

## HOUSING, DENSITY AND BYLAWS ON DENMAN ISLAND

Lately I've been spending a fair amount of time explaining the rationale for our land use bylaws. People ask me, **why can't I just build a second home for my friend, parents, or a land-partner who would help me pay my mortgage and/or farm my land?** With housing such a pressing issue on the Island, why stop people from creating solutions?

Every time I hear these sorts of questions I pause and think. Like many Denmanites, I deeply feel the urgency of the need for housing. But also (like many Denmanites), I'm not sure that abandoning our zoning bylaws and proclaiming open season on building is a viable way forward.

**Here, as I understand it, are some answers to those questions:** land use bylaws express and safeguard a vision for a geographical area and for the community that lives there. Both rural and urban areas have limits on density to prevent areas from becoming too crowded. These regulations arise out of extensive, and usually very lively, community discussions

I've participated in and listened to these discussions on Denman, and this is what I've heard: our limits on density (mostly, one house per property) reflect the desire to keep the island quiet and rural, to safeguard groundwater, to keep traffic, pollution, and noise to a minimum, to maintain an intact forest cover, and to provide unfragmented space for wildlife, watercourses and ecosystems.

For some people, limiting density connects to a view of Denman as a special place where humans live in balance with nature, where the landscape is shaped by care and caution rather than by the forces of continual growth and development.

Also, many people believe that keeping our population small means we are more likely to know each other, so we are more likely to work together to create culture, take care of nature, and weave the social fabric we love. It means growth happens slowly, and change happens incrementally. A certain level of community intimacy is maintained.

Density limits reflect a long-term vision. In the short term, an extra house on a property may provide much-needed affordable housing, but down the road we end up with two market-rate homes, and often pressure to subdivide. A new generation of young people with limited incomes are left out in the cold.

**These concerns about density are built into the foundation of our bylaws, as expressed in our Official Community Plan (OCP),** the vision document for land use on Denman. For instance, OCP Housing Policy 11 says, "The overall residential density on Denman Island should generally not increase beyond that permitted by existing zoning...except that an increase of approximately 5 percent may be permitted to accommodate zoning amendments for special needs and affordable housing, [and] secondary dwelling units approved...under a Temporary Use Permit..."

As this policy demonstrates, Denman's density-related bylaws do offer flexibility, specifically to open up options for housing solutions. **Here's an outline of legal opportunities for creating (potentially) affordable housing on Denman:**

**Secondary suites and cottages:** Any property in R2, RE, A and, F zones can have a secondary suite. There are no permit requirements for this. These properties also can have freestanding cottages/cabins but only after successfully applying for a Temporary Use Permit. **More info:** <http://www.islandstrust.bc.ca/media/339179/denman-secondary-suites-dwellings-information-brochure.pdf>

**Affordable housing projects:** Community projects for affordable, seniors' and special needs housing are encouraged in our OCP (Housing Policies 11, 27, 28 and 29). The regulations spell out conditions to ensure that these projects are reasonable in scale, minimal in impact, and will remain affordable and/or accessible for their intended occupants into the future. A rezoning application is needed. This is not a simple exercise, but does work – successful projects of this type exist on Denman and other Islands.

Of course, bylaws aren't houses. **The Local Trust Committee does not have funding or jurisdiction to actually create housing.** Other levels of government are not rushing in to fill the void. What we do have, though, are enterprising, innovative and tenacious individuals and community groups. Denman has two housing initiatives in place, and several more are under discussion. Also, people are starting to use the TUP option for secondary dwelling units.

Finally, I'll point out that our **density regulations can be changed.** This would require the same sort of thorough, open and thoughtful community conversations that created the current bylaws, and would need a convincing rationale that any change would better meet community goals over the long-term, without harming our precious natural world.

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