

# Why your municipal vote matters in the long run

Civic leaders can influence housing supply and, therefore, costs. Ask the candidates what a livable neighbourhood looks like



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## REAL ESTATE MATTERS

There was very little talk about housing in the long campaign that led up to last Tuesday's national election. The onslaught midway through the campaign of almost worldwide panic about the fallout from the U.S. economic meltdown dominated the debate. But housing is a key issue in other election campaigns underway — the campaigns for Nov. 15's provincewide municipal elections — campaigns almost lost in the flurry of the past month's economic storm.

Municipalities really are front-row-centre when it comes to policy-making that impacts housing. In fact, housing is almost an economic afterthought for parliamentarians in Ottawa, since Canada is one of the few western countries without a national housing strategy and much of the decision-making that impacts housing supply is delegated to the provinces. The provinces, in turn, delegate a lot of their authority to municipalities.

In a number of municipalities, voters paying attention to the contest for political control of local governments are hearing a lot of the standard rhetoric about that elusive term "affordable housing."

That catch-all phrase tends to be used to wrap up a wide range of issues associated with people and shelter. It can include everything from the dire needs of homeless street people to the debate over whether or not vacant luxury condo homes should be levied a special tax.

Public perceptions about the term "affordable" are changing almost daily as the realities of a sudden shift in our cyclical housing market have begun to change the way we think about the value of our homes.

The concern about skyrocketing prices has already given way to an emerging concern about maintaining property values in a declining market. Who would have thought, even six months ago, that those who have high-ratio mortgages and little wriggle room in terms of extra income would have an emerging concern about slipping housing values and the security of their homes?

With the affordability issue changing as we speak, the focus on housing issues during the municipal election campaign perhaps should shift to longer-term issues.

Concern about the relative cost of a roof over your head is indeed a long-term issue.

However, instead of focusing on government intervening to deal with short-term issues associated with high housing prices during periods when demand for housing far outstrips supply, we should be looking at the bigger issues of how governments can ensure an adequate stable housing supply.

We need to be concerned about the big issues around how and where homes are built and how we design our communities to protect the quality of life we enjoy today.

After all, what's the point of

having a roof over your head if living in that home means commuting two hours to your job, or living in a suburban wasteland where there is a no sense of community and where you spend a big chunk of your paycheck on gasoline for your car since you must drive everywhere to meet your daily needs?

Over the long term, it's really all about housing supply — something municipal politicians have a lot of control over.

The issues local politicians will grapple with in the Metro Vancouver area over this next term of office will in many ways set in stone the way housing will be supplied over the next 50 years.

Where will new housing go to meet demand?

What housing choice will be available for an aging population? What will a livable neighbourhood look like? How can we accommodate more growth without encouraging sprawl?

Which politicians are prepared to stand up to NIMBYs who resist higher density infill housing development?

What amenities will we be able to enjoy in the places we live? How will we move about and what role will the automobile play — as a driver in the housing-cost equation and as a form-maker in terms of the way we design and lay out our settlements?

These are the most relevant questions about long-term housing policy in this region. So, in these municipal election campaigns, you should be asking questions of candidates about these big-picture questions.

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