

## The York, SROs and Low Income Housing Conversion

### What are SROs?

SRO stands for Single Room Occupancy. SROs are buildings and hotels that contain small single rooms (approx. 10 by 10 feet) with no bathrooms and generally no cooking facilities in the units. Residents share bathrooms and cooking facilities with other residents, outside of their individual units. SROs represent the lowest cost market housing and are therefore generally one of the only sources of market housing affordable to those who are living on low, very low, or assisted incomes. For many, SROs are the only other option aside from living in emergency shelters or on the street.<sup>1</sup>

### Does the City count SRO's as Low-Income housing?

Yes. According to the *2009 Survey of Low-Income Housing in the Downtown Core (City Housing Survey)*, published by the City of Vancouver in April of 2010, SROs are considered part of the City's low-income housing stock.<sup>2</sup>

### How are SROs different from non-market, or social housing?

Non-market or social housing is income-tested, meaning rent is limited to 30% of a resident's income. SROs however, are not subject to rent control and represent the lowest cost housing provided by the private market.<sup>3</sup>

### Is the York considered low-income housing?

According to the *City Housing Survey*, as of January 2010, the York is an open SRO. Therefore, according to the city's definition of low-income housing, the York is considered part of the low-income housing stock. Likewise, it is featured in the Carnegie Community Action Project's *2012 Hotel Survey and Housing Report*, which details the actual cost of housing in many of Vancouver's 'low income' SRO hotels.<sup>4</sup>

### What does 'low-income' mean in terms of rent?

While the City has defined what the low-income housing stock includes (SROs, non-market or social housing, Community Care Facilities and Group Residences), low income is not defined by

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<sup>1</sup> City of Vancouver. *2009 Survey of Low Income Housing in the Downtown Core*. (Vancouver: April 2010). Online: <http://vancouver.ca/docs/policy/housing-2009-low-income-survey.pdf>. Pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *City Housing Survey*. Pg. 4

<sup>3</sup> *City Housing Survey*. Pg. 4

<sup>4</sup> CCAP. *We're Trying to Get Rid of the Welfare People* (Vancouver, Unceded Coast Salish Territories: CCAP, February 2013) Online: [http://ccapvancouver.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/2012\\_ccap-hotel-report\\_web.pdf](http://ccapvancouver.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/2012_ccap-hotel-report_web.pdf)

how much a unit is rented for.<sup>5</sup> In other words, price has nothing to do with the definition of low-income housing.

### **What is the conversion by-law?**

In 2003, the City of Vancouver passed the *Single Room Accommodation By-law, (Conversion By-Law)* which stipulates that SRO owners who want to convert their SROs into something else must first apply to council for a conversion or demolition permit. Before granting a permit, council will consider, among other things, the supply of low-cost accommodation, and the accommodation that will be available to the tenant affected by the conversion or demolition. Council may also attach a fee of \$15,000.00 per room for the conversion.<sup>6</sup>

### **Has the conversion by-law been effective?**

No. Many hotel owners and developers have used loopholes in the *Conversion By-law* to convert their SROs into rooms that are unaffordable to low-income residents without having to apply for a permit. Rather than applying to council for a permit, and possibly paying the \$15,000.00 per room conversion fee, some landlords buy out their low-income tenants, issue illegal eviction notices, intimidate tenants into leaving and/or refuse to rent to anyone other than students or working professionals. Because rooms are not being rented at a nightly or weekly rate, and are not being demolished, these conversions are not covered by the *Conversion By-Law*. Having removed low-income tenants, landlords can then raise the rental rates of the rooms to above what most low-income individuals can afford, often charging upwards of \$800-\$900 for SRO style accommodations.

Despite the City's view that SROs are 'low-income housing stock,' the *Conversion By-law* does not protect against these types of conversion. Because the City has not defined what low-income SRO housing is, once again, these landlords are technically not breaking the *Conversion By-law*. These practices are, however, forcing low-income individuals out of their homes. Even where these units are now being rented at almost triple the income assistance housing allowance (\$375/month), and are in fact displacing low-income residents from the area, these SROs are still being counted as 'low-income' housing by the City.

### **What happens when people are forced out of SROs?**

Many people living in SROs have low to very low incomes, so when the rental rate goes up, this last resort housing is no longer an option for them. For some this means living on the street or in emergency shelters, which can be both destabilizing and damaging. For others, it means seeking shelter in different parts of the lower mainland, away from their support systems, friends and community resources. For those living with mental illness, physical disability, substance abuse and addictions, or on assisted income, displacement away from these resources can be detrimental to their health and well-being. This displacement will only

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<sup>5</sup> *City Housing Survey*. Pg. 8

<sup>6</sup> City of Vancouver. *General Information on Single Room Accommodation (SRA) By-Law: Question and Answer*. Online: <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/single-room-accommodation-by-law-fact-sheet.pdf>

become more damaging as transit prices continue to increase and compass cards come into use.

**Case Study – 55 Powell (aka. Grand Trunk Rooms, The Heritage, The Warwick)**

55 Powell is a classic example of an SRO that unofficially converted into market rate housing without having obtained an SRO conversion permit or paying the conversion fee that goes along with it. According to the 2009 *City Housing Survey* it was an open SRO that was renting rooms, and therefore classified as low-income housing. However according to a craigslist add from July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013, the rooms are currently being rented to “students or people with student loans or work visas Only,” at \$849.00/month.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that this unit is clearly being rented at market rates, to a very specific demographic that does not include most people living in the DTES, the City is still able to consider this as part of its low-income housing stock.

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<sup>7</sup> Craigslist Ad, the Heritage. July 31<sup>st</sup> 2013.