

Press release: New West Tenants Union wins progress on protections against transit-oriented demovictions

For immediate release

June 11, 2024

New West Tenants Union wins progress on protections against transit-oriented demovictions

NEW WESTMINSTER — Tenants celebrated a major step for renter security when their building is redeveloped, as New Westminster city council last night unanimously passed a motion to direct staff to develop a strengthened tenant protection bylaw.

Couns. Nadine Nakagawa and Ruby Campbell brought forward the motion Monday evening, two months into a campaign by the New West Tenants Union for protections against demovictions in the community. The motion directed city staff to look at developing a tenant protection bylaw, with the City of Burnaby's tenant assistance policy as a model.

To date, New West has been comparatively safe for renters with regard to redevelopment, due to rules against converting rentals into condos. But the tenants union raised concerns that this could change with the B.C. government's transit-oriented development legislation, introduced last fall as part of a suite of housing bills.

Bill 47 requires cities to allow up to 20 storeys within 200 metres of a SkyTrain station, up to 12 storeys within 400 m and up to eight storeys within 800 m. While this doesn't give developers carte blanche to redevelop properties in the transit-oriented development zones, it does lift significant barriers to developers, and the tenants union argued it could open New West up to a Metrotown-style land rush.

"The dominant theory around housing these days seems to be, effectively, any and all supply at all costs, and if you look to Metrotown a decade ago, you can really see what the cost is for that kind of approach to housing. And often, it is at the cost of renters, and at the cost of affordable units," Dustin Godfrey, a volunteer organizer with the NWTU, told council.

"I'm particularly concerned about that kind of effect today because of just how obscene housing prices are today."

Tenant David Sadoway argued the benefits to developers from upzoning neighbourhoods should also be extended to the tenants that those developments would otherwise displace.

"Yes, it's important to have housing near transit, particularly for renters, particularly public housing, particularly non-profit housing," said Sadoway, who is also a Kwantlen Polytechnic University instructor in urban geography and urban planning.

"If this [law] unwittingly creates a situation where rezonings happen, and where the developments then become condominiums, not only is the profit to private developers an issue, because that's essentially a land lift subsidized by the public sector, but also the displacement of those who are in existing affordable housing."

The NWTU's campaign over the last two months involved surveying renters in buildings the tenants union found to be at a high risk of redevelopment about the rents they are currently paying and those that can

be found on the market today. Preliminary results from those surveys, presented to council by NWTU organizer David Hendry, indicate many renters in those buildings could be facing their rent nearly doubling.

“There’s a tremendous gap,” Hendry told council. “At least these people that were surveyed, they’re looking at anywhere from \$900 to \$1,500 increase in rent, which most of them could not afford. Eighty per cent said that they could not afford to stay, and they would move to Surrey, Langley, Alberta, or they would just have no idea what to do.”

The New West Tenants Union is proposing a Burnaby But Better bylaw that would provide tenants with a unit in the new building at the same rent they were paying in the demolished building, along with annual rent increases allowed by the province. The tenants union seeks to improve upon the Burnaby model in a few ways, including:

- Extending the interim rent support to cover the entire time of development, regardless of how long it takes
- An independent third party not hired by the developer to oversee the relocation process and inform tenants of their rights and options
- Ensuring affordable and market units aren’t segregated, and that amenities available to market units are equally available to affordable units
- Requiring market units and affordable units to be the same size
- Tenant consultation throughout the process, including shaping the development

Media Inquiries can be directed to:

Dustin Godfrey 778-988-4984 (Availability: 1:30-4:30pm Tuesday, 8-10am, 11am-4:30pm Wednesday)

Or David Hendry 604-780-5705 (Availability: 12pm onwards Tuesday)

New Westminster Tenants Union

Or by email at: nwtenantsunion@gmail.com

Reality Check

City council voted unanimously in favour of the motion, despite efforts by New West Progressives to water it down with an amendment that would push for more involvement by private developers in building the policy. The amendment, moved by Coun. Daniel Fontaine, also sought to move away from the Burnaby model, instead asking city staff to look for an “evidence-based” approach to tenant protections.

Fontaine pointed to the city’s demovictions prior to the tenant assistance policy and said he doesn’t see Burnaby as a model to emulate. However, this is an impressive level of mental gymnastics that ultimately appears to be an attempt to slow or diminish tenant protections.

Any astute politician would know the story of demovictions in the Metrotown area. They would know that the choice of prolonging mass demovictions was the decisive election issue that ultimately ousted Derek Corrigan and ushered in Mayor Mike Hurley’s task force, composed of tenant advocates and unions as well as private developers.

It was the hard work of tenant advocates and union representatives within the mayor’s task force, arguing with developers and insisting on first refusal rights and rent support that won these important policy innovations.

The current Burnaby tenant assistance policy is not without faults, but it represents the current high-water mark of tenants gaining a foothold of dignity in the redevelopment process to not be violently uprooted and displaced out of their communities for a small sum of money.

Equating the current TAP, a direct response and solution to demovictions, with the previous administration is a gross mistelling of the Burnaby story and does not uphold the important innovations and hard fought gains that were achieved.

These are the building blocks from which we propose a Burnaby but Better tenant relocation policy in New West. An attempt to roll back the clock on these ground-setting innovations and downplay their importance is an attack on tenants rights and the fight to a dignified life in New Westminster.