

## THE IMPACT OF LANEWAY HOUSING

We are now witnessing the rollout of the first Laneway Houses in the City of Vancouver since City Council approved rezoning to allow such development on virtually all single family lots throughout the city. It is difficult to comprehend how such a vast and fundamental change to the zoning of a City was enacted without a referendum and/or a pilot project. Perhaps the answer lies in the public not understanding the implications of the Laneway Housing or the term “Eco-densification”.

In addition to the approval of Laneway houses themselves, the “initiative” also approved the addition of up to two rental suites within the main residence on all lots 33 feet wide or larger. Therefore, on a single-family lot, there can now be 4 families residing.

Whereas there may be a desire on the part of certain homeowners to have a Laneway House for the purpose of accommodating aging parents or grown-up children, the motivation for many of these units is developer-driven and marketed as “mortgage-helpers”. What seems to have been ignored for the most part is the impact on adjacent neighbours and the environment. Outlined below are some of the implications for neighbours and neighbourhoods.

### **Scale & Massing:**

Laneway Houses have been misrepresented as small structures and of the same size as a garage. Whereas this may be true for a single storey Laneway House, it is certainly not the case for those that are more than one storey as the enclosed photograph clearly illustrates. While the footprint itself may be the same as a two-car garage, the Laneway Houses itself is considerably bigger.

The terminology used in the City Hall Guidelines and Regulations repeatedly refers to Laneway Houses in excess of a single storey as being “1 ½ Storey”. This too is misleading as one would assume that they would only be 1 ½ storeys high. In fact, they are 2 storeys high (up to 20 feet in height), with the second storey being smaller than the ground floor.

### **Visual Privacy:**

Although City Hall’s guidelines stipulate that windows should be minimized on the sides facing the main residence and adjacent properties, the fact remains that a window is a window and there will now be the ability for a Laneway House occupant to look directly into a neighbour’s bedroom and back yard from their second storey, a very short distance away.

### **Acoustic Privacy:**

With the increase of a single family to potentially four families on the same property, noise will be compounded. This will include increased traffic, pets, parties, etc.

### **Natural Light:**

With increased height and massing of Laneway Houses, south-facing back yards will have reduced sunlight and lessened desirability for use of the outdoor space between the main house and the Laneway House. Gardens will also be impacted and growing of vegetables and flowers will be compromised. Although shade may be a treasured commodity in sunnier cities, this is not the case in Vancouver.

**Parking:**

As there is only a requirement for a single off-site parking space, additional cars will need to be parked on the street. If a Block has a number of Laneway Houses and rental suites, the increase in street parked cars will be significant. The narrowness of many residential streets is already constraining the passage of traffic with street-parked cars and this problem will be compounded. (Note that a single car requires over 25 feet for curbside parking).

In multi-family developments, the City standard requirement is 1.75 parking stalls per suite plus bicycle storage. It should be noted that in Fairview slopes, 1 stall per residence was the requirement in the 1970's as that area was developed. This has proven to be inadequate and left a legacy of parking congestion in the area.

**Lane Access:**

If street parking becomes a challenge, owners/renters will inevitably park cars in the lane itself, partly on their property but mostly intruding into the lane itself resulting in impaired access for service vehicles, emergency vehicles and garbage trucks.

**Storage:**

With Laneway Houses occupying the space formerly taken up by a two-car garage, there will now be significantly reduced storage space for bicycles, garden tools, camping gear, skis, etc. All this is contrary to promoting healthy, active outdoor lifestyles.

**Impact on Market Values:**

It is not unreasonable to assume that an older house seen as a tear down will have an increased market value, while a newer house that is flanked by laneway houses on the adjacent lots may have a decreased market value. Who would wish to move into a house flanked by 2 Laneway Houses when there are other options?

**Eco-Density:**

The term Eco-Density is misleading at best. A Laneway House requires far more materials and walls to enclose a very small area than a regular-sized house. The heat loss is larger per square foot than in a new house of similar construction. Services such as plumbing are not efficient as they are not grouped or even linked to the main house. In comparison, a townhouse or high-rise development has a far better efficiency of material use.

To achieve City-desired higher densification that is not high-rise construction, townhouse projects in selected areas would be a superior solution, along the lines built along Oak & 37<sup>th</sup>, Oak & 45<sup>th</sup> and Dunbar & 39<sup>th</sup>. Secured parking is underground and these sites are suitable for densification for various reasons (adjacent to commercial areas, etc.). If townhouse projects were encouraged near commercial areas and bus routes, there would also be the added benefit that families would have alternatives to the use of the automobile.

**Public Response:**

To date, over 80 permits have already been issued for Laneway Houses with City Hall forecasting achieving 100 in July 2010. They have committed to "monitor" the initiative at that point but they are also heavily invested in the concept of Laneway Housing so that other than tinkering, there will be no significant retraction from their position unless there is very significant public opposition.

In conclusion, I would suggest that there has been inadequate study, inadequate information and inadequate public and neighbourhood consultation before embarking on such extensive and radical rezoning. Set out below are a few basic, common sense recommendations that should be followed by the City of Vancouver before this “initiative” intractably alters the single-family landscape of Vancouver:

1. Place a moratorium on further issuance of development permits for Laneway Housing (and in-house rental suites) for at least a year or two.
2. Conduct surveys by non-biased third party firms to properly gauge neighbourhood response to Laneway Housing units built to date.
3. Encourage neighbourhood meetings where residents can have their voices heard. (Although there were some public hearings prior to the enactment of the rezoning, many people feel these were inadequate and that City of Vancouver held these meetings only because they were obliged to do so and their agenda for Laneway Houses was already predetermined. Public meetings would be of far greater value now that residents can see the impact of Laneway Houses on their neighbourhoods).

Submitted by:

Peter Selnar