



**Ashley, Jade & Jasmine  
with Firefighters and Alderman Diane  
Southwood Community Association Open House June 2006**



**Town Hall Meeting on  
Illegal Suites  
Southwood Community Association**

## **September 2006 Newsletter**

**Alderman  
Diane Colley-Urquhart**

### **ILLEGAL DWELLING UNITS**

What's Calgary's worst kept secret? It is estimated that 50,000 illegal dwelling units exist throughout the city with what appears to be little effort to remove them. Even MLS listings make such pronouncements as a selling feature. At a time when housing is at critical levels, communities are beginning to question whether we should turn a blind eye as they continue to proliferate.

An illegal dwelling unit (or illegal secondary suite as they are sometimes referred) is an additional dwelling unit in conjunction with a principal dwelling unit (either a single detached or semi-attached dwelling). Illegal dwelling units are not limited to "basement" suites, and also can be found as dwellings above a rear detached garage, above the main floor of a single detached unit, attached to a single detached dwelling, or even detached from the principal dwelling such as a garden suite.

At a Town Hall meeting I hosted at the Southwood Community Centre in June, almost 150 residents from across the city came to express their views to a City panel of experts. The following comments reflect the nature of the controversial discussion:

- Behaviour and the transient nature of residents was cited as the greatest concern – ill-kept properties, parties, lack of respect for the neighborhood. Others felt these residents were a welcome addition to the neighborhood.
- Parking and traffic issues created by additional people living in the unit. Others also cited homes where families with teenagers each with their own vehicle create similar problems.
- Additional pressure on schools. Others mentioned that in some established older neighborhoods, schools are being closed due to low enrollment and additional families with children are a necessity to keep community schools open and communities vibrant.

- Unfair taxation of properties when the municipality is unaware that the home is actually 2 residences; rental income earned from illegal dwelling units is not always reported. This was not seen as equitable to those homeowners who are lawful.
- Health and safety code violations (inadequate egress from windows, ceiling heights, non-code wiring, etc) place occupants at risk; the threat of fire can be a hazard to both illegal units and neighboring houses.
- R-1 means R-1, that is, illegal dwelling units are not allowed and not wanted, period.

A number of other questions were raised: Do we “rat out” and report illegal dwelling units? Should the City develop an amnesty program to encourage reporting and compliance? What climate is required to encourage landlords to upgrade illegal dwelling units to comply with building and safety codes and zoning bylaws? Do we really want to tackle this for fear of opening a can of worms that we will never be able to address with any level of success?

The majority of existing illegal dwelling units are considered illegal for one or more of the following reasons:

- They do not conform with the zoning of an area – they frequently occur in R-1 districts which only allow single detached dwellings, unlike R-2 districts which allow up to 2 dwelling units on a lot;
- They do not conform with Alberta Building Code standards;
- They have been developed without the required municipal development permits and approvals.

It is important to note that there are 3 distinct elements that require further discussion – the first is addressing those illegal dwelling units that already exist; the second is dealing with the proliferation of new ones; and the third is allowing these units with new rules in new communities.

The first is most concerning as economic and social consequences of enforcement and compliance are complex. The dilemma comes if we decide to root out all illegal dwellings and enforce existing bylaws. This could compound our housing problem. Amending bylaws to allow them in existing R-1 communities would probably cause an uproar. The potential impact of such action creates community concern and uncertainty related to diminishing property values, transiency, and increased traffic and parking. However, the potential big picture benefits could include safe housing that conforms to building and safety codes, intensifying densities in existing neighborhoods thereby reducing urban sprawl and the need for high cost infrastructure to service a larger city, revitalizing older communities with families, children and post-secondary students, addressing the affordability of home ownership by providing an additional income source allowing new homeowners starting out an opportunity to carry larger mortgages in a tight housing market, and finally, providing another form of affordable housing to accommodate our growth.

The problem is complex and so are the solutions. I really need your feedback in wrestling with this issue.

In a city of a million people with a vacancy rate of less than 1%, with a critical shortage of affordable housing resulting in over 3500 men, women and children sleeping in shelters and on the streets, an annual inflation rate the highest in the country at 4.2% in June, and skyrocketing housing prices, we are facing one of our most significant challenges ever in housing the record number of citizens that want to call Calgary their home.

The City has recently undertaken a comprehensive review of the 25 year old Land Use Bylaw which regulates zoning – a timely opportunity to put this issue on the table. Now is the time to discuss whether we leave things as they are, whether we address illegal dwelling units in areas where they are not allowed and how we do it, and whether we open doors to develop and regulate this as a form of new housing in new and established communities. It is important that you attend the Land Use Bylaw open houses later this year that I will be hosting with City officials.

I want to hear your views on illegal dwelling units. I have posted a poll on my website, [www.aldermandiane.ca](http://www.aldermandiane.ca) and urge you to vote as well as asking your friends, neighbors and colleagues to participate and provide me feedback. I also encourage you to email me with your thoughts and comments on illegal dwellings. Later this fall, I will host a follow-up Town Hall meeting to bring the feedback I have received out to your for further debate.

### **AND THE WINNERS ARE....**

Thank you to all of you who visited my new website launched in May. I am thrilled with the new look and the ability to provide more forms of interactive content in the future. Thank you too to those who registered to receive the updates that I send from time to time to keep you informed of developments and news in your communities and emerging issues where I need your input. If you have not done so and wish to be included, please register by following the “Contact Diane” link.

I am very pleased to congratulate the winners of the website draw which was made at the June Ward 13 Presidents Council meeting:

**Sandra Robertshaw, Woodbine**  
**Elizabeth Baird, Woodbine**  
**Vic Willms, Canyon Meadows**  
**Marsha-Lea Smith, Millrise**  
**Mitchell Diaper, Calgary Evergreen**

**Starbucks Gift Card**  
**Chapters Gift Card**  
**A Night at the Movies for 4**  
**Dinner at Moxie’s for 2**  
**Dinner & Flames Game for 2, compliments**  
**of Calgary Flames Owner, Harley**  
**Hotchkiss**

### **PROVIDENCE OPEN HOUSE -- MARK YOUR CALENDARS!**

A draft of the Southwest Regional Policy Plan will be presented for public review and comments at an Open House on **Wednesday, September 6, 2006 from 6:00 – 9:00 PM at Peace Lutheran Church (14640 – 6 Street SW)**. City planners will be on hand to discuss planning for the lands located north of Highway 22X (Spruce Meadows Trail SW), south of 146 Avenue, west of the Transportation & Utility Corridor, and east of 85 Street SW. A formal presentation of the Plan will take place at 7:00 PM. For further information, contact Scott Lockwood, Planner, New Communities at 268-2423, or by email at [scott.lockwood@calgary.ca](mailto:scott.lockwood@calgary.ca).

**As always, you can contact my office regarding these or any other civic matters at 268-1624, by email at [dcolley@calgary.ca](mailto:dcolley@calgary.ca), or through my website, [www.aldermandiane.ca](http://www.aldermandiane.ca). Alternatively, you can contact ‘311.’**