

Far-reaching changes in store for community planning

By Doug Holmes

The provincial government has recently introduced a range of housing-related legislation and regulations that will bring sweeping changes to local land-use planning.

Changes include requirements for housing targets and increased density, loosening of building permitting processes, and frequent updating of Official Community Plans (OCP) and zoning bylaws. There will also be tighter restrictions on short-term rentals, and the speculation and vacancy tax will be extended to more communities including Summerland.

While the legislative changes are understandable in light of the urgent need to address the housing crisis, taken together they have significant impacts on municipal finances and capacity as well as on local self-determination.

By mid 2024, municipalities will have to update their zoning bylaws to permit three or four units (duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, secondary suites or carriage homes) on lots currently zoned for single-family or duplex use. (There are exemptions for heritage homes and properties not connected to community water or sewer systems.)

By the end of 2025, every municipality must have updated their OCP and zoning bylaws to include pre-zoning for different housing types to meet local housing needs for a 20-year period. After that, housing needs reports, OCP, and zoning bylaws will have to be updated every five years.

The government-imposed timelines are ambitious and Council had not planned to conduct a full-scale OCP review this term. While the Province says it will provide implementation support, it's likely some of Council's current priorities will have to be delayed or shelved.

Beyond the immediate transition period, the legislative changes also raise concerns about how we will upgrade our infrastructure to support new growth.

There is a long-standing principle that growth ought to pay for growth, meaning that the cost of infrastructure to service new development should be borne not by existing taxpayers but by those who benefit from the development, for example through the collection of development cost charges.

The operational and capital costs of growth are often underestimated, however, and new provincial requirements (eg. for pre-zoning) further weaken the growth-pays-for-growth model and exasperates the current underfunding of basic infrastructure.

The legislative changes also mark a shift towards more prescriptive, centralized community planning, which could carry unintended consequences. Public hearings, for example, will no longer be allowed for development applications like rezonings that conform to the OCP. That means the only opportunity for the public to provide feedback on residential development will be during the OCP review, when ideas are conceptual rather than specific.

This will put pressure on Council – and the community – to make sure we get our OCP right. With no chance to provide input afterwards, it will be doubly important for residents to participate in the OCP review, and the District will bring forward a range of engagement opportunities as the process gets underway.

The right to self-determination is a tenet of democracy as those who live in a community have the best understanding and most at stake in what happens in their community. As the legislative changes take effect and we work to create more housing, we will need to come together as a community to set the vision for that future growth and development.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland.