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ACT Solutions

Affordable Workforce Housing in a Resort Community

Whistler Housing Authority, Whistler, British Columbia

Issue

Escalating real estate prices and a shortage of building sites for homes have been driving homeownership and rental costs in the luxury resort community of Whistler beyond the means of the town's resident workforce and seasonal workers. The high cost of housing makes it difficult for the service-oriented local economy to attract and retain the workers it needs to operate.

The municipality introduced new regulatory measures in 2003 to limit further loss and gentrification of the town's remaining affordable private housing stock. The changes allow:

- conversion of non-restricted market units to ones that are restricted to an affordable price and/or are restricted to rental by qualified local employees;
- secondary suites in duplex zones and duplexes in single family zones;
- secondary suites above detached garages;
- larger suites; and
- density bonusing for the creation of suites restricted to employees of local businesses.

Plan

With the assistance of an ACT grant, the Whistler Housing Authority commissioned a study in 2004 to create baseline research against which the municipality could assess the effectiveness of its regulatory changes.

Project team

Whistler Housing Authority (WHA)
Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW)
Terra Housing, consultant

Results

The extensive research project included a detailed analysis of existing studies, custom tabulation of census data and a community survey. Input from local community members was very helpful, and a great amount of useful information was collected says WHA General Manager Marla Zucht.

"Principally, we wanted to start acquiring baseline data of private sector homes to determine where employees lived, then move into getting a sense of the future tear-down activity," Zucht says.



Certain homes in Whistler, such as this townhouse, increase the number of affordable living spaces by setting maximum rental rates and/or restricting occupancy to local employees only.

Source: Whistler Housing Authority

WHA's research revealed that the average price of a single-family home in Whistler had increased six-fold in the 10-year period from 1994 to 2004. Many employees rent suites and rooms in older single detached houses, the housing type most vulnerable to redevelopment in the future. Sixty-three per cent of Whistler's resident workforce is housed in market units, while 37 per cent reside in restricted non-market housing units.

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Census data showed that the share of Whistler's workforce living outside the municipality's boundaries increased from 29 per cent in 1996 to 35 per cent in 2001. At the same time, Pemberton residents working in Whistler increased by 138 per cent and Squamish by 55 per cent.

Whistler's study revealed a great many properties "under-utilized or not occupied on a full time basis": 72 per cent of all properties were registered to owners living outside of Whistler. As a resort community attracting two million visitors per year, and as co-site of the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, Whistler knows it must find ways to balance resident needs with tourism requirements.

Zucht says market conditions pressure homeowners to cash out and leave, paving the way for redeveloped homes that are less affordable and less accessible to the local workforce. Following up on the survey data, the challenge was to mitigate the loss of affordable housing.

"We set about creating opportunities for owners to continue to reside in existing market housing," Zucht says. "We've had an active Task Force looking at opportunities such as lot splits, allowing duplexes and multiple suites."

"We have a good sense of what needs to be done to keep housing affordable for permanent residents," says RMOW Housing Planner Guy Patterson. "But what is the incentive to the owner or builder to go through with those developments?"

The responsibility for creating affordable living spaces falls not only to the large developer,

Patterson says, but there must also be opportunities for individual property owners to participate.

The RMOW is searching for ways to pique the general public's interest in affordable development. One possibility is a density bonus in exchange for an agreement restricting residency to a qualified local employee.

Further regulatory changes, if they are to be made and if they are to be effective, must take homeowner needs into consideration.

"The idea is to allow for separate titles, register covenants and put in place occupancy and price restrictions where the cost will not increase any more than X per cent per year," Patterson says. "There are challenges ahead — such as in creating appreciation formula strategies — but we believe it will be possible to maintain affordable housing in Whistler."

Related reports

Housing Information Report 2004: Housing Whistler's Workforce (global FRAMEWORKS Ltd. & Terra Housing Consultants, 2004)

This report is available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

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These three-bedroom duplex units, near Whistler's commercial area, are examples of housing that is restricted in resale price and occupancy.

Source: Whistler Housing Authority

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