

Incremental Density



CASE STUDY | JANUARY 2024



1. Background

The fast-growing District of Squamish (22% increase since 2016) has allowed duplexes in a large portion of the community for many years now. Starting in 2015, the District began to change single family zoning to allow for accessory dwelling units and secondary suites. More recently, gentle density approaches expanded into triplexes and cottage clusters, while past and current neighbourhood planning process are expanding missing middle housing options in established areas through infill. Looking forward, the District will consider additional opportunities for increased housing diversity and infill housing, potentially across broader areas through density bonus structures.

Policy/program

Incremental Density

Municipality

District of Squamish (2021 population: 23,819)

Gentle Density Types Involved

- Secondary suites
- Coach/ADU houses
- Duplexes, duplexes with suites
- Triplexes
- Cottage clusters

2. Key Players

Municipality

- The planning department is responsible for bringing forward policies for expanding gentle density and leading the public engagement for neighbourhood planning.
- Engineering supported efforts by considering impacts on infrastructure
- Climate Change and Sustainability with Engineering supported efforts by considering front of property improvements (e.g., sidewalks, bike lanes) as part of rezonings.

Stakeholders

- Local developers and builders on specific considerations of viability
- Residents including, non-market tenants and advocates, youth, seniors and employers

3. Description of policy/program

Gentle density beyond the popular and existing duplex zoning began as a result of a [2016 Housing Task Force Report](#) that identified a lack of purpose built rental housing in Squamish. Accessory dwelling units such as suites or coach houses were identified as an easy starting point and staff encouraged this style of development in 2016 by:

- Waiving development cost charges:** Squamish reduced development fees for secondary suites and coach houses as an incentive (saving [\\$3,500 or more for a 70m² suite](#)) and only due to the nature of these unit types providing rentals. There was an understanding that waiving fees would not lead to a significant amount of lost revenue and that waiving fees would also discourage illegal development.
- Reducing setbacks:** Ongoing reductions in lot setbacks overtime have increased opportunities for landowners to develop gentle density. Though there are still concerns, there is a strong support for more units.
- Faster building approval process for suites:** Increasing the speed of approvals reduces building/development costs for landowners. Suites represent the simplest built form of gentle density and therefore it easier to gain support for this approach.

Secondary suites, coach houses, duplexes and triplexes are all identified in the [zoning bylaw](#). Currently, homeowners/applicants wishing to build one of the types of housing have a relatively similar process to a single family home building permit application. Development cost charges are exempted for secondary suites and ADUs however, and triplexes are currently required to submit a development permit application in addition to the building permit application.

4. Outcomes

There is no formal tracking of applications and approvals though some of the outcomes described include:

- Suites and ADUs – many have been added since 2015
- Duplex – many are being added, and the zoning as a right has been in place for a long time.
- Triplex on corner lots – 4-5 projects as of 2023
- Creative applications of duplexes have occurred. For example, duplexes with suites and a coach house are resulting in five units on one larger sized single family lot. There are 3-4 creative applications of the zoning such as this so far





5. Lessons learned

Facilitators

- Taking an incremental approach in Squamish means always moving forward, often in small ways, to remove barriers to gentle density while addressing public concerns along the way. In doing so, it is important to present how each change works at reducing barriers, and the administration and developer requirements. For example, allowing second story coach houses, then allowing ground level units, then removing lot restrictions for accessory dwelling units, and ultimately ending the change process by allowing both secondary suites and coach houses.
- Applying zoning changes across the community instead of pilot neighbourhoods allows for greater support for the change. For example, triplexes are allowed on all corner lots in the RS-2 zone (duplex zone applied to roughly half the residential areas) It is not currently allowed in RS-1.
- Squamish Council is well versed in the importance of increasing the supply of housing and housing diversity due to the development of the 2016 Housing Task Force Report and subsequent policy work. Other activities to support Council with context and content for responding to questions from the community included; normalizing the process of increasing gentle density with examples from other communities; creating a framework of knowledge (through reports, engagement and other activities) that Council could draw from when speaking to constituents; stressing the benefits of gentle density in relation to efficient infrastructure investments.
- It is important to have a strong zoning and enforcement program in order to preserve suites and coach houses for long-term rentals and not short-term nightly vacation rentals. Preserving the principal residential use is important.
- The ongoing local and provincial discussion and messaging about increasing housing supply provides a strong foundation for incremental changes.

Challenges

- Removing barriers is important as too many restrictions can complicate the process and make it uneconomical for development. Fewer restrictions results in creative applications of policy. For example:
 - a. Purpose built rental duplex project: 14 rooms total, sharing a common amenity space (kitchen etc.).
 - b. Duplex (Two primary dwelling units): the addition of two suites and one coach house allows for a five-unit development on larger lots.

6. Next Steps

- Triplexes will likely be considered for expansion to more lot configurations in the future. The District is looking at ways to streamline the development permit process (which costs the developer time), such as shifting the intent of the development permit guidelines into the zoning bylaw as it is updated. Key design considerations including that the triplex same meet the same general form and massing as single-unit dwellings will likely be included.
- Parking is a major concern from neighbours when increasing density, and a major challenge for creating triplexes. Additionally, garage parking often gets used for storage. The District is trying to address these concerns and challenges and is researching various ideas to help alleviate these problems.

7. Resources

- | Secondary Suites: <https://squamish.ca/business-and-development/home-land-and-property-development/secondary-suites/>
- | Zoning Bylaw: <https://squamish.civicweb.net/filepro/documents/68132/?preview=207028>