

## **Rental Housing Task Force**

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Via email: [RentalHousing.TaskForce@gov.bc.ca](mailto:RentalHousing.TaskForce@gov.bc.ca)

### **Re Fairness for Renters: Affordability, Security, and Justice**

Dear Rental Housing Task Force,

It our pleasure to provide our input to the *Rental Housing Task Force*. We have put this submission together based on our interactions with constituents here in Vancouver-Fairview.

We have the privilege to speak with constituents every day and to hear varied perspectives on what matters to people in our community. We get to hear what's broken and, often, people's thoughts on how it can be fixed. And it's not exactly a state secret that people disagree. People disagree a lot. But the one thing we find that people consistently agree on – at least when it comes to housing – is that the way things are is not the way they should be.

Whether it's here in Fairview, elsewhere in the Metro Vancouver region, or across the province, renters are struggling. First, with vacancy rates below one percent in many communities, they fight to find a decent place to live. Then they fight to stay afloat with rising rents (not to mention stagnant wages and soaring prices). They fight demovictions, renovictions, and all the uncertainty and vulnerability that comes with being a renter. This benefits no one. Even those who are making massive short-term gains in our overheated housing markets will eventually pay the price of a hollowed-out city with fewer and fewer young people, families, and workers. Not to mention what happens to local businesses when people are spending ever more of their paycheques on housing, leaving less and less for disposable income. To protect renters and landlords alike, we must focus on affordability, security, and justice.

#### **Affordability**

The government recognizes that the main principle guiding all of their work should be affordability. Many of our constituents are low-income seniors who live on fixed incomes and rely on access to subsidized housing in order to have a safe, stable place to live. Over the years, the *Shelter Aid For Elderly Residents* (SAFER) program has provided much-needed subsidies for such people. Today, many seniors are concerned that the increases to SAFER have not kept up with the growing cost of living, especially in major urban areas throughout the province. Those receiving *Old Age Security* (and, often the *Guaranteed Income Supplement*) may have been able to make do with having two-thirds of their fixed income left over for non-housing costs before, but many seniors tell us this is no longer a sustainable calculus. We were thrilled to hear that, as of

September of this year, the average SAFER subsidy will go up by approximately \$930 per year. This is an important step in the right direction and we hope to see more measures such as this in the future.

While recent changes to renters' rights when renovations are undertaken have been welcomed, renters have also expressed concern that, even with a right of first refusal, the ability of landlords to charge market rents may make their long-time homes unaffordable and have the same negative impact as the recently closed "geographic comparability" rent increase policy. This is emphasized in a rental market where prices were subject to large increases over a number of years enabled by legislative loopholes. While it is true that renovations impose new costs and landlords need to recover these reasonably or they may have no incentive to improve the rental unit, there are existing mechanisms to make an application for additional rent increases based on actual cost, on a case-by-case basis, where all circumstances can be considered.

## **Security**

The feeling of housing insecurity is at the heart of the stories we hear from renters in Fairview. Whether it be a young family or senior on a fixed income, there is an undeniable sense of anxiety over the long term security of their housing situation. People see their friends and neighbours displaced as a result of evictions and increasing rents and wonder whether they'll be next. Young families worry about having to leave their neighbourhood only to be disconnected from local services like schools and childcare. Seniors often speak of their precarious living situations. As many are long-time renters in their current homes, and therefore pay below-market rents, seniors feel particularly vulnerable. They see rents increase in their neighbourhood and worry about being evicted so their landlord can increase rent for new tenants. Other low income and marginalised populations share similar concerns about not having the resources to find a new affordable place to live.

In addition, many of our constituents have written to us about the lack of protection for pet owners. In an overheated housing market with very low vacancy rates, pet ownership should not be a barrier to finding a place to live. A few of our constituents have also written to us about strata age restrictions for those below the age of nineteen. Under normal circumstances, allowing such a policy may seem harmless, but in a housing crisis this kind of restriction seems counterproductive. This is especially burdensome because many families struggle to find adequate housing and are left facing difficult choices as a result.

We are pleased with the measures the government has taken to protect renters from evictions (closing the fixed-term loophole, eliminating the geographic rent increase, changing the rules that apply in cases of demovictions and renovictions), and hope to see these strengthened further through recommendations from the *Task Force*.

## Justice

Unaffordability, low vacancy rates, and housing insecurity all lead to an environment where tenants are fearful of standing up for their rights. We believe it is essential that tenants have confidence in and improved access to the dispute resolution process. We have heard countless stories of people who refrain from raising a concern with their landlord or disputing a conflict over fear of repercussions. As a result, bad behaviour is perpetuated and often goes unchallenged. We were pleased to see the recent changes to the Residential Tenancy Act that provides tenants with more time to dispute a notice to end a tenancy and more time to find alternate housing if their landlord ends a tenancy. We would also like to see changes to the timeline for *Orders of Possession* to further improve the fairness of the dispute process. One story we have consistently heard is that tenants are not given enough time to vacate if their landlord wins an eviction hearing. Arbitrators often issue *Orders of Possession* requiring the tenant to move out in as little as forty-eight hours after the hearing. While we understand that tenants can ask for a longer *Order of Possession*, this short timeline deters many people from disputing in the first place. We would like to see an increase in the minimum order of possession timeline to encourage participation and reduce the potential hardship faced by difficulty in finding a new place to live. Having the time and resources to access the dispute process can be particularly challenging for marginalised populations; in these cases the power discrepancy that exists between landlord and tenant is particularly evident.

These changes will create a more fair and accessible dispute process, and ultimately deter bad faith behaviour and produce more equitable outcomes. Helping tenants achieve peace of mind when renting also benefits landlords. Reducing the tension and anxiety associated with precarious living situations benefits all parties involved (not to mention society as a whole). Making the rules surrounding residential tenancies more equitable and just benefits the landlord-tenant relationship as a whole and serves to protect good landlords and good tenants alike.

Our communities are complex ecosystems that thrive on cooperation. We build, we adapt, and we thrive by working together. We are better off when our communities are inclusive and diverse and make room for everybody, not just those at the top of the socio-economic ladder. We are encouraged and excited about all the meaningful steps taken to address the rental housing crisis so far and are hopeful that this Task Force will lead to even more progress on the matter.

Sincerely,

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