



COUNCIL REPORT

Report Date: May 14, 2024
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VanRIMS No.: 08-2000-20
Meeting Date: May 29, 2024
[Submit comments to Council](#)

TO: Standing Committee on City Finance and Services
FROM: Chief Building Official
SUBJECT: Adaptable Housing Design in the Building By-law

Recommendations

- A. THAT Council approve in principle, the general adoption, with such amendments as necessary to consider the timely delivery of housing and advance the goals of equity and inclusion, of the adaptable housing design provisions of Subsection 3.8.5. of the new 2024 BC Building Code as part of the next edition of the Building By-law.
- B. THAT Council direct staff to defer the implementation of new adaptable housing design provisions in the Building By-law until at least May 28, 2026, to provide developers, owners, and constructors with additional time to update their building designs and facilitate the amendment of in-stream projects, and for City Staff to evaluate the impacts of the new adaptable housing design provisions on the delivery of housing.

Purpose and Executive Summary

The new 2024 BC Building Code includes new mandatory adaptable housing design requirements which significantly affect dwelling unit layout and space planning.

Adoption of these requirements into the Building By-law would:

- be consistent with past City Policy and improve future accessibility, facilitating aging-in-place and changing life circumstances for occupants, but
- could impact the delivery and cost of new housing in the city.

This report requests direction from Council with respect to its adoption and implementation into the VBBL.

Staff are generally recommending adoption and harmonization with the Provincial adaptability requirements but recommend a delay in the implementation in order to help ensure successful rollout and facilitate uptake by industry who currently have projects in-stream. This will also allow for more fulsome exploration of the potential impacts on the design and cost of new housing in Vancouver.

Council Authority/Previous Decisions

On July 19th, 2019, Council enacted Building By-law No.12511 regulating the construction of buildings and related matters in the City of Vancouver. This was enacted under the authority granted by section 306 of the Vancouver Charter, permitting Council to make By-laws to regulate the construction of buildings; and under section 306(w), by which Council may adopt by reference in whole or in part and with any change Council considers appropriate, any code relating to fire safety or energy conservation or affecting the construction, alteration, or demolition of buildings.

Under past editions of the Building By-law, Council has consistently promoted accessibility and adaptable housing design provisions exceeding National and Provincial regulations.

- In 1990, the City published the “Accessible Design Guidelines” document to promote increased accessibility. This expanded on the provisions of the 1987 Building By-law, aiming to increase developer and designer awareness and understanding of accessible design by providing illustrations and examples.
- In 1995, Council resolved to increase the general level of accessibility of Vancouver's housing, beyond the limited regulations in the VBBL. The Accessible and Usable Dwellings Project developed a comprehensive set of design guidelines for all areas and functions of a home, as well as an implementation strategy, which were outlined in the resulting report, “Dwellings Designed for Everyone”. The key objectives were to improve the accessibility of all housing, from single family to multiple unit residential buildings, through voluntary implementation of performance objectives.
- On July 9, 2002, Council adopted “Enhanced Accessibility” requirements, implemented via amendment to the 1999 Building By-law, which provided a series of enhancements in accessibility and adaptable housing design exceeding National and Provincial requirements for accessibility for condominium and apartment type buildings.
- On [July 19, 2022](#), Council approved the Accessibility Strategy – Phase 1: “Transforming Attitudes, Embedding Change”, including action on Goal 3, to improve the availability of secure and affordable housing suitable to meet the physical needs of persons with disabilities.

City Manager's Comments

The City Manager concurs with the foregoing recommendations.

Context and Background

In December of 2023, the new edition of the BC Building Code was introduced, which included mandatory adaptable housing design provisions for apartment and condominium type dwelling units in order to advance accessibility, equity and inclusive design. The new Provincial requirements have requirements for future accommodation of open space allotments that facilitate maneuverability for persons with disabilities. This could significantly affect dwelling unit layout and space planning, and concerns have been raised by the building industry that the adoption of these new regulations could have impacts on the delivery and cost housing in the City.

Adaptable Housing

Adaptable housing design is a subset of accessible design which focuses upon an approach to residential design in which homes can be modified at relatively low cost to meet occupants' changing needs over time.

By building flexibility into homes from the start, regulations requiring adaptable housing design create capacity for residents to:

- stay in their own homes through illness, injury, and aging,
- more easily tailor some of the features of the home to suite their changing needs,
- reduce the cost of future renovations to accommodate disabilities, and
- provide more housing choice for people with disabilities.

This approach also carries broader societal benefits by saving on institutionalized care costs and allow residents to remain in and contribute to their community.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

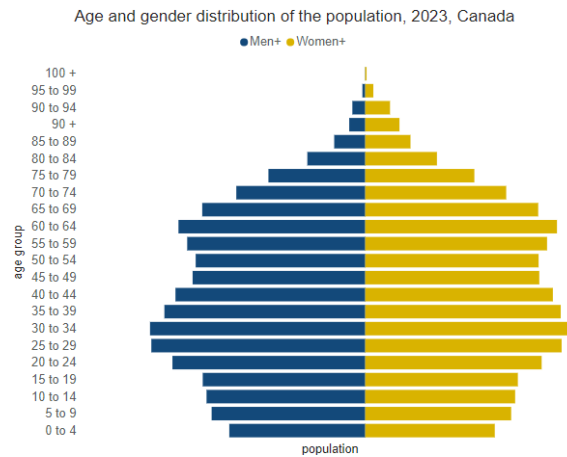
Adaptable housing design is also consistent with the City's commitment to promoting a more accessible and inclusive city, as outlined in Transforming Attitudes, Embedding Change: The City of Vancouver's Accessibility Strategy (Phase 1). More than one in five people in Vancouver have some form of ongoing disability¹, and current provisions in the Building By-law support accessibility objectives and include mandatory adaptable housing design requirements which are broader in application than the currently proposed provisions. However, current requirements predate the Provincial provisions for adaptability, and therefore these provisions are not fully consistent with the Provincial approach, nor do they provide the same clear space allotments, which could limit their effectiveness under some circumstances.

Aging in Place

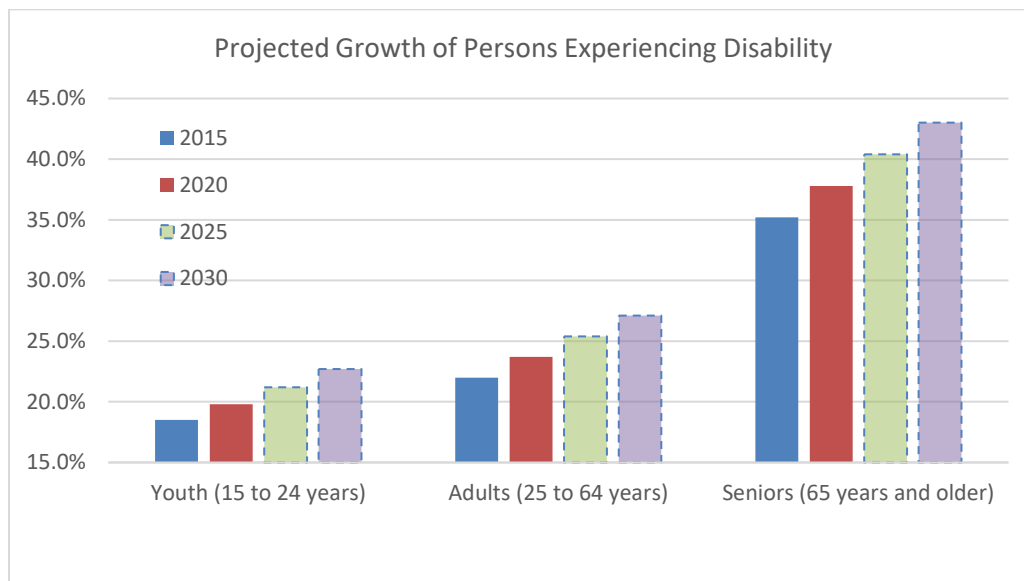
Another import benefit of adaptable housing design regulations is the ability for residents to age-in-place. Recent data from Statistics Canada shows that there are now more Canadians over the age of 65 than under age 14².

¹ City of Vancouver, "Accessibility Strategy – Phase 1" (Plain language), pg.13. (<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/accessibility-strategy-phase-1-plain-language-version.pdf>)

² From Statistics Canada Infographic, see appendix A (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2020018-eng.htm>)



In Vancouver, there were 113 000 people age 65 and older as of the 2021 census. This is a 16% increase since 2016, and is five times the growth rate of people under age 65. And the below graphic indicates substantial expected growth in all age categories for persons with experiencing disability³.



A survey by the Canadian Medical Association and the National Institute for on Ageing, found that 96% of Canadians wanted to age at home and live independently for as long as possible⁴.

Adaptable housing design represents a cost-effective approach to facilitating independent living by requiring specific features at the time of construction that significantly increase the ability of a dwelling unit to accommodate future renovations for accessibility and reduce future financial barriers that would impede such renovations.

The added initial construction costs are minimal when integrated into new construction, as compared to the costs of adding accessibility features after construction. According to the

³MS Copilot data aggregation (generated May 6, 2024), see Appendix for details

⁴Canadian Medical Association webpage (last retrieved April 23, 2024), <https://www.cma.ca/our-focus/aging-dignity-community#:~:text=A%20recent%20survey%20by%20the,going%20into%20long%2Dterm%20care>

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), many items like wall reinforcement for grab bars, carry little or no additional cost when incorporated into a building during construction. Whereas by comparison, other accessibility features such as doorway and hallway widths, can be prohibitively expensive to introduce into an existing building.

Housing Costs Implications

Initial public consultation on the adaptable housing design provisions undertaken by the Province did not reveal immediate concerns regarding the proposed clearances for maneuvering room. It was generally felt that through creative design these could be integrated into the existing floor area allocations due to relaxations in dimensional requirements for certain common floor spaces. To help ease the transition to the new regulations, the Province also provided a staggered implementation of the new Building Code that would see the adaptability requirements taking effect on March 10, 2025, more than a year after the March 8, 2024 general implementation of most other code provisions, giving the construction industry additional time to accommodate the new provisions and for the Province to provide additional guidance on this subject.

More recently, there have been expressions of concern from the building industry that the potential additional space needed in a dwelling unit in order to accommodate the Province's adaptable housing design requirements may be considerable (anecdotal estimates have suggested as much as an additional 80 to 100 sq.ft per unit) and this could then have a negative impact on the cost to construct housing and the industry's ability to deliver housing.

Additional analysis will be undertaken to more fully explore the potential spatial, design and cost implications for new housing development in Vancouver. Staff note that increases across a range of factors in recent years have placed significant pressure on the financial viability of new housing development in Vancouver, including construction, land and financing costs. By potentially increasing project costs and resulting in fewer dwelling units, the new requirements could add to these pressures and impact the supply of new housing, particularly for much needed new secured rental and social housing projects which face the greatest viability challenges.

Discussion

Given that the concerns of adaptable housing design exist at the intersection of several City priorities with respect to housing, accessibility, and inclusion, Council's direction with respect to the adoption and harmonization of the adaptability provisions for new dwelling units into the Vancouver Building By-law is essential to providing industry with certainty for future projects. Without certainty on whether these new adaptable housing design requirements will be applicable, developers are likely to slow further development in order to limit their risk exposure.

Recommendation A

Staff recommend support for Recommendation A, the general adoption of the Provincial adaptability requirements in Book I, Division B, Section 3.8.5. of the BC Building Code, as staff see benefit in greater alignment with the Provincial requirements. This would:

- Reduce confusion through a harmonized set of requirements across the province for constructing adaptable dwelling units,
- Potentially save time and money for industry through standardization,

- Making future renovations works for accessibility less onerous, and
- Implicitly advancing accessibility and inclusivity throughout the City and beyond by supporting national and provincial equity and inclusionary objectives.

Further to this, if Council supports Recommendation A, City staff would seek to develop additional refinements to the adaptable housing design provisions through the Building By-law development process, with the goal of reduce the impacts on the construction industry, while preserving the core intention of these provisions and the City's leadership in this area.

Recommendation B

Staff also recommend support for Recommendation B, delaying until at least May 28, 2026, as this would extend the time for industry to address any potential changes to their projects, and to find and test additional design solutions to reduce developmental impact to their projects. This will also provide Staff with time to explore changes to the Zoning and Development By-law that may be necessary to align and support implementation of the new adaptability requirements. Taken in conjunction with the delayed implementation already provided by the Province, this would provide industry with more than two years to coordinate work on in-stream projects in Vancouver, or to find new solutions to meet the proposed adaptability requirements.

Should Council support Recommendation B, Staff propose to use the additional time to engage consultants to more fully study the developmental and construction concerns and to develop additional guidance documentation for both industry and staff, and seek to uncover additional regulatory improvements which could further mitigate impacts on the cost and delivery of housing. This work is currently underway through the Apartment Living initiative. Staff have initiated design testing through an external consultant to better understand the implications of the Province's proposed adaptability requirements on unit mix, size, design, and form of development.

Council's adoption of the recommendations above, would send a strong signal to industry that accessibility and adaptability requirements should be expected, and that time and support will be provided to enable a transition to the new adaptability requirements.

Financial Implications

The adoption and implementation of the adaptable housing design provisions are not anticipated to have a direct financial impact on the City, however extended confusion or indecision over the City's position on adoption of the adaptable housing design provisions could have an impact on the building industry's ability to deliver housing units, which could have indirect economic consequences. Staff are of the opinion that Council's direction on this issue of adaptability and the timing of its implementation, will provide certainty to the industry and allow them to make decisions on how best to implement the requirements, and the time to necessary to develop suitable designs to meet those requirements.

Equity Implications

The City is committed to advancing both housing and equity, and is prioritizing our actions for those who need it most. Extra time is needed to ready industry for these changes, and to understand and more fully explore potential outcomes on new housing, including impacts on livability, affordability, and project viability.

The current Building By-law already requires both enhanced accessibility and adaptable housing design provisions, which together provide substantial capacity for adaptability. Staff are recommending a delay the implementation of new adaptable housing design provisions for one year, in addition to the one-year delay by the Province, to facilitate the successful implementation of these requirements.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications associated with this report’s recommendations. Council is empowered by the authority granted by Section 306 of the Vancouver Charter, permitting Council to make By-laws to regulate the construction of buildings, and under section 306(w), by which Council may adopt by reference in whole or in part and with any change Council considers appropriate.

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APPENDIX A 2013 Population Estimate by Age and Gender

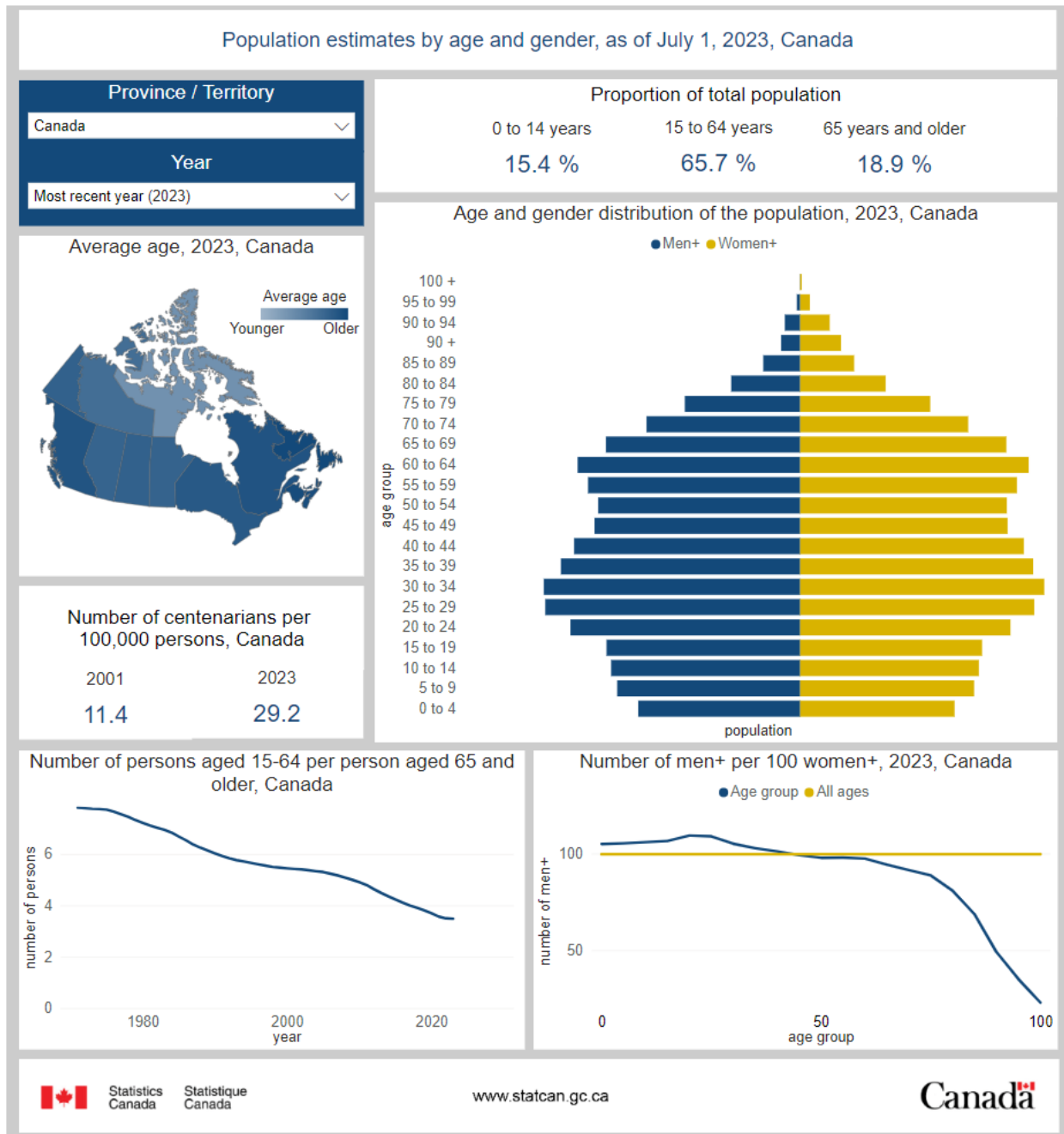


Figure 1. Statistic Canada - 2013 Population Estimate by Age and Gender

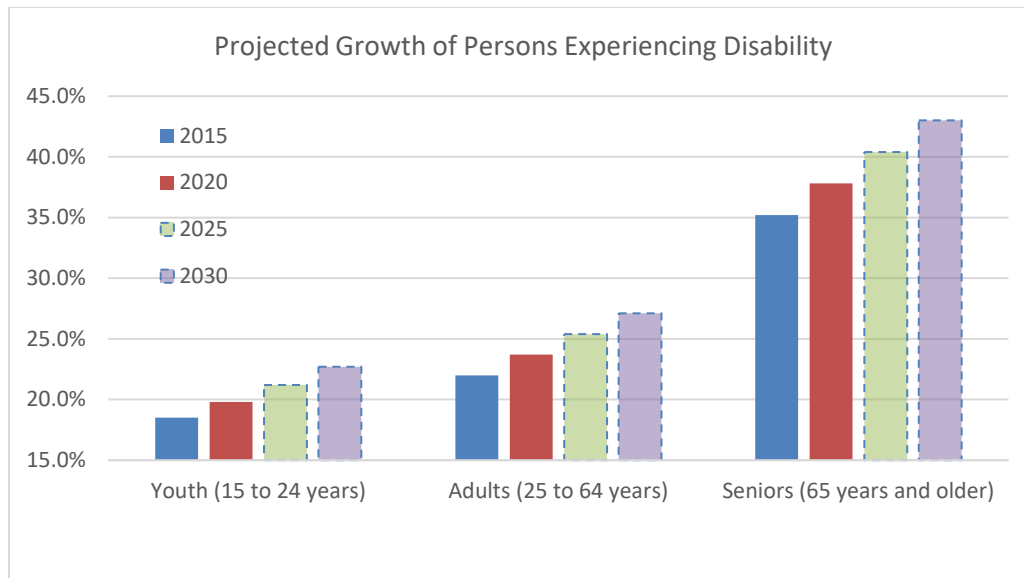


Figure 2. derived from MS Copilot data response to prompt “based on statistics from the last 10 years, create an infographic showing the projected growth of persons with disability in the City of Vancouver British Columbia” (generated May 6, 2024)

Response (abbreviated): According to Statistics Canada's 2022 data, the disability rate in British Columbia for individuals aged 15 and over is 28.6%⁴. This means that approximately 334,000 people in B.C. self-identify as having a disability. It's important to note that this rate has increased by 3.9 percentage points since 2017.

Here's a breakdown of the disability prevalence by age group in British Columbia:

- Youth (15 to 24 years): 20.1%
- Working-aged adults (25 to 64 years): 24.1%
- Seniors (65 years and over): 40.4%⁴

The most common types of disabilities reported include mental health-related, pain-related, and seeing disabilities. These have seen the largest increases from 2017 to 2022, contributing significantly to the overall rise in the Canadian disability rate⁴.

Now, let's visualize this information in an infographic:

1. Current Disability Rate in B.C.: 28.6%
2. Projected Growth:
 - Considering the historical trend, we can estimate a gradual increase in the disability rate over the next decade.
 - Assuming a linear growth, we might expect the disability rate to reach around 30% by 2030.

Remember that these projections are based on historical data, and various factors can influence disability rates. Efforts to improve accessibility, inclusion, and support services can impact these numbers positively.

Sources:

1. [New data on disability in Canada, 2022 - Statistics Canada](#)
2. [Profile table, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population - Vancouver ...](#)
3. [Building a better B.C.: accessibility and inclusion in British Columbia ...](#)
4. [Fact sheet: Employing People with Disabilities - Vancity](#)

5. [City of Vancouver 2021 Census Population and Dwelling Counts and Metro ...](#)
6. [DABC's Response to 2024 BC Budget | DABC](#)
7. [Services, supports expand for people with disabilities](#)