

This letter was submitted as an op-ed to The Globe and Mail in response to *Drive to build rental units sours in dense Vancouver*, (Frances Bula, Tuesday, August 17). The paper did not print it. Link to original article is [here](#).

Rentals in Vancouver: Welcome. Odious developments: Not Welcome.

Frances Bula's article of Tuesday August 17 ("Drive to build rental units sours in dense Vancouver") has several points of contention. It says the "public brawl" about the right way to create rental housing in Vancouver is due to the City's failure to convince the public of the need for a "healthy stock of purpose-built rentals." But this is not simply a public relations problem. The public largely accepts the need for rental housing.

The real issues are that the City and developers are working together to impose dramatic changes and the loss of heritage on this mature and successful neighbourhood, by using rezoning for dramatic increases in building height and density. The West End already has a high population density and its community services are already used above capacity. These rezoning applications make one wonder what has happened to Vancouver's intelligent approach to planning. They highlight the need for a proper community review and planning process before making dramatic changes in any neighbourhood.

Vancouver's Short Term Incentives for Rental Housing (STIR) program is at the centre of the current controversy. There are other controversial projects (some under STIR, others not) in the West End, but the article focuses on a proposal by Ian Gillespie (Westbank Projects Corp.) and Ben Yeung (Peterson Investment Group) to demolish St. John's Church at 1401 Comox Street and build a 22-storey glass tower, a significant departure from the current streetscape.

While STIR documents state that the program "...will complement existing planning policy and be subject to quality urban design principles," the public sees no evidence that this guidance is being applied. In fact, an official STIR brochure states that besides the construction of rental market housing, a goal of the program is "to *create construction jobs* in response to the economic recession in 2009." Creating jobs is a good thing, but unfortunately, the public had no say in the City's creation of this STIR program, and the incentives for the construction industry are not "free." They come with increased or deferred costs for all taxpayers in a city that already has strained finances.

A basic flaw of the STIR program must be rectified: It includes no guidelines on acceptable and allowable density increases for projects that include rezoning. The result is a "let's make a deal" approach to urban planning. When Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Yeung purchased the St John's Church site—which has been a key part of the community for over a hundred years—they gambled that they could get approval to build 22 storeys despite the current outright zoning height limit of six storeys, and a quintupling of the density (built floor space) currently permitted on the site. The community has responded by saying this is the wrong development for this site. Incidentally, some STIR projects in Vancouver

have proceeded smoothly, both with and without rezoning. For some properties, a modest density bonus was sufficient to build rental housing and for others, no density bonus was requested or granted. The article correctly states that the City has failed to release detailed financial information about Mr. Gillespie's project.

The statement that the West End has not seen any new buildings built for decades is simply wrong. There is no moratorium on development in the West End. Developers are permitted to build within current guidelines for design, height, and density. Vancouver also requires that any rental units demolished be replaced.

The statement that these developers have no rentals in their portfolio is also wrong. Peterson owns two large rental properties: Langara Gardens on Cambie Street, and a 32-storey tower built in 1998 on Alberni. Ironically, the firm has applied for permission to convert part of the latter building from rental to hotel use, thereby reducing the number of rental units on the market.

Councillor Raymond Louie suggests that by increasing supply, new rental units reduce pressure on older, lower-priced apartments. That may be the theory, but there is little evidence that it works in practice. In fact, some predict that as new units are built, older units nearby will be renovated to "price match" with rent increases, resulting in more "renovictions." And in fact, if the true goal of the City is to *provide* (but not necessarily to *construct*) more rental units, it is worth noting that the conversion of two West End hotels (one in process, one pending) will quickly bring about 800 units onto the rental market at virtually no cost to taxpayers.

The article's suggestion that the gay and lesbian community space was part of the 1401 Comox proposal from the beginning is surprising. In fact, this space was not part of the original proposal presented to the public in November 2009. It was announced only after residents raised concerns about losing valuable community space at the church. The developer publicly announced the space for two (well-respected) community groups in the revised proposal presented to the public only in April, 2010. Incidentally, both groups are now actively lobbying the public and City Council to support the rezoning, guided by a public relations firm hired by the developer.

In the article, Don Littleford of Metro Vancouver notes that renters need to be speaking out. In fact, they already are. Renters are the majority of the nearly 10,000 persons who have signed the West End Neighbours' petition, titled "No Rezoning Without a Comprehensive Plan" for the West End. Renter, owners and visitors alike recognize the need to respect the character and livability of this community.

The West End community centre, library and schools are stretched beyond capacity. The proposed developments do nothing to address the pressure on these public facilities, and in fact, the STIR program allows developers to avoid paying the development cost levies that would normally fund infrastructure improvements to cover extra demand on public facilities. Bringing more residents into the area only makes sense with a broader review of community needs —

the type of review that would take place as part of a good community planning process.

Mayor Robertson and his Vision Councillors are ignoring what the residents are saying loud and clear: The West End has existing guidelines; abide by them until these guidelines are reviewed and updated. This is the message of those who have signed the petition, and it is further substantiated by the City's own survey report, and a report by the West End Residents Association, both released in July.

So where does this leave Mr. Gillespie and his proposal for a 22-storey tower on the church site? The community has many ideas to offer. Residents would genuinely appreciate a change in approach and real consultation with the broader community. Such an approach would help to rebuild the broken trust among all stakeholders involved in and affected by Vancouver's future land use developments.

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