



Building Better Homes and Communities

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ACT Solutions

Making Space for Rooming Houses

Jeruth Holdings Ltd., Vernon, BC

Issue

The City of Vernon lacked policies and bylaws that specifically supported the accommodation of single persons in rooming houses. Development of this type of housing may be permitted under bylaws pertaining to duplexes, but that had resulted in delays, confusion and difficult progress.

"For many individuals, a rooming house is ... a step away from homelessness."

*– Jed Astin, President,
Jeruth Holdings Ltd.*

Plan

With the assistance of an ACT grant, the project team planned to examine regulations related to the supply and operation of rooming houses, such as zoning, parking, and building and fire code requirements. The project would result in rooming house policies and bylaws, an efficient application process for building conversions and operational guidelines recognizing tenant needs.

Project team

Jeruth Holdings Ltd.
City of Vernon
Vernon Home Builders' Association
Canadian Mental Health Association
British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources
North Okanagan Social Planning Council

Results

The project team quickly realized that, for rooming houses, construction of new units would not be cost effective in Vernon. The level of affordability required would simply be unattainable, the team found, under foreseeable market conditions for new construction. Instead, acquiring and renovating existing buildings would provide more viable opportunities.

All stakeholders identified location as a foremost consideration early on in the process. The City of Vernon's existing zoning bylaw located rooming houses in the Transitional Commercial Zone, whereas surveys of rooming house residents indicated a preference

for accommodation close to services in the downtown core.

Rooming house residents, for the most part, do not own vehicles and often can ill-afford transit or taxis. Therefore, municipal policies should support the location of rooming houses in the downtown core. Negative aspects often associated with rooming houses can be mitigated through good design and features that take tenant needs into account.

Through surveys, fact-finding and study group meetings the project team arrived at a comprehensive overview of housing needs. For example, security on a number of fronts is important to tenants: each room should have its own refrigerator (security of food concern) and a deadbolt. Individual secure mail service is important to tenants, as it is for apartment dwellers, although Canada Post policies and practices may preclude such service. The team also concluded that either the property owner or a manager should live on-site, an important factor in contributing to a well-maintained property.

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The proposed amendments to Vernon's bylaws specified the zones in which rooming houses should be permitted and included a requirement for on-site management. Specifically, rooming houses should be allowed in the downtown commercial district and not just in areas zoned for multi-family dwellings as currently permitted. The proposed bylaw serves as a model for other jurisdictions interested in this type of affordable housing.

The project team recommended that rooming houses be permitted in central areas, where tenants can be close to services. This is the model eight-unit rooming house created from a duplex.

Source:
Jeruth Holdings Ltd.



Working with civic leaders sympathetic to the needs of social housing tenants can be critical, Astin says, particularly when dealing with restrictive bylaws. The rooming house amendments repeatedly bogged down in hearings on such issues as management and zoning. A change in Council was perhaps the most important development in the project team's push to introduce new bylaws.

"I'm thankful there has been a turnaround," Astin says. "Now, I'm optimistic and actually confident the new bylaws will proceed."

In the meantime, the project team embarked on converting a duplex into a rooming house under the existing bylaws. The eight-unit rooming house, renovated to code requirements, includes four bedrooms with separate entrances on each floor. Emergency lighting, inter-connected smoke alarms and gas-fired hot water heat were added in the renovation.

In keeping with the project team's recommendations, the model building provides handicapped access, a common room, a laundry room and vehicle parking provisions that conform to City bylaws.

A monetary analysis of the model building's operation showed accommodation for eight single men could be provided at a rent of \$340 per month (2003), an amount within the bounds of affordable housing for the local area.

"It's becoming critical in our area, where for the low-income person it's pretty well impossible to rent an affordable one-bedroom apartment," says Jed Astin of Jeruth Holdings Ltd., contending that the working poor are crowding out those people who rely on the various forms of social assistance.

"We have incredible demand for the product we have," Astin says, insisting that multi-million dollar projects preferred by some developers and civic leaders are not representative of the need. Rather, the true needs are beginning to drive changes that will make allowances for projects such as rooming houses.

"We have to ask ourselves 'What can we do to assist those people who need it most?'" Astin believes. "Social housing is in a real stress situation."

Related reports

ACT case study: *Innovative Rooming Houses* (Foyer des Cents Abris, Montreal, 1995)

The case study is available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

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