeys to be economically viable. However, they also suggested that 6-storeys as a maximum could be too restrictive. There was clear **appetite for greater heights and densities to be considered**, with some expressing interest in building up to 30 storeys or

higher in areas where higher densities are supported, including around rapid transit stations. Some providers noted such projects were already underway in other municipalities .

Many interviewees expressed that limiting development to 6-storeys would be restrictive and would miss out on opportunities across the City. One interviewee noted that there are several parts of the city characterised by mid- and high-rise development, and limiting to 6-storeys in these areas would be missing out on considerable opportunity.

For projects up to 6-storeys, most interviewees noted 90-100 units as the minimum required for feasibility, with 120-150 units or more noted as more viable. When asked about the most viable base density in the form of **Floor Space Ratio (FSR)** for such projects, developers interviewed suggested 2.5 – 3.0 FSR.

Generally, interviewees expressed that affordable housing projects become more viable when greater densities and building heights are achieved. Due to the cost of concrete and mass timber, affordable housing developers noted that buildings with heights between six (6) and 30 storeys have limited economic viability.

Floor Space Ratio (FSR) is a measure of density, determined by dividing the gross floor area of a building by the total lot area.

Length of affordability

Some interviewees noted the proposed length of legal agreements (60 years) could be challenging for some providers, particularly when needing to maintain affordability over such a long time-period. Additionally, a few interviewees noted that the 60-year term is not well aligned with some of the existing CMHC funding programs, which could limit access to funding programs most housing providers rely on. Adjusting that detail could provide more flexibility.

Locational considerations – site characteristics

Interviewees noted Sapperton, Uptown, near 22nd Street Station, near Columbia Station, and the corridor towards the Royal Columbian Hospital as particularly promising areas for expansion. Generally, **anywhere near transit, schools, or community centres were considered ideal areas to expand pre-zoning for affordable housing projects.**

Most interviewees noted the importance of proximity to transit, services, and amenities when considering affordable housing projects. Schools, community centres, childcare, and medical services were noted as critical.

Access to or inclusion of greenspace in affordable housing developments was also noted as very important. Some interviewees noted the inclusion of shared gardens and rooftop gardens in existing projects, if there are no nearby parks or greenspaces available to tenants.

Parking requirements

There was general appetite for reducing minimum parking requirements, particularly considering the significant cost of parking. Some noted that in existing rental buildings, only 50% of the available parking was being used by tenants. There was **some interest in supporting car share programs, particularly for lower income tenants who may not be able to afford a personal vehicle**. One interviewee noted they were working towards providing accessible parking only. EV parking was also a consideration for some, though demand for this type of parking is lower and the cost significant.

Most interviewees were generally opposed to eliminating parking requirements altogether. Many noted there is still demand and competition for parking in some contexts, including housing for seniors, families, and people with disabilities, and housing further away from transit.

Only a few interviewees were in favour of eliminating parking requirements altogether. They noted that providers generally have the best sense of what demand for parking will be in their particular context, so minimum requirements are not necessary.

Several interviewees noted a need for bike storage, but that there is an apparent surplus – the bike storage space provided in some existing projects has exceeded demand and is also context dependent. For example, demand for bike storage in housing for seniors would be far lower than in housing for families or younger demographics. **Flexibility in these requirements was considered key, with some interviewees suggesting that general storage, suitable for bikes and other personal items, would be the best solution**.

Complimentary uses

There was general interest and support among interviewees for including additional, complimentary uses on the ground floor of affordable rental housing projects. Complimentary uses that would be considered by interviewees, given their importance to residents, included:

- Daycares and preschools
- Healthcare and counselling services
- Food banks
- Community halls
- Places of worship

Some noted that such uses (particularly daycare) have already been included in existing projects.

However, despite the general interest, common challenges were discussed. Complimentary uses are challenging to include, both legally and financially, and so can impact the viability of affordable housing projects, particularly when funding is already a constraint. **Funding for these projects often does not cover non-residential uses, so additional funding is required**. However, there are limited potential partnerships or clients that could provide this additional financial support.

Collaboration and engagement

Some interviewees expressed the importance of collaboration with residents in the development of affordable housing projects. Public engagement was considered key to understanding needs across the housing continuum.

However, many interviewees expressed that too much community engagement can hinder progress. More engagement often means more opposition, but public opinion can have little impact on project outcomes, given the funding and procedural constraints. **Some interviewees observed that most pushback is often related to built form, so good urban design and building maintenance is critical for integrating projects into local neighbourhoods.** Ensuring building operators act as “good neighbours” once projects are established was considered more important than asking the public whether projects should go ahead. Delivering affordable housing was considered higher priority than community opposition.

Other suggestions from interviewees included partnering more with Indigenous organizations or local First Nations and providing more clarity around the potential phased approach to the initiative.

Virtual Community Discussion

There were 35 attendees at the virtual community discussion, including three (3) representatives of non-profit housing providers. The discussion provided the community an opportunity to:

- Hear directly from City planners about the initiative, its purpose, and proposed zoning changes
- Ask questions about the initiative
- Share their thoughts on how the City can better integrate affordable rental housing projects into neighbourhoods in New Westminster.

The virtual community discussion session included a Questions and Answers (Q&A) segment, and small group breakout discussions. During the virtual community discussion session, participants were invited to submit questions through the Zoom Q&A tool. Questions were answered by facilitators as they were submitted. General themes heard throughout the session included:

- Education and awareness
- Parking requirements
- Locational considerations
- Complimentary uses

Education and awareness

Participants were asked how the City can better integrate affordable rental housing projects into their neighbourhoods. One suggestion was to discuss, raise awareness of, and learn from the success of recent affordable housing projects (e.g., 841 Sixth Street). Another was to expand existing 3-4 storey multi-unit housing complexes up to the initiative's maximum height of 6-storeys. Another suggestion was to present information at residents' association meetings

Parking requirements

One breakout group discussed the importance of providing parking in affordable rental housing projects. A participant expressed the need for multiple parking spaces in family households. Another participant, representing a non-profit housing provider, described how building off-street parking in these projects can be extremely costly, which can impact the economic viability of the project. This highlighted the importance of affordable housing projects being in transit-oriented areas, where greater heights and densities can be achieved (increasing the economic viability of the project), and residents can rely more on transit than personal vehicles.

Locational considerations

Other suggestions for ways to integrate affordable rental housing projects into local neighbourhoods included:

- Locate projects close to existing commercial areas, services, and amenities.
- Incorporate these projects into neighbourhoods with ownership-housing, to foster a mix of home ownership and rental housing.
- Determine rents and revenue streams before development.
- Include a mix of housing types (affordable rental housing, market rental housing, and homeownership).

Complimentary uses

When asked what additional, complimentary uses could be helpful alongside affordable rental housing, common suggestions included:

- Cafes and restaurants
- Childcare facilities
- Medical services, such as doctors' offices
- Greenspace
- Community spaces

Generally, participants did not express any concerns with the addition of complimentary uses. Some expressed that having "attractive" and "well-utilized" public spaces near affordable housing projects would be desirable.

Other questions that arose throughout the breakout discussions were:

- Will affordable housing be considered within transit-oriented areas?
- Does this initiative address supportive housing as well?
- How will the City engage with residents as individual applications are brought forward?
- What is the revenue stream? Figuring out rents before the development starts would be beneficial.
- What possibilities are there for developments that have heritage churches?
- Could you build on top of an existing building?

Answers to these questions have been published on the FAQ section of the project Be Heard page. A full list of the questions asked during the Q&A is available in **Appendix A – Virtual Community Discussion Q&A**.



6.0 Next Steps

This What We Heard report will be published on the Be Heard page and shared with City Council. The input gathered throughout engagement will help refine the Zoning Bylaw changes.





Appendix A

Virtual Community Discussion Q&A

Questions submitted through the Zoom Q&A tool during the Q&A portion of the Virtual Community Discussion. Questions have been edited to correct spelling errors only.

- How do we define Affordable?
- Please define affordable?
- Why are there parking values for rentals. I was told the government removed all parking requirements.
- How are rents determined.
- Is there consideration for redeveloping or converting existing multifamily properties?
- In the slide with the setbacks. There were two different internal and external side setbacks. Can you define them, I do not understand the difference.
- When you speak of a legal agreement being needed, is that a Covenant on the titles? Or are these separate agreements specifically with the organization running the housing?
- Why excluding areas near Skytrain? Doing so will only increase traffic congestion that is already bad due to cross-roads nature of New West in Lower Mainland.
- Are proposals designed and presented by the Non-Profit; Government entity or Co-op? Or is CNW preparing some initial properties and then searching for these entities to assume/take over?
- Considering the high cost of construction and permitting, who would be building rental units?
- Underground parking in each of the buildings built? and who monitors that the non profits to make sure they are on the up and up. I live near London Place and most of the residents have more than 1 vehicle
- Will Translink bus service improve to match the new higher density areas?
- Is part of this exercise to look at area outside of the TOA, that include new areas that are not currently zoned as such. IF that is the case what is the process liaising with existing neighbourhoods
- You said there is a need to add a certain number of units per year. What was the number? And is there a backlog/pent-up demand?
- RGI doesn't help a Developer assess the affordability of the project, how do we estimate the potential revenue to cover costs?
- How many affordable rental units are currently in New West?
- How are school taxes calculated in the rental agreements with builders/ non profits or is this burden going to be put on home owners because as the Example of London Place there are many children going to our local schools .



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