

Municipality to launch waitlist for affordable housing

Following a careful review of how it works elsewhere and fine-tuning to make it fit just right for Bowen, the municipality has designed Ownership Unit Guidelines. These procedures outline the qualifications and waitlist process to identify eligibility and register those seeking to purchase affordable housing on Bowen. Tim Wake, working closely with the Affordable Housing Working Group, presented the Ownership Unit Guidelines to Council in September.

The affordable housing consultant explained that the guidelines were written to be as simple as possible. They outline a straightforward process that will lead to an opportunity for applicants to purchase housing units, when they eventually become available. Though that may still be a few years down the road, it is not uncommon for potential purchasers to choose to add their names to a long-term waitlist in anticipation of owning at some point. That is not generally the case for renters looking for a place to live immediately or within a few months, so the activation of a rental waitlist is not yet planned.

To be added to the waitlist, individuals must fill out an application and meet a number of criteria. To qualify, they must be a resident or permanently employed on the island. They must not own property anywhere in the world, for at least five years prior to the time they apply to be on the waitlist for a residential unit. As well, applicants must be able to obtain pre-approval for a mortgage.

To get the list started, the guidelines have established a rough screening procedure to be followed for the first three months only. Applications from qualified individuals will be placed in a priority sequence based on a point system. Points will be assigned, totaling one point per year for every year of permanent residence on Bowen for adults 19 years of age and older and half a point per year for each child in the same household.

This will give families and long-term residents a slight advantage, noted Wake.

After the first three months, however, the point system will be dropped and qualified applicants will be added on a first-come-first-served basis.

The municipal housing corporation, to be established in early 2009, will ultimately file, review and hold applications. In the interim, the Affordable Housing Working Group will be responsible for administering the applications.

The new housing corporation will hold the right to disqualify applicants if information cannot be verified, is inaccurate or incomplete. As well, under special circumstances, its Board of Directors will have the authority to approve the addition to the waitlist of an applicant who does not meet all qualification criteria.

The housing corporation will keep applicants on the list updated on their position. As units are built, it will hold open house sales events. Applicants high on the list will be given three chances to purchase a unit. If they choose not to buy, they will be dropped to the end of the list.

Some Council members were concerned that the procedures as proposed would not fully ensure that the housing would go to those who most need it. The question was raised as to why qualifications were not based on income level.

Wake responded that it is unlikely that those who are not truly in need will be interested in the units that will be offered for sale. The goal is to "preserve the community that exists now."

The Affordable Housing Working Group is currently finalizing the application for the ownership waitlist. It will announce the launch of the list and make applications widely available later this month. It will circulate an information bulletin to all residents and hold two public information meetings, one on the evening of 23 October, at the Gallery @ Artisan Square, and a second on a Saturday morning, 22 November, at Cates Hill Chapel.

This is the fifth in a series of articles presented by the municipally appointed Affordable Housing Working Group. To view these articles online, please visit the website of the Bowen Island Municipality, at www.bimbc.ca. The topic of Affordable Housing is listed under the "Current Events" heading on the left side of the homepage. These articles can also be viewed online at www.bowenhousing.org.