

Secondary Suites FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

1. Why has Council asked the Administration to look at increasing the opportunities for secondary suites in Edmonton?

Council has asked the Administration to look at Secondary Suites as one way in which the City can increase the supply of affordable housing units. They not only can increase the number of affordable units for tenants, but also can give potential first time home buyers a way to subsidize a mortgage.

2. When will there be an opportunity to provide views on secondary suites?

There will be three open houses held in September, where Staff will provide the opportunity for interested members of the public to view the proposed Zoning Bylaw amendments and be available to answer questions.

Public Open House Dates and Venues for Secondary Suites are as follows:

Thursday Sept 13, 2007 6pm-9pm
Strathcona Community League Centre
10139 87 Avenue

Tuesday Sept 18, 2007 6pm-9pm
Clareview Recreation Centre
3804 139 Avenue

Thursday Sept 20, 2007 6pm-9m
Grant MacEwan College
10045 156 Street
Room 436

A Public Hearing will follow, likely in November or December 2007. Watch the secondary suites website for updates.

www.edmonton.ca/secondariesuites

City Council also held a non-statutory hearing on secondary suites on June 13, 2007. A random telephone survey of over 400 households was conducted to gauge public opinion on secondary suites. The public was invited to participate in an on-line version of this survey as well.

For a summary of the public hearing and survey results, check out our website at www.edmonton.ca/secondariesuites

3. What is a secondary suite?

A secondary suite is any self-contained dwelling unit that includes a kitchen, bathroom and sleeping accommodation contained within a principal dwelling, usually a single detached home. Secondary suites are possible within most low density residential zones. Most secondary suites are contained within the lower level of a principal dwelling.

Garage suites, suites usually built above a detached garage, and granny flats or garden suites (smaller separate dwellings on the same lot as a principal dwelling) are considered secondary dwellings.

4. Why are many existing secondary suites illegal?

The majority of existing secondary suites are illegal for one or more of the following reasons:

- 1) The Zone within which the secondary suite is located does not allow secondary suites, or does not allow a secondary suite in the particular location.
- 2) The suite does not meet the requirements of the Alberta Building Code or Fire Code
- 3) The secondary suite does not have a valid development permit and/or building permit.

5. How are secondary suites allowed within the Current Zoning Bylaw?

Secondary suites are allowed only within single detached dwellings under certain conditions.

The Zoning Bylaw currently allows secondary suites as a permitted use in the RF3 Low Density Development Zone, where the lot abuts land zoned for row housing, apartments, commercial or industrial uses.

In all other cases, secondary suites are discretionary uses, subject to certain conditions. Discretionary use decisions may be appealed by the applicant as well as adjacent landowners (as they are a permitted use decision where the Development Officer has exercised discretion).

Opportunities for Garage suites are not as common. They are permitted or discretionary uses in a few specialty zones, including the Griesbach Low Density Residential Zone with Garage Suites (permitted) and Terwillegar Single Detached and Small Lot zones (discretionary). Opportunities for Granny Flats (separate buildings in the backyard) do not exist.

Secondary suites are currently not allowed within the RPL Planned Lot Residential Zone.

In addition, there are other regulations pertaining to secondary and garage suites, including, but not limited to, parking requirements (minimum of one additional parking spot in addition to principal dwelling) and area requirements (100 m² additional lot area required for a secondary suite).

The **attached Table 1** includes the zones where secondary suites are currently allowed.

6. What changes are expected to the Zoning Bylaw in order to increase the opportunities for secondary suites?

City Council endorsed the Administration's proposed two-phase plan to implement Zoning Bylaw changes in order to include more opportunities for Secondary Suites, as well as Garage Suites (Secondary Dwellings), throughout the City on July 17, 2007.

This approach includes increasing the opportunity for secondary suites in the RF1, RF2, RF3, RF4, RSL and RPL low density zones, as well as the RF5 and RF6 medium density, and the RA7, RA8 and RA(high density zones).

For the most part, the opportunity for secondary suites is being increased through the following:

- 1) Increasing the opportunity to a Permitted, rather than a Discretionary, Use in most Zones (Discretionary permits require adjacent landowner notification).
- 2) Decreasing the minimum size of lots to accommodate Secondary Suites (from the 100 m² additional Site area requirement to an across the board minimum lot size of 360 m²).
- 3) Decreasing the number of locational restrictions for secondary suites in the RF1 and RF2 Zones (as part of the phased approach)
- 4) Adding the opportunity for secondary suites in zones where it is currently not an allowed use, such as the RPL Zone.

Opportunities are proposed to be increased for Garage Suites through introducing the opportunity for Garage Suites into most residential zones as a Discretionary Use (adjacent landowner notification required). Currently the Use is only allowed in Terwillegar Towne and Griesbach specialty zones.

7. What will the proposed changes to the Zoning Bylaw not do?

Changes to the Zoning Bylaw will not automatically make existing suites legal. Secondary suites will still require a development permit as well as a building permit. These changes may make it possible for an increased number homeowners with existing suites to apply for development and building permits. Changes may also provide increased opportunities for those planning to build new homes to apply for development and building permits for new secondary suites.

It is not expected that Zoning Bylaw amendments will allow more than one secondary suite in a single principal dwelling.

Zoning Bylaw changes will not address Building or Fire Code issues.

Phase 1 amendments will not provide the opportunity for Secondary Suites and Garage Suites throughout the entire RF1 and RF2 Zones. Further amendments will be considered for Phase 2 (12-18 months after approval of Phase 1 amendments) that may include considering the opportunity throughout the RF1 and RF2 Zones.

8. How will recent changes to the Alberta Building Code and anticipated changes to the Alberta Fire Code impact the provision of secondary suites?

The Province of Alberta has recently created new construction and maintenance standards for secondary suites (in the form of basement suites) through new Building Code standards adopted in December 2006. For existing secondary suites, the Alberta Fire Code will apply. Changes to Fire Code standards are not expected to be implemented until December 2008. Changes to the Alberta Building and Fire Codes are intended to facilitate the development of secondary suites while still maintaining an acceptable level of health and safety.

Any changes that are made at the provincial level will provide a potentially greater opportunity for existing and new secondary suites to conform to new building and fire standards. However, they will not automatically render any existing or proposed secondary suite legal.

A homeowner must apply to the City to ensure that their proposal for a suite, existing or new, conforms to the Zoning Bylaw and the Alberta Building Code.

9. What could be some of the advantages for landlords and tenants of more secondary suites?

For a list of benefits of secondary suites please see attached Table 2

Rental Housing Supply: Compared with other forms of rental housing, secondary suites are relatively easy to create, and use existing infrastructure and buildings (in the case of basement suites).

Affordability: Compared with other forms of rental housing, secondary suites tend to be more affordable than other types of housing.

Mortgage Helper: Financial institutions recognize income from secondary suites when qualifying home buyers for mortgages, provided that the secondary suite is legal, and conforming to municipal bylaws.

In-Law Suites: Secondary suites can assist seniors and empty nesters on fixed incomes to remain in their community, through the provision of supplemental income.

Secondary suites provide a means through which children can provide accommodation and assistance to elderly relatives and also families to provide accommodation to adult children, while still maintaining independence.

Current City of Edmonton Zoning Bylaw - Secondary Suites Table 1

Secondary Suites

Zones where use case is allowed	What is Allowed?		
	Permitted	Discretionary	Regulations
RA7 Low Rise Apartment			* Discretionary
RA8 Medium Rise Apartment			* Discretionary
RA9 High Rise Apartment			* Discretionary
RF1 Single Detached Residential			* Discretionary
RF2 Low Density Infill			* Discretionary
RF3 Low Density Development			* Perm/Disc
RF4 Semi-detached Residential		Yes	
RF5 Row Housing			* Discretionary
RF6 Medium Density Multiple Family			* Discretionary
RSL Residential Small Lot			* Discretionary
TSDR Terwillegar Single Detached Residential		Yes	
TSLR Terwillegar Small Lot Residential		Yes	
RF4t Terwillegar Semidetached Residential			Discretionary, as RF4
RF5g Griesbach Row Housing			Discretionary, as RF5
RF5t Terwillegar Row Housing			Discretionary, as RF5
RA7g Griesbach Low Rise Apartment			Discretionary, as RA7

Note: * See regulations within the applicable zone.

Garage Suites

Zones where use case is allowed	What is Allowed?		
	Permitted	Discretionary	Regulations
GLG Griesbach Low Density Residential with Garage Suites	Yes		
TSDR Terwillegar Single Detached Residential		Yes	

*Secondary Suites Table 2 – Tenant, Owner and Community Benefits

Benefits to Tenant	Benefits to Owner	Benefits to Community	Benefits Legalized (to Tenants & Community)
<p>Affordability/Market Impact - Secondary suites increase supply on market and tend to be lower cost than apartments</p> <p>Choice - Offers a choice to live in a low density neighbourhood. Secondary suites are ground-oriented, usually include access to yard.</p> <p>Proximity to Services - Suites in existing neighbourhoods include benefit of having access to existing schools, shopping, recreation, and other services</p>	<p>Mortgage Helper - Offers an option for new home buyers to assist in mortgage payments.</p> <p>Seniors/fixed income groups - Have greater potential to remain in their homes. Seniors may feel more secure and have assistance with property up-keep through tenant agreement.</p> <p>In-Law Suites - Opportunity to provide children or elderly relative with opportunity for independence within same principle dwelling. Alternative to assisted living.</p>	<p>Maintain/Modestly Increase population - Modest population increase in communities that may be subject to population decline due to life cycle changes - Population thresholds can increase viability of commercial and public services</p> <p>Neighbourhood Character - Secondary suites increase rental housing stock without significantly changing form of low density neighbourhoods</p> <p>Promotes Smart Choices - Increase density in existing neighbourhoods, lessening pressure to develop at outer edge of community.</p> <p>Use of Existing Infrastructure - Make use of existing infrastructure (utilities, roads, parks, schools) that may be under-utilized through decline in population</p> <p>Socio-Economic Diversity - Secondary Suites allow citizens from range of economic levels and age groups to live in same neighbourhood</p>	<p>Stability - More reliable and stable rental supply (not subject to risk termination due to enforcement action)</p> <p>Income Stream for Mortgage qualification - Legal Suites are recognized by lenders such that they can assist in qualifying new home owners for mortgages.</p> <p>Increase in Federal Transfer Payments - Tenants will be more easily identified, and can result in higher population counts, thus increasing population-based grants.</p> <p>Infrastructure Planning - Increased certainty on number of dwelling units provides government better opportunity to plan infrastructure requirements</p> <p>Health & Safety - Increasing legal opportunities for secondary suites will provide better opportunity for ensuring minimum health and safety standards are met (Fire and Building Code).</p>

*Adapted from "Secondary Suites: A Tool to Address Calgary's Affordable Housing Needs" United Way, Calgary. Revised March 2007.