

Message to Coleman: protect renters' rights

By Mike Howell
The Vancouver Courier
October 9, 2005

The head of an Olympic watchdog group is fearful rents could increase in the years leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympics because of the influx of well-paid trades workers looking for accommodation.

Linda Mix, chairperson of the Impact on Community Coalition, said workers moving to Vancouver to build Olympic facilities could create a boon for landlords wanting to earn more money.

"If you're a union-paid trades person, you're probably making more than 20 dollars an hour and you could probably afford the higher rents," she said.

Mix is concerned some landlords will jack up rents, leaving low-income renters looking for other places to live or out on the street.

She pointed out that the B.C. government amended the Residential Tenancy Act last year to allow landlords to make retroactive rent increases.

"It's hidden in the regulations and a lot of people don't know about it, but savvy landlords, if they do their homework, know about this," said Mix, the former executive director of the Tenants Rights Action coalition. "I'd like to see that repealed."

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation figures show that the vacancy rate at two per cent in the city and the average price of a two-bedroom apartment at \$948 per month.

Mix sent a letter dated Oct. 3 to B.C. Housing Minister Rich Coleman asking that he and his staff ensure rental housing stock and tenants' rights are protected leading up to the Games.

"It's like buying an insurance policy," she said. "You don't buy the insurance after you've had a break-in. You buy it before to protect yourself."

In her letter, Mix pointed out that the 1988 Olympics in Calgary and the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City showed that tenants are "the first to take a direct negative hit from events of this nature in the form of steep rent increases."

Mix said she would like to meet with Coleman and his staff to discuss options that construction companies in Torino, Italy have implemented as workers there build facilities for the 2006 Winter Olympics.

She said some companies in Italy have built housing for construction workers and the city of Torino has agreed to buy the housing after the Games and offer it to low-income renters.

Max Cleevely, spokesman for Coleman's office, said the minister hasn't had a chance to review Mix's letter and therefore couldn't comment until he reads it.

So far, the city is doing its part in protecting housing stock, said Mix, noting council introduced the Single Room Accommodation bylaw that regulates the demolition or conversion of SRO hotels. Council has also legalized secondary suites and approved the Homeless Action Plan that calls for more low-income housing and the protection of it.

"The city is already making plans to deal with renters leading up to the Games, and I think the province needs to start as well," Mix said. "I'm saying let's get protections in place now."

Mix's watchdog group was co-founded by Jim Green, who is Vision Vancouver's mayoral candidate. Green voted in favour of Vancouver hosting the Olympics in 2010.