



Family Housing, Downtown

A dream of many planners and downtown boosters – in cities large and small – is to draw more people into living downtown. To a surprising degree, and in sometimes unexpected places, this is happening. The Brookings Institution, for example, has reported on quite large percentage increases in the downtown population of a number of major cities.¹

In part, this trend is being driven by the increased housing and transportation costs suburbanites face. But even more of a factor relates to “lifestyle” preferences of aging empty-nesters and young urban professionals.

But how solid a base can be built on these two ends of the demographic spectrum? A gaping hole is the broad swath of families with children – especially school-age children – who are rarely found living in our downtowns.²

One city that has directly addressed this challenge is Vancouver, British

Columbia. Through a series of specific planning and development policies, the city has made it much more realistic for families to consider living downtown.

Ann McAfee, Co-Director of Planning for Vancouver, acknowledges that “housing families in inner-city high density areas is not easy.” Yet between 1996 and 2001, the number of families with children living in Vancouver’s 2.2 square mile downtown increased from 2,545 to 5,680.

What has made this work in Vancouver? As McAfee tells it: “We researched experiences of families living in apartments. To our surprise, we found that the size (number of units) of a family project is more important than the density (units per acre).” Moreover, she continues, “density can be mitigated by factors such as location close to daycare, schools, shopping, and transit, as well as by project design that includes open space and play areas.” But McAfee cautions that knowing how to build livable family housing is only the first step, the second “is to ensure developments include housing suitable for families.”

Vancouver has approached this second step in two ways. First, for larger developments the city requires, as a condition of approval, that 25 percent of all units be designed to be suitable for households with children.³ Larger developments must also provide services for families includ-

ing parks, daycare, and school sites. Smaller developments pay a cash development charge which goes to finance non-market affordable housing, parks, and other community services.

McAfee acknowledges that Vancouver’s “buoyant economy” helps allow for the imposition of these kind of development conditions and charges.

The other key element in providing housing suitable for families is found in the “point block tower” form of Vancouver’s typical downtown housing. All new residential towers are located in the center of the site and are surrounded, at street level, by two to three story “town homes.” These two to three bedroom town homes, each with individual access to the sidewalk, are designed as family housing.

While Vancouver’s approach to developing downtown family housing may be too demanding for some cities to follow, it does seem to be working. It also reflects an understanding of the need to have in place the “infrastructure” of schools, parks, groceries, and daycare facilities essential to accommodating family living downtown. ♦

1 See “A Rise in Downtown Living” <www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/livingdowntown.htm>. While recent percentage increases are high, absolute numbers are still fairly low.

2 See “Who Lives Downtown” <www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20051115_Birch.pdf>, which reports that in 2000, families with children made up just 10 percent of all downtown households.

3 In addition, 20 percent of all units are to be available for lower income households through cooperative and other affordable non-market rental programs; half of these lower income units must be designed for families with children.



Vancouver’s approach to downtown housing focuses on having family-oriented town homes surrounding residential towers. Parks and play areas for kids are integral to new development.



For more information, contact Ann McAfee at: ann.mcafee@vancouver.ca. For details on Vancouver’s planning process: <www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/>. The city’s guidelines for housing families at high density are available at: <www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/H004.pdf>.