



Local News

Vancouver council strengthens renter protections but key measures sent for study

The Vancouver Tenants Union calls it an "incredible win for literally half the population," referring to the roughly 50 per cent of people in Vancouver who are renters.

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Coun. Jean Swanson speaks at a rally against renovictions before a council vote at Vancouver city hall on Tuesday. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP /PNG

Vancouver council voted Tuesday to strengthen protection for the city’s renters, many of whom face precarious tenure in a pricey city with a near-zero vacancy rate — a decision celebrated by renters and advocates as a win.

Councillor Jean Swanson’s motion, intended to protect tenants from “renovictions and aggressive buyouts,” drew 56 speakers over two nights and a large crowd that rallied outside council chambers before the vote on Tuesday.



“We are in disbelief we got a unanimous vote,” said Sara Sagaii of the Vancouver Tenants Union, calling the decision an “incredible win for literally half the population,” referring to the approximately 50 per cent of people in Vancouver who are renters.



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“It speaks to the strength of the testimonies we have heard from tenants,” she said. “The fact that renovictions are bad, you can’t debate that.”

A group of people, including Jean Swanson, are gathered at a rally against renovictions. They are holding signs that say "STOP RENOVICATIONS" and "TENANT POWER". Jean Swanson is speaking into a microphone.

Coun. Jean Swanson speaks at a rally against renovictions before a council vote at Vancouver city hall on Tuesday. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP /PNG

Council voted to require landlords to offer displaced tenants the opportunity to temporarily move out during renovations, but return without their rent increasing or their leases ending. It also voted to track tenant buyouts and to inform affected tenants of their rights by mail.

However, council voted to refer two sections of the motion to staff for a closer look. One proposed the city apply its tenant relocation and protection policy to all forms of rental accommodation and to all parts of the city. The policy only applies to a limited number of rental properties subject to renovation and demolition, particularly those that require development permits. The second asked the province be urged to implement effective vacancy controls.

“We need to make sure we are not making things worse,” said Mayor Kennedy Stewart, who proposed the amendments, noting the city needs to make sure it has the authority to implement the motion under the Vancouver Charter, the provincial law that governs Vancouver.

Staff is expected to report by March 2019.

Councillor Adriane Carr said she was worried about the impact of extending the tenant relocation and protection policy to the approximately 30,000 secondary suites in the city, the majority of them illegal.

“I am amongst those worried of the impact this may have if it were to come forward as it is,” said Carr. “I do not want to see that secondary market lose suites. We don’t want to have unintended consequences such as taking rental stock out of the market.”

Swanson said the “wishy-washy-ed” motion is not the strong signal she hoped to send developers, adding some renters cannot wait three months for the staff report.

Councillor Peter Fry said he did not want to risk anything that could hurt an already fragile rental stock, but believes council is already signalling that it gives renter concerns a higher priority than that of

“We’re sending a signal we need to control this crisis and stanch the flow. Once we get our vacancy rate back up to a healthier form, we can revisit the concerns of industry,” he told reporters after the meeting.

Representatives from landlords had opposed the motion, saying it could bring the unintended consequence of reducing the amount of rental housing, which would hurt renters.

Sagaii said she was frustrated by the three-month delay in extending the rental protection policy to all rental accommodations in the city, saying protection should apply to all renters, including those in basement suites or the secondary market because they are already more vulnerable than those in purpose-built rental housing.

Tuesday night’s debate unfolded in the midst of big changes coming to the rental landscape of Vancouver and the rest of B.C. The provincial government’s rental housing task force is expected to deliver its final report soon, which will recommend changes to B.C.’s residential tenancy laws.

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— *With files from Dan Fumano*



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