

The Gentle Density Messaging Guidebook

Published: January 2024

small
housing

Background

In November 2023, the Government of British Columbia tabled legislation that seeks to compel changes to municipal zoning regulations, allowing homeowners and small-scale developers to build up to four homes, including secondary suites, on single and two family lots. This legislation will potentially catalyze the delivery of more ground-oriented, multi-home dwellings that are more attainable for middle-class, working families, as well as seniors and young professionals across BC.

As municipalities throughout the province prepare for the most significant changes to urban planning and land use management in almost four decades, **this messaging guide is designed to educate and strengthen your communication efforts in building support for gentle density housing projects.**

What is Gentle Density Housing?

Gentle density is a form of housing development that focuses on *incrementally* increasing the number and variety of ground-oriented homes in traditionally single-detached neighbourhoods. Traditional zoning in many neighbourhoods often consists of large lots with a solitary single family home, resulting in underutilization of valuable land resources.

Gentle density proposes to invite more households into single-detached neighbourhoods, creating more homes. It can do so by slightly building out existing lots to include not just a single home, but a home and a laneway home or backyard duplex for example, while it can also look to redevelop a site entirely to include multiplexes like triplexes, fourplexes, or infill row houses.

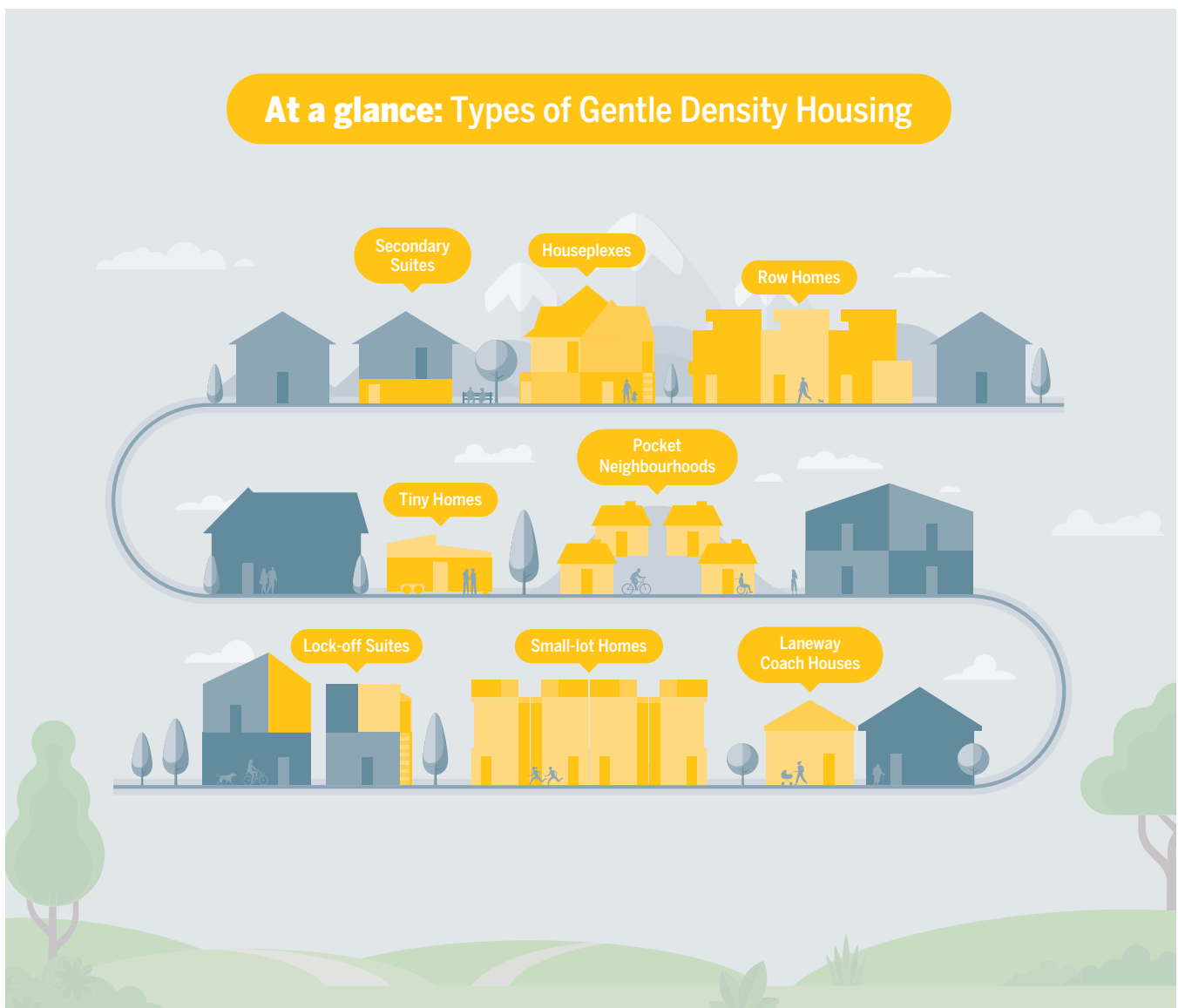
Are there other terms for Gentle Density Housing?

“Gentle Density Housing” (GDH) is often synonymous with “Missing Middle Housing,” a concept that emphasizes the creation of diverse housing options that are compatible in scale with ground-oriented, single-detached homes.

Additionally, it can also include **small housing** or **infill development**, which highlights the focus on compact and efficient dwellings that promote sustainability and community integration.

These terms all describe housing solutions that strike a balance between density and livability, while addressing the housing challenges many communities face.

At a glance: Types of Gentle Density Housing



Proposed messaging tips for GDH Solutions

Highlight the advantages that GDH delivers for those who need, but are struggling to secure, attainable homes

Make housing more equitable

Too many of the most sought-after neighborhoods are starting to resemble exclusive clubs, selling a restricted number of homes to the highest bidders. By lifting restrictions and allowing a broader variety of housing options outside of single detached homes and high-rise apartments, GDH can more effectively **support a greater diversity of housing needs**.

Deliver homes of all shapes and sizes for the many, not just the few

By enabling smaller format homes that share a single parcel of land, the price point can be reduced. This provides **more attainable housing options** for a broader range of household incomes.

Center messaging on community and family values

Keep families together

GDH can support **multi-generational living**, delivering enhanced family supports such as **shared caregiving responsibilities for both children and elderly family members**. This can lead to financial savings owing to less reliance on more formal childcare and senior care services.

Support the needs of our seniors

GDH facilitates **aging-in-place** solutions, offering seniors the opportunity to maintain their independence in familiar surroundings. This not only significantly **supports their overall well-being and mental health**, it can also often result in cost savings compared to moving to assisted living or nursing homes, making it a **more financially sustainable choice** for many older adults.

Support young families and individuals

The reduced costs of smaller format homes within gentle density developments **can make homeownership more attainable for younger generations**, providing them with a valuable pathway to wealth accumulation and financial stability, as well as opening the door to entry level homeownership. By increasing housing supply in established areas, it also allows young people to live closer to job opportunities, schools, and public transit, making their daily lives more convenient and reducing the need for long commutes.



Highlight how GDH can support housing needs of workers and boost local economies

Supporting workers who are the cornerstone of our societies

Gentle density housing provides more equitable housing opportunities for **the essential front-line workers who serve our communities**. By diversifying housing options in desirable neighborhoods, it **offers teachers, healthcare professionals, and public servants the chance to reside in the very communities they serve**.

Support the livelihoods of local tradespeople and businesses

By encouraging the construction of smaller-scale homes in established neighborhoods, GDH creates demand for local construction and skilled trades, such as planners, engineers, builders, carpenters, amongst others. Furthermore GDH can stimulate spending within the community, bolstering the local economy and opening opportunities for creation of new businesses in the area.

Emphasize that GDH can support efforts in meeting environmental ambitions

“The greenest building is... one that is already built.”

By repurposing existing land and infrastructure, gentle density housing that supports infill development reduces the need for new construction on undeveloped land, **minimizing the environmental impact associated with new development**. For example, the construction of smaller-scale homes, and promotion of building types such as prefabricated homes, has significantly **reduced embodied carbon** across the lifecycle of the building materials used.

Help curb urban sprawl

By making more efficient use of existing urban infrastructure, such as roads, water supply, sewage systems and utilities, and allowing more people to reside within walking distance of public transit options, we can minimize the need for costly infrastructure expansion and maintenance, **reducing the carbon emissions associated with such processes**.



Use visuals as part of your communication efforts

Using imagery is a powerful tool in storytelling and persuasion as it adds a visual and emotional dimension to your message. Visual elements have the unique ability to evoke feelings, create vivid mental pictures, and simplify complex concepts, making your narrative more engaging and memorable. When seeking to convince an audience of the merits of Gentle Density Housing, well-chosen imagery can provide concrete examples, foster a deeper understanding, and establish a personal connection.

Such images can take the form of simply showcasing the physical forms that gentle density homes can take (Image to the right), or they can showcase the occupants of such housing (Images below). Taken together, these can help convey your message with greater impact and resonance.



Example of a multi-generational family living together under one roof, thanks to gentle density housing.



Variety of Gentle Density Homes across Vancouver, BC. Photo Credit: Brendon Purdy

Communications Cheat Sheet



Highlight the advantages that GDH delivers for those who need, but are struggling to secure, attainable homes

Gentle Density Housing, through its diverse housing options and smaller format homes, promotes housing equity and affordability by catering to a wider range of housing needs across various income levels, ultimately delivering homes for the many rather than the few.



Focus messaging on values that reflect the community

Gentle Density Housing enhances family bonds by enabling multi-generational living, resulting in cost savings and improved care quality. GDH also supports aging-in-place for seniors, offers more attainable housing options for young families, and promotes fairer access to housing. Additionally, it benefits essential front-line workers by diversifying housing options, reducing commutes, and improving affordability, benefiting teachers, healthcare professionals, and public servants.



Highlight how GDH can boost local economies

Gentle Density Housing supports local tradespeople by fostering demand for construction and skilled trades in established neighborhoods. It also benefits local businesses by encouraging spending within the community, potentially stimulating the growth of new businesses in the area, thereby strengthening the local economy.




Emphasize that GDH can support efforts in meeting environmental ambitions

Gentle density housing through infill development repurposes existing land and infrastructure, reducing the environmental impact of new construction. It also promotes efficient urban development, minimizing the need for costly infrastructure expansion and maintenance, which in turn lowers carbon emissions associated with these processes and encourages walkable access to public transit.

Addressing skepticisms

While Gentle Density Housing presents a promising approach to address various housing challenges, it is not without its skeptics. Understanding these skepticisms is essential for a comprehensive view of the debate surrounding this housing strategy. In addition, respecting opposing views on gentle density housing is paramount for fostering constructive dialogue. Using respectful

language acknowledges diverse perspectives, opening avenues for collaboration and ensuring that discussions focus on shared goals of sustainable and inclusive community development. **In this section, we will explore some of the most common objections and concerns raised against gentle density initiatives, as well as some suggested responses.**

 <p>Can it deliver affordable housing?</p>	Possible Challenge
	<p>Some may argue that gentle density housing does not always translate into more attainable homes. In some cases, these developments can still command relatively high prices, especially in desirable neighborhoods, which can exclude lower-income individuals from accessing these housing options.</p>
	Suggested Response
	<p>Many factors caused this housing crisis, and unfortunately there is no silver bullet, or indeed one standalone policy that can be delivered to fix the housing crisis. Alongside the delivery of an ambitious suite of measures from our lawmakers to address this generational housing crisis, we also need to be engaged with community leaders and other key actors who can help deliver the housing that people want, need & deserve.</p>

Messaging tips

It is important to note that while gentle density housing doesn't ensure affordability in all cases, it can significantly contribute to addressing the housing challenges we collectively face as a society. **By diversifying housing options, we can create more accessible housing choices for those currently struggling to secure homes, or those looking for homes to better meet their needs.**

For example, by expanding housing supply in the form of legalizing missing middle housing, we can more effectively enable seniors to downsize into appealing homes in their neighborhood, freeing up more homes for others seeking residences that better align with their needs and budget. This creates a dynamic housing cycle, enhancing options for individuals across various demographics.

Will more homes not lead to quiet neighborhood streets being overrun by cars?

Possible Challenge

The [gentle] densification of neighborhoods places an untenable strain on parking provisions in neighborhoods, leading to increased traffic and congestion, as well as noise pollution. With more residents sharing limited parking spaces, competition for parking can intensify, causing additional on-street parking and potential traffic disruptions, thereby affecting the neighborhood's overall livability and peace.

Suggested Response

We need to consider **those families or individuals who are struggling to secure housing, and ask: are they less important than a car space?** The choice we face is whether to prioritize parking spaces or potential homes for families. When we prioritize valuable urban land to car spaces, it is a clear signal that we value our cars more than the livelihoods of our own community members.

Messaging tips

While parking is important for some undoubtedly, prioritizing housing, especially for families in need, should be a priority. Innovative solutions, such as shared parking or transit-oriented development, can help us find a compromise.

Furthermore, balancing the increased housing density with improved parking management strategies, such as permit systems and incentivizing public transportation, can mitigate the negative impacts on parking, traffic, and noise. Effective urban planning and transit options are key to addressing these challenges while promoting the benefits of gentle density housing.

Finally, one may make the argument that gently densifying our neighborhoods does not necessarily equate to more cars, as often those who opt to live in smaller format homes tend to be more sustainably-minded, and as such, forgo the ownership of a car in favour of public forms of transit. *However, more evidence is required to support these claims so use this argument as anecdotal.*

Will increasing the number of homes in pre-existing neighbourhoods place unsustainable strains of infrastructure?

Possible Challenge

Some will hold that gentle density housing can strain existing infrastructure, as it may lead to increased demand for services such as transportation, schools, and utilities. The need to accommodate additional residents can pose challenges in maintaining the quality and capacity of infrastructure.

Suggested Response

When responding to concerns about infrastructure pressure from gentle density housing, **it's vital to emphasize the gentle nature of gentle densification.** Gentle density promotes incrementally increasing the number of homes in existing neighbourhoods, and is subtle in the impact that it imposes on communities and existing infrastructure, particularly when contrasted to more intensive forms of housing development, such as the construction of 'high rises'.

Messaging tips

While it's true that gentle density housing occasionally can place some additional demands on existing infrastructure, it's essential to recognize that responsible urban planning can address these challenges effectively. Well-designed, sustainable development can improve infrastructure efficiency and promote long-term growth, benefiting both current and future residents.

Will missing middle homes lead to the deterioration of the single family home?

Possible Challenge

Broad upzoning legislation may be interpreted by some as a de-facto ban on single-family homes, and a subsequent deterioration of the family values that they view as integral to communities.

Suggested Response

In reality, legislation promoting gentle density housing is not a ban on single-family homes; instead, **it's simply about expanding housing choices**. It allows residents the option to diversify their communities and accommodates varying housing needs, fostering a more inclusive and adaptable approach to urban development.

Messaging tips

Upzoning supports efforts to deliver complete communities; those communities that provide a diversity of housing to meet identified community needs and accommodate people at all stages of life, and provide a wider range of employment opportunities, amenities.

About Us

Small Housing is a non-profit organization that collaborates with government, industry, and homeowners to enable the introduction of ground-oriented gentle density housing in single-family zones.

For more information: www.smallhousing.ca | info@smallhousingbc.org

