



## Heritage Vancouver

www.heritagevancouver.org  
info@heritagevancouver.org  
604 254 9411

PO Box 74123, Hillcrest Park PO,  
Vancouver, BC  
V5V 5C8

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City of Vancouver  
453 West 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4

### **Re: Character Home Review – Comments prior to Public Hearing**

Dear Mayor and Council,

As we celebrate Canada 150 Plus, Heritage Vancouver Society (HVS) is highlighting threats to the physical, social and cultural fabric of historic urban landscapes.

For the first time, HVS has two No. 1's on our 2017 Watch List: the **historic urban landscapes of Chinatown and Character Homes and Neighbourhoods** are tied as the most endangered places.

We are pleased to see the City of Vancouver is exploring ways to address the dual issues of heritage conservation and housing options in the Character Home Review and Vancouver Housing Strategy.

HVS supports the zoning incentives that the City is exploring for retention of pre-1940 homes as a part of the Character Home Review and recommends the following areas of improvement:

1. Apply an integrated strategy to Heritage Management and develop neighbourhood wide statements of significance.
2. Modernize and update character merit criteria
3. Improve the development review process for heritage and character
4. Integrate the RT Zoning Review process and Housing Action Strategy with the Character Home Review.
5. Test and review the success of the policy (including specific FSR #s) after an appropriate number of projects have been processed. Conduct a periodic review where new City directives and by-laws can be incorporated into the policy.

The details of our recommendations are on the following pages. We would be pleased to share detailed textual amendments with City staff for consideration and inclusion in the policy, for brevity we have not included them here.

## 1. Apply an integrated strategy to Heritage Management

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We believe in taking an “ecosystem” approach to neighbourhoods as historic urban landscapes that embrace a sense of place and the diversity of communities. Specifically with respect to these current planning initiatives, we continue to recommend that an integrated approach to neighbourhood character and housing policies/actions be developed with the following four guiding principles:

1. The character of our neighbourhoods is ever evolving, diverse and unique to each place.
2. Pre-1940—and post-1940—houses are important to retain where their architectural quality, or uniqueness, is integral to place character.
3. Contemporary architectural expression is essential for place character in historic areas to evolve through the inclusion of heritage for the future.
4. A diversity of housing types and tenures in older neighbourhoods enables more people to enjoy living in historic areas with cultural and built heritage.

We believe that the future of our neighbourhoods includes both retention of pre-1940—and post-1940—homes, established streetscapes and special historic areas, and high-quality new houses and infill in the form of new houses, duplex, and multi-unit housing.

As noted in the most recent staff report (dated April 2017), neighbourhood character cannot be managed through new zoning incentives alone. What is needed is community planning that integrates how to retain, and layer onto, the diversity of buildings and streets including all eras of city building, from pre-1940 to today, with tools that can manage area-wide (versus site-specific) changes, e.g. heritage conservation areas.

## 2. Modernize and update character merit criteria

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### **Issue #1:**

A pre-1940 definition of “character home” fails to support the retention of the diversity of periods and styles in older neighbourhoods.

### **Recommended action:**

Update the “character home” definition to embrace post-1940 housing that contributes to neighbourhood character and to fully align with building age thresholds that are already eligible for incentives, e.g. conversions of pre-1977 homes to multiple units allowable in the R-T9 Zone.

**Issue #2:**

The existing character merit criteria reflect a bias towards certain styles.

**Recommended action:**

Update the character merit criteria for pre-1940—and post-1940—styles to embrace cultural and social diversity, rather than only reflecting British and American architectural movements, e.g. Arts & Crafts, English Cottage.

The proposed criteria would be difficult to meet for pre-1940 styles without a veranda (e.g. Art Deco, International Style variants) and post-1940s (e.g. Vancouver Special).

While we appreciate the introduction of potential incentives for post-1940 houses “with exceptional architectural merit”, this is a vague policy that will be difficult for staff and applicants to interpret and apply. It is also inadequate for supporting the retention of layers of urban fabric from all decades in our neighbourhoods, which is considered to be best practice for historic districts in other cities, and internationally.

### 3. Improve the development review process

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**Issue #3:**

Staff interpretation and use of the Vancouver Building Bylaw has sometimes unfortunately led to removal and replacement of original features of pre-1940 houses, which defeats the retention objective.

**Recommended action:**

Amend the Vancouver Building Bylaw (VBB) to remove the provisions for energy efficiency in character home renovations and to replace them with the less intrusive standards for houses on the Heritage Register.

We are pleased to see that changes to the VBBL are planned and we look forward to further information.

**Issue #4:**

The present review and approvals process for development permits and building permits are untimely and costly.

**Recommended action:**

Introduce a “green door” in development permit and building permit application review and approval processes for multi-unit house conversions, multiple secondary suites, new unit additions, or new infill, specifically for the sites where a heritage or character home is retained. This should also apply to Heritage Revitalization Agreements for unique projects.

Similarly we welcome the improvements to application processes that are mentioned and await hearing details.

**Issue #5:**

Streamline the Heritage Revitalization Agreement approach to retention.

In many character neighbourhoods there are still significant historic assets (original farmhouses, wartime housing, historic mansions, odd shaped lots) that might not fit into the zoning-based incentive approach outlined above. These places may need additional incentive for retention (the HRA).

**Recommended action:**

Streamline the HRA application and review process make guaranteed timelines for staff decision making and review. Make staff decisions transparent and accountable. At the same time enforce the expiry date, maintenance bylaws and other provisions related to applications so as to make owners and developers accountable to their promises.

**Issue #6:**

Staff interpretation and use of the design guidelines for new construction in single-family neighbourhoods has encouraged “fake history”, and obstructed high-quality contemporary design.

**Recommended action:**

Revisit and make changes to the design guidelines for heritage and character homes and new houses to ensure they are outcome-oriented, not prescriptive, and that staff approve good contemporary design. New housing and infill can be compatible and complimentary complementary to the existing context without imitating a particular historical period. We recommend replacing the wording under “character home criteria” with new wording that embraces a broader diversity of housing styles, and eras, something like the following:

“Conversion and infill projects should be designed to be lasting, quality additions to neighbourhoods. Changes to existing character houses should maintain their original form and character in keeping with the character house criteria, and additions should be compatible but distinguishable. A variety of architectural styles will be considered for infill development, so that neighbourhoods are encouraged to evolve, in ways that respect the character of existing buildings and streetscapes and allow the creation of future heritage.”

#### **4. Integrate the RT Zoning Review and Housing Action Strategy with the Character Home Review**

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**Issue #7:**

The present parking regulations discourage infill and retention in RS zones.

**Recommended action:**

We encourage the City to consider the results of the parking study underway for RT zones in Grandview Woodland and Mount Pleasant, and to use this information to reconsider the parking requirement for one stall per dwelling unit in the RS Zone. The ability to have a greater portion of a site for new infill will indirectly support the objective to retain historic houses.

## 5. Test and review the success of the Character Home incentives

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**Issue #8:**

Proposed FSR incentives may not be sufficient to encourage retention.

**Recommended action:**

We encourage the City to include specific testing, review and tweaking (if required) after a representative number of projects have been processed successfully to confirm that the incentives are working.

We look forward to continuing to working with the City as detailed policies are developed on this important topic.

Respectfully submitted

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Javier', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Javier Campos  
President, Heritage Vancouver Society