

Secondary Suites Frequently Asked Questions

On May 11, City Council will consider a proposed bylaw amendment to wards 7, 8, 9, and 11. This amendment would remove one step from the process - the requirement for a property owner to apply for a land use redesignation in areas where it is currently required (R1, RC1, RC1L). Applications would still go through the permit process and have to meet building code and fire safety requirements. Currently, property owners must first apply for a land use change and present to City Council for approval, then apply for a development permit.

What is a secondary suite?

A secondary suite is a separate living space created within a property originally designed to accommodate a single family. It is a private, self-contained unit that can take a number of forms including basement apartments, in-law suites, garden suites, and above-garage laneway units. A secondary suite has its own bathroom, kitchen, living, and sleeping areas, but can share a number of features with the rest of the house. Shared facilities may include a yard, parking area, laundry and storage space, and sometimes a hallway.

It is important to note that even if the amendment is approved, above-garage units and garden suites will remain a discretionary use. This means that neighbours and community associations would be able to comment on the proposed development at the development permit application stage.

What is happening in other municipalities?

All other large Canadian cities permit secondary suites city-wide, which has given us the opportunity to learn from their experience.

In two and a half years (December 2007 to July 2010) since the City of Edmonton enacted a by-law permitting secondary suites in all residential neighbourhoods, approximately 353 building permits were issued - the combined conversion of existing suites and brand new suites. Currently they are receiving about 250 applications per year.

In Calgary from 2008 – January 2015 the City of Calgary has received 617 development permit applications and 568 of these were approved, 191 out of 213 were approved in wards 7, 8, 9 and 11.

Why is Council only debating changing the bylaw in these four wards?

Council did not approve direction to pursue citywide changes to zoning to include the permitted use of secondary suites at this time. However, they did direct Administration to report back on making these changes within wards 7, 8, 9 and 11, which are well connected to major employment and education facilities by walking, cycling, and transit infrastructure.

What about parking?

Currently there are no restrictions on the number of cars that can park at a home. To address concerns with overflow parking with the creation of a secondary suite in a home, this amendment requires the creation of a designated on-site parking spot. This will limit any potential impact on street parking generated by the addition of a suite.

Studies demonstrate that residents living in secondary suites are less likely to own an automobile than those in owner-occupied dwellings or traditional rental units.

What about property maintenance?

Poorly maintained properties are not limited to secondary suites, and appear amongst rental and owner-occupied properties. Unsightly properties of all types are best dealt with through bylaw enforcement, not zoning. This is done by reporting the property to 311 for bylaw enforcement. The City is also currently in the process of reviewing and updating its Community Standards Bylaw, which applies to all properties.

What about safety?

Currently there are only 550 legal suites in Calgary. The majority of the remainder (up to 16000) are either grandfathered or illegal. It is the opinion of the Calgary Fire Department that 80% of non-legal suites do not comply with basic fire and safety codes. It is the City's goal to reduce the number of illegal and unsafe suites, and increase the number of regulated and safe suites.

All new suites will have to meet a rigorous set of building code requirements to ensure the suites are safe for those living in the suite, in the principal residence, and in the community as a whole. It will also be easier for property owners to upgrade illegal suites, so that they too will meet building codes.

Through a separate initiative, the City is also exploring a safe suites program designed to encourage the upgrading of currently illegal suites. This program may include a publicly available safe-suites registry and a suite sticker initiative.

What about property value?

There is no data that shows a decrease in property value. According to CMHC, building a secondary suite increases the value of an individual home because of the potential rental income. The change in value of adding a secondary suite is often compared to going from an unfinished basement to a finished basement. Assessed property value is determined by comparing your home to like homes, so if your home does not have a secondary suite, it will not be compared to homes with suites to determine its assessed value.

What about the character of the community?

Secondary suites provide housing choices without changing the character of the existing neighbourhood. The land use bylaw and the term 'single family home' relates to the built form of the home. The building envelope of a house will remain the same with a secondary suites policy, with the exception of garden or garage suite (which will still require a development permit, notification, and is subject to appeal). Community associations and neighbours will still be able to comment on suite applications that involve substantial changes to building forms.

What about subdividing properties?

The rules related to subdivision will remain unchanged. Property owners would still need to go through the application process, and secondary suite zoning does not make it any easier to be approved. This proposal does not change R1 properties to R2.

What about the aging infrastructure in older communities?

The City takes a proactive approach to protecting and replacing aging infrastructure such as water mains. Generally speaking, even in communities where population is growing, the communities are below their peak population numbers. Therefore, the infrastructure is capable of handling higher population numbers and any modest increases that may occur if secondary suite development occurs.

What are some of the negatives that have been raised about this proposed amendment?

- The character of the community will change.
- There will be problems with street parking.
- There will be an increase in traffic in the community.
- The old infrastructure is unable to handle the increased population density.
- Renters and absentee landlords are not invested in the community.
- This change in zoning will open the door to subdividing of properties.

What are some of the positives that have been raised about this proposed amendment?

- Secondary suites are an important supply of rental housing, in cities like Vancouver and Edmonton they make up about 20% of the rental stock.
- Change in zoning provides more property rights to the private property owner.
- Removing the land use application requirement reduces the red tape and thus the cost to the tax payer and to the applicant, in both monetary and time commitment costs.
- Secondary suites are driven by the market and provide moderate change to the density of the City within existing areas, thus relieving the pressure on the tax payer that comes with the cost of growth.
- Secondary suites can provide extra income to first home buyers thus enabling them to qualify for a mortgage to buy their first home.
- Secondary suites promote aging in place as they enable elderly residents to utilize the extra space in their home they no longer use and at the same time obtain additional income, security and assistance with yard and home maintenance.

- Changes in zoning will remove a barrier to property owners that currently have illegal or legal non-conforming suites, thus making it easier for these owners to bring their suites up to today's building and safety codes.
- Removing the land use requirement will allow City resources and enforcement to be more focussed on unsafe suites.
- More legal and safe suites will put market pressure on private property owners of illegal suites to bring their suites up to code. This would happen gradually over time.

Do Calgarians support secondary suites?

A random sample telephone poll commissioned by the City of Calgary, conducted by the Mustel Group of 501 Calgarians in late 2009 found that:

- **84%** of Calgarians supported the development of new secondary suites (12% were opposed)
- **85%** of Calgarians supported the legalization of existing suites (10% were opposed)
- **76%** of Calgarians supported secondary suites in their own community (21% were opposed)

Another survey conducted by Zinc Research in March, 2011 on behalf of the U of C Students' Union highlighted similar results:

- **79%** of Calgarians supported legalization of existing suites (13% oppose)
- **75%** of Calgarians supported legal secondary suites in their neighbourhood (18% oppose)
- **77%** of Calgarians comfortable with their neighbour having a legal secondary suite (17% oppose)