



A Response to the Draft Ambleside Local Area Plan (“LAP”) From the Community Housing Action Committee (“CHAC”)

June 2023

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A diverse and affordable housing stock is critical to accommodating growth and supporting the region’s population. Communities across metro Vancouver are experiencing significant housing pressures paired with accelerating housing costs in the rental and ownership markets leading to strong demand for rental housing and rising rental costs. At the same time, existing affordable rental stock is aging and in need of maintenance and renewal (Metro 2050 Regional Growth Strategy, 2022, p. 69).

The Ambleside LAP Options Booklet (the “Booklet”) reviews some thirty planning reports from 1946 through to the present day. Seen through our housing lens, CHAC notes sixteen selected studies that specifically target the importance of improving housing in the Ambleside area which extends from 13th Street in the east to 23rd in the west, and from the waterfront northwards to Fulton Street.¹ Drawing from these, with an emphasis on the Official Community Plans (“OCP”), and the recent Housing Needs Report (“HNR”), CHAC makes six recommendations, some critical, which follow.

1. *Housing affordability advocacy*: The District of West Vancouver (“District”) should adopt a stronger advocacy role to actively seek Provincial funding and other support for West Vancouverites in severe housing need.
2. *More rental housing, including non-market rental, supportive, and cooperative housing*: The District should approve and encourage more rental housing, including non-market rental, supportive, and cooperative housing.
3. *Seniors’ housing in accessible areas*: West Vancouver should provide seniors’ housing in areas that are walkable, close to transit, in proximity to senior services, and near support systems they can access independently.
4. *Mixed-use housing, coach houses, duplexes, and townhouses*: The District should seek opportunities to provide mid-rise mixed-use housing throughout and along the Ambleside corridor. We also recommend that coach houses,

¹ See Appendix A for information on the sixteen important planning studies.

duplexes, and townhouses be built in neighbourhood areas. And, to increase affordability, the District should consider incentives to promote secondary suites.

5. *Increase capacity targets in the OCP*: The District should revisit and increase the Ambleside capacity targets to account for additional rental housing units required to overcome the local concerns identified in the HNR and OCP.
6. *Create a more complete community*: The District should adopt the strategy developed by Enhance West Vancouver, which will be of great benefit to West Vancouver. As well, the District should support day care programs for younger families.

The following description in the Booklet of the current state of housing in the Ambleside area seems to be a clear warning against maintaining the status quo:

Ambleside's housing mix mainly includes aging apartment buildings and expensive single detached homes, with limited mixed-use or ground-oriented middle options like townhouses. The Ambleside apartment area provides 90% of the District's rental stock, but these buildings will be vulnerable to re-development over time. Housing diversity is needed to provide options for families, workers, downsizers and seniors (Ambleside Local Area Plan Options Booklet, 2023, p. 5).

The description above captures the essential, urgent, housing dilemma for this area: build more appropriate, diverse housing, or lose the important growth and variety opportunities presented by an imminent Metro-population surge – as well as the richness of the people who are already moving away because they cannot be affordably housed.

Overview of the Ambleside LAP Options: The Central Role/Position of Ambleside

Early in the Booklet, we see the importance of the Ambleside area to the district as a whole. In addition to its being a distinct neighbourhood and a centre in itself, it has a unique and primary role as the seat of government, with its largest social hub and commercial main street, with nearby parks, schools, library, community and seniors centres, and is a focus for business and visitors.

The Booklet clearly outlines the three options for public comment. Each option refers to the importance of the housing mix of ground-oriented, and various low, mid-rise and apartments in mixed-use buildings. In particular:

- Option 1 provides "twenty rental sites east of 19th would be allowed additional density in mid-rise forms to enable the increase of rental stock over time."
- Option 2 speaks to priority opportunities for ground-oriented housing (50%), mid-rise apartments (10%) and 40% apartments in "mixed-use buildings".

- Option 3 describes, looking east over Marine Drive near 23rd St., ground-oriented apartment housing that “would transition between existing high-rises and single detached homes.”

2. WHO IS CHAC?

CHAC grew out of the 2003 North Shore Poverty Forum that revealed a growing number of North Shore residents were finding themselves unable to afford rising rents. Those residents were having to move away from the North Shore and were taking with them all kinds of valuable community participation.

CHAC is a program of the North Shore Community Resources whose mission is to design and deliver programs and services that enhance well-being, social connections, empowerment and community participation. Since CHAC’s formation in 2004, the committee has grown from its original seven members to its current twenty-eight. It is composed of retired planners, lawyers, several non-profit housing program managers, retired real estate and financial consultants, and others who are likewise concerned with the growing rental crisis in all three North Shore municipalities. CHAC members are renters and owners, and almost all either work or live on the North Shore, or both. Current municipal planners, and ex officio members, attend CHAC meetings regularly to advise and report on local housing issues.

While CHAC’s main concern is rental affordability and tenant protection during renovations, it also provides advice and feedback to all three municipalities on other related issues such as poverty, neighbourhood and community development and policy.

3. EXPLANATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Housing affordability advocacy.

The HNR pays special attention to the worrisome, and worsening, issue of housing affordability in West Vancouver. The HNR states:

West Vancouver’s housing affordability and diversity are key challenges that form a significant component of the District’s recently adopted OCP (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 65).

According to the HNR data regarding core housing and extreme core housing need, there are far too many people in West Vancouver who are forced to live in increasingly dire circumstances:

As of 2016, there are 2,432 West Vancouver households that do not live in acceptable housing [...] and acceptable alternative housing would cost 30% or more of before-tax income. If current trends continue,

2,714 households will be in core housing need in 2026 (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 60).

These are unacceptable numbers for any municipality. In the discussion that follows, it must be understood that the District must consider the circumstances of those people who are so poorly housed.

Therefore, we recommend the District adopt a stronger advocacy role to actively seek Provincial funding and other support for West Vancouverites in severe housing need.

2. More rental housing, including non-market rental, supportive, and cooperative housing are valuable options in a community.

Non-Market Rental & Supportive Housing Needed

In all three LAP options, there is no mention of increasing non-market rental housing, even though the HNR identifies it as an area of need. According to the HNR, there is a non-market rental housing supply gap:

Low-income households are challenged to afford the average cost of rental housing. An increase in the number of households on BC Housing's waitlist confirms the need for additional non-market rental housing in the community. Seniors, singles, and young families are reportedly being pushed out of the rental market and there is a need to address the growing gap between what is available and what is affordable (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 63).

Provision 2.1.19 of the OCP directs the District to work with non-profit housing groups and senior levels of government to maintain existing and create new non-market rentals, including supportive housing (Official Community Plan, 2018, p. 31).

Also, the HNR recommends that "West Vancouver should continue coordinated efforts to address homelessness with other municipal and service partners across the North Shore" (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 63).

More Rental Housing Needed

The OCP highlights the need for additional rental housing because the rental vacancy rate in Oct 2017 was the lowest in the region at 0.4% – whereas a healthy vacancy rate sits between 2-3% (Official Community Plan, 2018, p. 22).

In addition, the HNR also discusses the need for more rental housing:

There has been limited new purpose-built rental construction in West Vancouver over the last twenty years, except for seniors' rental housing. Of the District's existing purpose-built rental stock, approximately 98% is more than 40 years old and vulnerable to redevelopment to strata units due to existing zoning (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 61).

Feedback from consultation indicates there is a need for more affordable rental options to help young singles, downsizing seniors, and families to afford to live in West Vancouver. By 2026, West Vancouver is anticipated to be home to up to 5,103 renter households (465 to 843 net-new renter households) (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 61).

We agree with the HNR that "While Provincial Government subsidies can better enable non-market rental, West Vancouver should consider approving and encouraging more rental housing, especially considering the condition of the existing rental stock and the limited growth of purpose-built rental over the last four decades" (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 61).

Furthermore, the HNR identifies the concern that "Local employers struggle to recruit and retain employees because wages are not reflective of the high cost of housing" (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 61). Specifically:

Feedback from engagement reflects the impact of housing costs on the local economy – the high cost of rental housing has created recruitment and retention challenges for local employers. With a limited industrial tax base and a lack of affordable housing options, the community's labour force is highly commuter-based, creating congestion and contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 65)

Although the OCP and HNR have identified the need for more rental housing, option 2 and option 3 of the LAP includes little or no plans to develop additional rental buildings. To remain aligned with the OCP and to overcome the challenges highlighted in the HNR, we recommend the District include plans to build additional rental housing, including non-market rental, supportive housing, and cooperative housing, in the final Ambleside LAP.

3. Seniors' housing in accessible areas.

As more seniors are interested in downsizing to smaller, single-level, affordable units, the limited housing diversity and the high cost of apartments have led many seniors to leave West Vancouver for more affordable communities (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 60). Specifically:

Findings from this report demonstrate seniors are struggling to remain in the community as they age, given the limited number of single-level, accessible, and affordable housing options (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 65).

Although the District has made some plans for seniors housing in the LAP options, we agree with the following recommendation in the HNR:

West Vancouver should consider providing seniors' housing in areas that are walkable, close to transit, in proximity to senior services, and near support systems that they can access independently (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 64).

The proposed seniors' housing located at Fulton and 15th Street seems to present walkability challenges. We recommend the seniors' housing at Fulton and 15th Street be changed to a more appropriate location.

4. Mixed-use housing, coach houses, duplexes, and townhouses.

The HNR identified the need for a greater diversity of housing forms in Ambleside:

West Vancouver's housing form is relatively homogeneous [with] 64% [as] single detached. Stakeholders expressed a desire for greater housing choice to ensure seniors, young families, and singles have housing options that meet their needs. There is an opportunity to introduce sensitive infill housing (e.g., coach houses, duplexes), missing middle ground-oriented housing (e.g. townhouses), mixed-use housing and apartments in centres or along transit corridors to regenerate West Vancouver's existing housing (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 64).

Also, the HNR reveals that the cost of housing, which stems from the lack of housing form, affects the Ambleside community demographics:

West Vancouver has shifted from a relatively mixed demographic community to one that primarily comprises older residents. While population aging is a contributing factor to this shift, feedback from consultation indicates the cost of housing has prevented young families from moving to West Vancouver. This is reflected in population data: younger families with children and parents between 35 to 54 account for 14% of the population, down from 21% in 2011 (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 62).

The Booklet specifies that "Ambleside has an aging population and is home to 45% of West Vancouver's low-income seniors" (Ambleside Local Area Plan Options Booklet,

2023, p. 4). And, the average age in Ambleside is 58 years old (Ambleside Local Area Plan Options Booklet, 2023, p. 4).

To maintain a balanced community demographic, the HNR states:

There is a need for smaller units for singles as well as 2- and 3-bedroom units, which are typically found in infill (coach houses, duplexes, triplex, townhouses), apartments and mixed-use development – these ‘missing middle’ options can help to provide more attainable options in proximity to schools and services (Housing Needs Report, 2020, p. 62).

Therefore, to sustain a balanced community demographic, we recommend the District seek opportunities to provide mid-rise, mixed-use housing and apartments throughout and along the Ambleside corridor near public transit.

Furthermore, we recommend that, where possible, coach houses, duplexes, and townhouses be built in neighbourhood areas. And, to increase affordability, the District should consider incentives to promote secondary suites.

5. Increase capacity targets in the OCP.

The Booklet states that “The three [Ambleside LAP] options respond to existing OCP policies, including direction to create capacity for 1,000-1,200 estimate new housing units” (Ambleside Local Area Plan Options Booklet, 2023, p. 2). However, provision 2.1.13 of the OCP states that the capacity target for the Ambleside Municipal Town Centre is subject to change (Official Community Plan, 2018, p. 30). Provision 2.1.14 of the OCP elaborates that the net new unit estimates are reviewed and confirmed through the local area planning process (Official Community Plan, 2018, p. 30).

We recommend the District revisit and increase the capacity targets to account for additional rental housing units required to overcome the local concerns identified in the HNR and the OCP.

6. Create a more complete community.

Since the area covered by the Ambleside LAP is home to many of the municipality’s vital recreation and social amenities, we recommend the District adopt the strategy developed by the West Vancouver Community Center Society (now known as Enhance West Vancouver), which will be of great benefit to West Vancouver.

As well, we believe the District should support day care programs for younger families.

4. CONCLUSION

We began this review of the Ambleside LAP options with the Metro 2050 Regional Growth Strategy's statement:

A diverse and affordable housing stock is critical to accommodating growth and supporting the region's population (Metro 2050 Regional Growth Strategy, 2022, p. 69).

West Vancouver has fallen seriously behind: it does not have anywhere near a sufficient "diverse and affordable housing stock", seemingly due to a strong, historical cultural bias against growth. Many, if not most, apartments are situated along Marine Drive and are forty years old and need to be replaced, or at least significantly updated.

Overall, CHAC's most important feedback for the District is not so much which option (or parts of) is best, but the urgent necessity of creating new, diverse, and affordable housing immediately.

The Community Housing Action Committee is pleased to be invited to comment on the Ambleside LAP options, particularly as it refers to housing.

Respectfully,



Don Peters,
Chair, Community Housing Action Committee
June 1, 2023

APPENDIX A

Important Planning Studies (1946-2023)

Some thirty planning reports during this time have been completed to lay out the condition and prospects for Ambleside improvement – particularly some that describe the state of housing in this area. Seen through our housing lens, CHAC notes the following sixteen selected studies that specifically target the importance of improving housing in Ambleside.

- 1) 1946: *Comprehensive Town Plan*: made five recommendations, including reconstructing and rehabilitating older residential districts in Ambleside for continued use;
- 2) 1954: *Living and Working in West Vancouver*: this study recognized that West Vancouver was in a vulnerable position with single-family real estate carrying the residential tax load, and recommended greater diversification in housing form;
- 3) 1956: *Ambleside District Planning Study*: this study recommended major changes to parking, shopping and pedestrian patterns in the Clyde Avenue area;
- 4) 1958: *Apartments in West Vancouver*: this study noted that establishing densities in advance of widespread construction was important for effective planning;
- 5) 1980: *Official Community Plan*: This OCP noted that despite fears of growth, there was recognition that growth was a solution to providing the necessary tax base. Ambleside was recognized as the oldest neighbourhood;
- 6) 1991: *West Vancouver Directions Study-Ambleside to Dundarave*: this study encouraged small-scale hotels and restaurants;
- 7) 2004: *Official Community Plan*: This version of the OCP noted projections that indicated that the aging trend would continue with fewer young children and youth living in the community in 2004 and that many people could not afford to live in the community and that growing population would require considerable increases in health, support, housing services; also, there was a need to reinforce the role of Ambleside as the Town Centre through the building of complete communities, with new policies outlined to allow for buildings of up to three stories;
- 8) 2005: *Renewing the Heart of our Community: Ambleside Business Area Business Review*: This study noted the challenges that Ambleside faced included a low population density, a relatively older income population, a lack of younger consumers and a weaker, small-store retail presence;

- 9) 2006: *Ambleside Land Development Review*: This study concluded that the District should strive for a higher Floor Area Ratio than 1.6 FSR to achieve the goals and visions of the Ambleside Centre Strategy. (see next);
- 10) 2009; *Ambleside Village Centre Strategy*: This study recommended, among other enhancements, that the development of buildings over four stories could be considered along three special sites along Marine Dr;
- 11) 2013: *Financial Analysis for the Ambleside Centre Zoning Districts*: Among other things, this study suggested exploring changes to zoning to encourage more marketable rental units, make it easier to achieve four storeys, and clarify that residential use is allowed at grade in the lane;
- 12) 2016: *Review of Municipal Tools and Economic Analysis of Protecting and Expanding Rental Housing*: This review delved deeply into various options for providing both rental and non-market rental and found that the widely-used policies in the Lower Mainland included: leasing District-owned land for affordable housing projects, collecting affordable housing reserve funds, establishing density bonus provisions for rental housing, and fast-tracking affordable housing developments. A mixture of strata and non-market rental was seen as more viable than just market rental apartments. To develop any of the test sites as entirely non-market would likely require senior government incentives;
- 13) 2017: *Ambleside Community Profile*: Recognizing the important role of this area, this is a critical piece in this survey of Ambleside planning studies, as it lays out the needs of both the current and future success of this part of West Vancouver, concerning demographics, age, household stock, size and income, and employment. In our opinion, this profile is of vital importance to its future development;
- 14) 2018: *Economic Development Plan*: There can be no mystery regarding the mutual importance of a healthy business presence and homes for people who provide an essential, local workforce-especially along the narrow Marine Drive from 13th to 23rd;
- 15) 2018 *Official Community Plan*: This high-level framework emphasizes housing improvements in Ambleside along with several companion needs, and is aligned with the above Economic Plan;
- 16) 2020: *Housing Needs Report*: There is no need to re-visit here the important data in the HNR: these data are all critical to the current and the future well-being of the District, not to mention Ambleside. All along the housing continuum, from shelters to market rentals, the District has its version of the

rental crisis across the nation – and, in our view, needs to address where, and how, are people of different household incomes going to live?

This question applies also to the need to provide shelter accommodation for the growing number of homeless people and the provision of cold weather emergency shelters. The Lookout in North Vancouver is often over-filled.

The above seventy years of planning studies and reports, especially the two OCP's and the HNR, underscore that the supply and condition of much of West Vancouver's rental housing stock are poor. Many residents are leaving. The young and the old find appropriate and affordable housing difficult to locate. Growing numbers of the workforce must commute to jobs. The linkages are clear.

REFERENCES

- (2023). *Ambleside Local Area Plan Options Booklet*. West Vancouver: District of West Vancouver Planning Department.
- (2020). *Housing Needs Report*. West Vancouver: CitySpaces Consulting.
- (2022). *Metro 2050 Regional Growth Strategy*. Burnaby: Metro 2050 Metro Vancouver Regional District.
- (2018). *Official Community Plan*. West Vancouver: District of West Vancouver.