

# Garden Suites



CASE STUDY | DECEMBER 2023



## 1. Background

The Town of Gibsons has allowed secondary suites in all single-family dwellings across the community since 2008. In 2020, the Town expanded secondary suite locations to permit them in duplexes and townhouses and also permitted lock-off suites in apartment units. As of 2015, garden suites were allowed in limited areas and an expansion of garden suites is currently being reviewed through a community engagement and planning process.

### Policy/program

Garden Suites

### Municipality

Town of Gibsons (2021 population: 4,758)

### Gentle Density Types Involved

- Secondary suites
- Lock-off units
- Garden suites
- Duplexes

## 2. Key Players

### Municipality

- Planning department: zoning, public consultation, form and character development permit areas
- Infrastructure servicing department: identification of infrastructure needs
- Fire department: fire codes
- Building department: building codes, building permits

### Stakeholders

- Existing garden suite homeowners
- Neighbours of garden suites
- Residents interested in building a garden suite
- Other residents/neighbours

## 3. Description of policy/program/project

In 2005, enabling coach housing was part of implementing the Gibsons Smart Plan (OCP). Coach housing was envisioned for the areas within the Low Density Infill I and II land use designations, but was not yet reflected in zoning.

In 2013-2014, Council included permitting coach housing in its Strategic Plan as part of the objective of promoting development that supports long term sustainability of community assets. In 2014, a planning consultant was retained to explore approaches in other communities and identify options for Gibsons. Garden suites (a form of coach housing) were introduced in 2015 as a gentle way of increasing housing supply and diversity in the community and were only permitted in designated “garden suite areas” (identified in the [zoning bylaw](#) and Schedule F map). Lock-off units – accessory dwelling units within apartments – were introduced in 2020.

There was always a plan to review the garden suites program five years in and/or after ten garden suites had been built. In 2021, after 15 garden suites were built, the program was evaluated by Planning staff with public consultation. This led to Council allocated a budget in 2023 to expand the garden suites program and remove barriers to the application process.

The Council Strategic Plan also supported affordable housing in general, which was the policy direction guiding the expansion of secondary suites. Also, a change in the BC Building Code at that time to allow greater implementation of secondary suites supported the decision to consider expansion of suites in the community.

## 4. Outcomes

While residents were not applying for zoning amendments in order to build garden suites, there were a lot of requests and questions about building them in neighbourhoods across the community. As of 2021, there were 15 garden suites in the community in the designated garden suite areas.

Council liked the scale of gentle density and felt that garden suites could address some of the housing needs identified in the housing needs assessment.

Currently, there are no implementation practices in place to support garden suites or duplexes to be built, although the Town plans to develop a comprehensive garden suite program that would include a zoning amendment and possibly change in fee structure (e.g., reduce DCCs). There are currently no plans to promote duplexes aside from permitting them across the R3 zone.



Hopkins Landing, Gibsons, BC. Anastase Maragos.

# 5. Lessons learned

## Facilitators

- Council support was crucial to getting this approved.
- Having a general understanding in the community about the general housing shortage helped.
- The Town has specific short-term rental regulations in place that only allow short-term rentals within a principal residence and to apply for a business license. These regulations aim to keep the housing rental stock open for longer-term rentals.

## Challenges

- It was hoped that garden suites would provide a level of affordability in the community; however, garden suites are not affordable housing. They do provide additional rental and add to housing diversity.
- Some unintended consequences of a garden suite program include the need to look at infrastructure upgrades (e.g., water lines), fire flows and fire department access needs (as lane access may be insufficient).

# 7. Resources

- | [Garden Suite Development Guide](#)
- | [Development Permit Guidelines](#)
- | [Garden Suite Eligibility Flowchart](#)



# 6. Next Steps

Currently, homeowners/applicants for garden suites within the designated garden suite areas are required to submit a form and character development permit application as well as a building permit application. However, the recommendations from staff for the expanded garden suite program will be to remove/reduce the development permit guidelines and create a form-based zone instead; approvals would then be done by staff rather than Council, reducing application fees and processing times for approvals.

In 2021, Staff conducted a survey to existing garden suite owners and to the broader community/neighbours of completed garden suites to seek feedback on the design of the suites constructed to date, neighbour experiences, and preferences for future policy and expansion of the garden suites areas. 14 current garden suite owners and 175 other residents completed the survey. Based on the feedback from the surveys, in 2022 staff recommended the following updates to the garden suites program:

1. Expand the garden suites areas to include suitable properties.
2. Replace form and character development permit requirements with a form-based zone.
3. Refine and strengthen regulations for use and design of garden suites and sites to improve neighbourhood compatibility.
4. Review garden suite development fees and utility fees.
5. Plan for impacts to infrastructure.

The next step is for staff to hire a consultant to take the recommendations and develop the expanded garden suites program.