

How much more housing do we need?

by Doug Holmes

To address future growth, Summerland will need 671 more housing units in the next five years and 2,212 more units within 20 years, according to a new housing needs report recently received by Council.

The report was required by the provincial government as part of new legislation aimed at easing the housing crisis and draws on data provided by BC Stats, Statistics Canada, CMHC and others, as well as interviews with affordable housing operators, business owners, non-profits, School District 67, and members of the public through an online survey that garnered 767 responses.

Survey respondents expressed particular concern with the cost of housing, including the cost of construction and the cost of land. Some 44% of residents said they spend more than 30% of their before-tax income on housing, which is the point where housing is considered unaffordable.

While most respondents said they would not move away from Summerland due to housing issues, 42% said either they would at least consider it.

A key problem for Summerland is the lack housing options, which results in a lack of diversity in our local population with the most affected being renters, seniors on fixed incomes, and young families looking to enter the housing market.

The latest data (2021) shows that 71% of all Summerland residents live in a single-detached house. While that proportion has fallen from 76% in 2006, much of the new multi-unit housing being built is high-end condos. As a result, paradoxically, many people who have outgrown their family home find that they can't afford to downsize. They therefore remain in a house that's too large for their needs, resulting in fewer opportunities for young families to purchase or rent a single-detached house.

The housing needs report is intended to be used by Council for a review of the Official Community Plan (OCP), which is required by the provincial government by the end of 2025.

The data and information in the housing needs report uses standardized methodology issued by the Ministry of Housing to provide a consistent understanding of local housing needs around the province. The model is designed to take account of social variables such as homelessness and population growth as well as variables reflecting market demand such as rental vacancy rates.

However, the methodology has its limitations because it is not a market-based measure and does not reflect supply and demand factors such as construction costs or prices levels. It doesn't consider nuances like whether anyone will be able to afford to build or buy the housing that is estimated to be needed.

Some of the data needs to be treated with caution. For example, it was determined that Summerland requires only six more rental housing units over the next 20 years to achieve a 'balanced' rental vacancy rate above 3%. Intuitively, we know the need is much greater.

While the report remains useful for identifying general trends, determining how and where the community is to grow will ultimately be guided by on-going consultation with the residents of Summerland as part of the OCP review process.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland