

Trustee Notebook

By Laura Busheikin



Islands Trust

A Conversation About Housing

Would secondary dwelling units (cottages, in-law-suites, carriage houses, etc) be a good thing on Denman Island? Currently, with a few exceptions, they are not permitted. Should we change this, and if so, how (the devil, they say, is in the details)? The Denman Local Trust Committee (DLTC) is asking these questions in an upcoming review of housing regulations. Towards summer's end you will be invited to share your thoughts, listen to others' ideas, and brainstorm at a series of meetings.

The DLTC needs to hear thoughtful, honest, and informed community input. To contribute to this, I will be writing about this issue in the next few Trustee Notebooks. To get started, I'll look at two key questions:

1. Why is the DLTC initiating this review?

Individuals and community groups have been telling us for years that there are housing problems on Denman. We hear about the school population shrinking, about families with young kids having to leave the island, about elders facing homelessness. We also have more formal, quantifiable evidence, which is important when spending tax dollars or meddling with long-established regulations. Here's a snapshot:

Affordable housing: The *Housing Needs on Hornby and Denman Island* report (2008) tells us the following about Denman Island:

- approximately 13.5% of all households (68 households) reported experiencing housing need
- From 2001 to 2006 the median house price went up from \$139,000 to \$324,000 – a 133% increase – while the median income went up 9%
- 26% (135 in total) households were spending over 30% of their income on shelter (a common benchmark of affordable housing)

Seniors: The *Age Friendly Communities Report for Denman and Hornby Islands* (2011) was based on surveys of seniors in the community and made the following conclusions for Denman:

- Housing is one of three main challenges facing seniors
- There is also a need for assisted-living housing
- There is a lack of reliable, affordable year-round accommodations for caregivers and others providing services to seniors

Visitor accommodation:

Last fall, the DLTC received a petition with approximately 230 signatures asking for bylaw changes to expand possibilities for visitor accommodation. We heard a similar message from many of the 48 people attending a public forum in October. Much of this centred around a request to allow kitchen facilities in visitor accommodation. The addition of a kitchen would turn a B&B room into a secondary dwelling unit, so a discussion of housing regulations will need to include these issues as well.

2. Why focus on secondary dwelling units and not look at a wider spectrum of possible solutions to housing needs?

Various other approaches have already been put in place over the past 10 - 15 years. Support for potential rezoning for seniors and affordable housing was added to our Official Community Plan in 2001, along with a policy allowing up to a 5% increase in the overall density of the Island (commonly referred to as the density cap) for affordable or special needs housing. Also, a density bank, which can be used to add density to a given property through a rezoning proposal, was created in 2008 and currently holds 13 densities. These options depend on a person or group initiating a project and submitting a rezoning proposal; thus far, one cooperative affordable housing project has been created, and a rezoning proposal for one affordable housing unit is in process.

A 'wide-angle lens' approach to reviewing housing regulations was carried out in 2007/08 by the Advisory Planning Commission (APC), a group of community volunteers that advises the DLTC. This group identified nine possibilities for change. These were put through the filter of DLTC analysis and public consultation, and several were adopted, notably the density bank, a policy encouraging land trusts, and allowance for occasional accommodation in accessory buildings.

Denman Islanders have been discussing secondary dwelling units both formally and informally for years. We don't need to start this conversation from scratch. There has been some in-depth, and in fact fascinating (at least to housing policy geeks like me), examination of their pros and cons.

Next month I'll write about past DLTC-sponsored discussions of secondary dwelling units. Stay tuned for exciting summaries of the work of the Accessory Dwelling Advisory Committee of 2002/2003 and the APC Task Force on Affordable Housing!