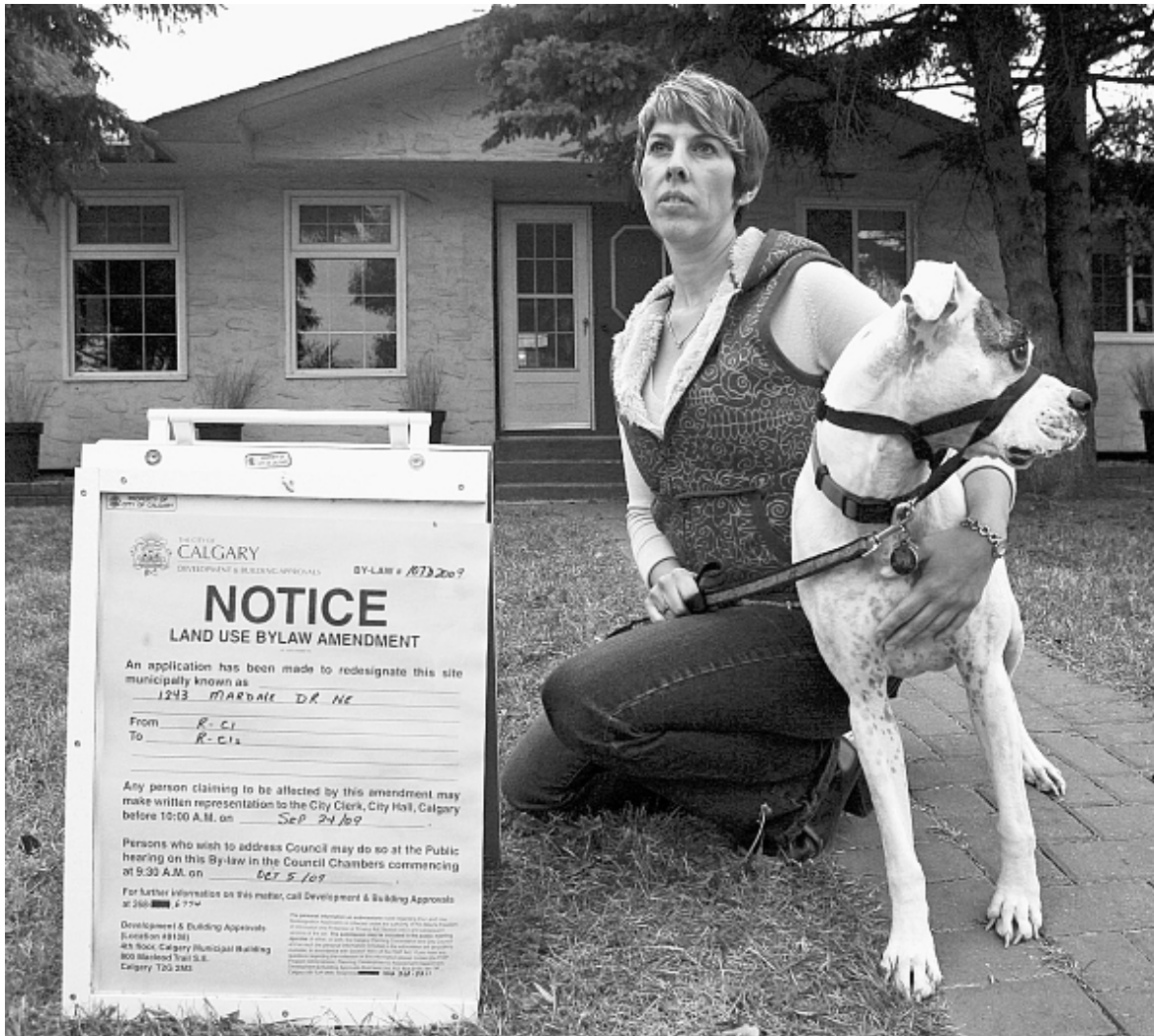


Basement suites hit brick walls

Homeowners leave city open houses frustrated by rules

BY JASON MARKUSOFF, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 10, 2009



Tammy England is surprised her neighbours and alderman oppose her bid to legalize her basement suite in marlborough, saying she will build an extra parking pad so the suite will not affect parking on the street.

Photograph by: Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

Like many others, Dan Gustafson was greeted by smiling city officials at the open house on financial subsidies to create legal secondary suites.

Like many others, he left shaking his head.

Some were told they'd need the costly, politically precarious step of rezoning their home. Others were told to wall off part of their basement so the suite would fit size regulations.

Gustafson learned there was nothing he could do, except perhaps move. His Ranchlands house sits on

too narrow a lot to qualify for a legal suite.

"They make it way too difficult. It's to the point of ridiculousness," he said.

Instead, Gustafson is considering what the city's legal-suites program was trying to prevent--an unregulated suite, perhaps with a kitchen that barely skirts rules to keep city inspectors at bay.

"Maybe we'll just have a fourth bedroom, with a separate entrance . . . you know, we'll have a 'bar' in there, quote."

The city's \$2-million secondary-suites program, offering grants of up to \$25,000, is trying to break down the financial barriers to meeting city regulations.

Would-be applicants are instead running into other brick walls.

Of the 20 Calgarians the Herald interviewed at Thursday's city-run open house at a northeast leisure centre, none said they were confident they'd qualify for the program or be able to create a suite.

They encountered an array of deal-breaking conditions set into the 2008 land-use bylaw that created the option of legalized suites.

Craig Nelson doesn't live in his Forest Lawn house, so he can't get a grant. Debra Howe said she'd need to hire a construction contractor just to figure out if she was suitable. One lady was fouled because duplexes can't have suite while many were told their land-use zoning was wrong. Another man's necessary renovations likely wouldn't be worth it.

"I'm better off trying to do it on my own, without applying for anything," said Dalhousie resident Derek, who didn't provide his last name.

The Calgary Homeless Foundation predicts it will take 200 new, affordable and legal basement or garage suites every year to meet its goal of ending homelessness in a decade.

In the 10 months before the grant program came in, the city had approved only four suites, and since it quietly began in April, there have been at least nine more, and 24 applications for the \$25,000 grants.

Hundreds attended last week's three open houses, and staff who administer the grant expected a flood of applications afterward. In the following week, however, only five came in, the grant office reported.

The bylaw setting out rules for secondary suites was set by council, city administrators have pointed out.

At another open house in Kensington last week, Ald. Druh Farrell also encountered resident after resident irked by the prohibitive rules.

"I think some were feeling that it was lip service, that we're setting it up to fail," Farrell said.

She's working with the Hillhurst-Sunnyside association to allow basement or backyard suites on the neighbourhood's narrow residential lots, and ease the requirements for parking.

But many homeowners must spend thousands of dollars on application fees to apply for rezoning -- and aldermen must consider each one individually.

Marlborough single mother Tammy England's rezoning bid squeaked through council Monday, despite opposition from her community association, neighbours and ward alderman. But it won't be final until a vote next month.

"If this goes through, I'm moving, and it won't be within Calgary," said Art de la Mare, England's neighbour.

"I bought in there because it was R1-zoned 29 years ago, and now they want to change it to allow supplemental suites? It's just going to create chaos for people to park."

Many aldermen are sensitive to established residents' worries that allowing one or two legal suites will open floodgates and transform a community's character.

"Virtually everybody puts a lot of thought into what they're buying into and what they believe is going to occur around them," Ald. Gord Lowe said. "And I don't think as government, we should change that without consultation."

He helped vote down a suite-rezoning bid in Dalhousie in the spring, despite letters of support from neighbours and the community association. He calls it "spot zoning"--trying to insert suites in a community without fully reconsidering where they fit best--and voted against two similar applications last week at the planning commission.

Andre Chabot, the alderman for Marlborough, said there are already too many illegal suites in England's neighbourhood and insufficient road capacity to encourage more legal suites. Inner-city Ald. John Mar disagreed, praising basement units as "invisible density" in communities.

Vancouver and Edmonton have lifted all zoning restrictions on suites in single-family homes in an attempt to encourage the affordable housing units.

England expressed surprise her community and neighbours worry about the impact on street parking, since she's pledging to build an extra parking pad for her basement suite, as the rules dictate.

"Some of the neighbours feel like they own the street," she said.

While the grant initiative promises to create dozens of illegal suites a year, complaints to the city have

led officials to order the shutdown of about 400 annually for the past five years, because of improper zoning or lack of development permit.

Tom Parr, another Marlborough resident, is appealing his closure order in court, arguing that his 1970s house shouldn't be covered by subsequent bylaws. None of his neighbours complained, but his basement's tenant did when she wanted to break her lease early.

"It wasn't a parking issue, because in five years, only one tenant ever had a vehicle. They don't look at everyone's individual situation," Parr said of city inspectors.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said the city should spend money on seeking out illegal units, not subsidizing more suites--especially since the housing crunch has cooled.

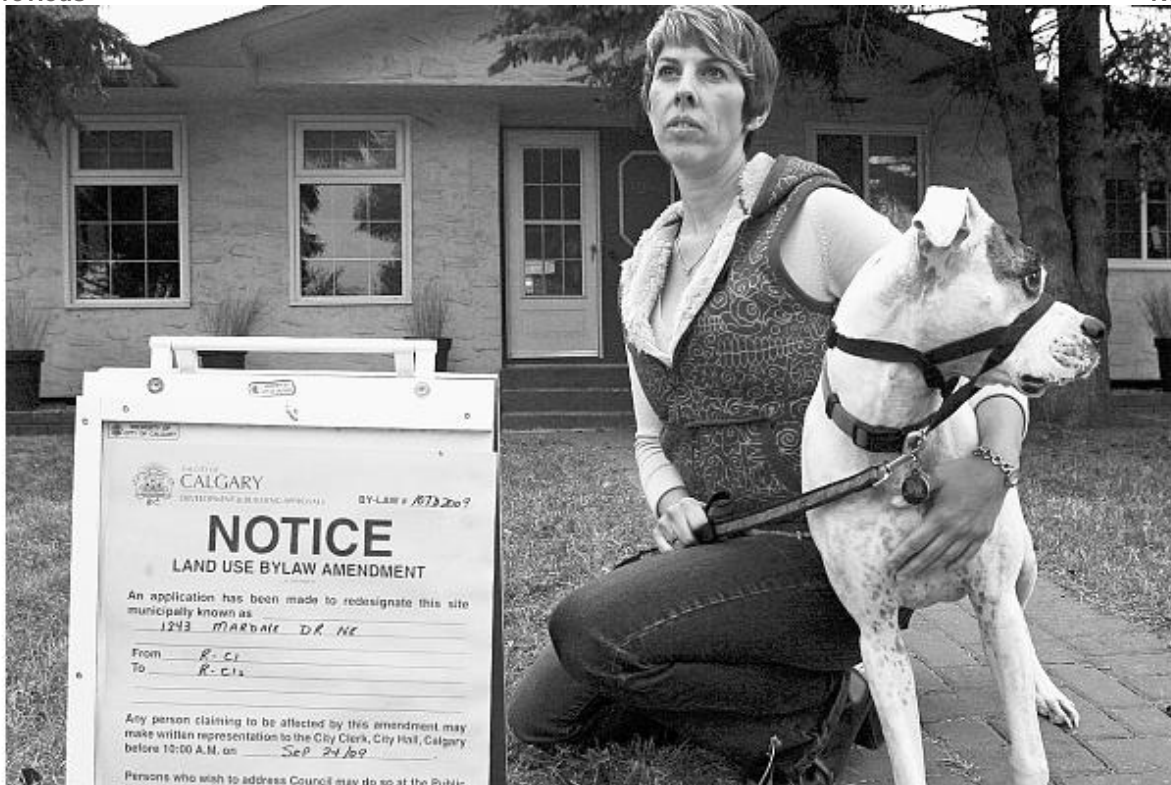
"In my community in Southwood, people are in an uproar with these illegal suites that are destroying our neighbourhoods," she said. "Take the money, hire the inspectors and get these people out of there."

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