

Fort Richmond residents concerned about overdevelopment

Rental properties increased in last five years

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Elizabeth Wiebe has lived in Fort Richmond since 1979 and has seen a spike in rental houses aimed at university students in the last five years. [Photo Store](#)

Crammed into a conference room in a neighbourhood public library, 100 residents from Fort Richmond and surrounding areas gathered Thursday to discuss ways to solve the community's student housing problems — and air a few grievances.

The meeting, organized on behalf of a neighbourhood property owner, was held to gauge community opinion on rezoning and developing one Fort Richmond property, 632 Grierson Ave., according to Michelle Richard, partner in one of the host organizations, Richard Wintrup and Associates.

"It's really about exploring the issue at a very comprehensive level," she said. "We're just at the point now where we're starting to engage in that."

According to Richard and her team, the owner is hoping to develop her property, currently occupied by a single-family home, into student-focused housing. The neighbourhood is home to dozens of student rooming houses, some of which are illegal. Richard said she couldn't name the property owner, who did not attend the meeting.

Neil Bazan grew up in Fort Richmond, and, after moving away as a young adult, has recently moved back. Like many residents at the meeting, Bazan said he was worried about maintaining the feel of the neighbourhood.

"It's always been a single family street, he said. "My concerns are that it'll be overdeveloped, and it may be too large or not keep with the existing community."

But, Bazan said, that's not to say there isn't a housing problem that needs to be addressed. He said he thinks the issue should be tackled by government or the university, not just individual property owners.

"Something like this might be able to (help)," he added. "But that goes to a much bigger question of who needs to be responsible for ensuring student housing and obviously that's something that needs to be addressed from a lot of different levels, especially the university itself."

Community members were presented with three ideas for potential developments, although Richard noted the possibilities were in the early stages and the property owner was open to other options.

One option, called "shared housing," was billed as "essentially a larger single-family home," with residents sharing facilities such as the kitchen and bathroom, like several already in use near the University of Winnipeg. The other options were a small apartment complex and row housing.

Elizabeth Wiebe has lived in her Fort Richmond house since 1979, and said that, until recently, she knew all her neighbours by name. Over the past five years, she said her community has changed, with many residents downsizing as they get older, or chasing warmer climates.

Standing in her yard on Pasadena Avenue, Wiebe can see at least four rooming houses without leaving her garden. Wiebe said she doesn't blame the students, but the unkempt yards, dubious legality and possible safety concerns frustrate her.

"It really bothers me," she said. "It devalues the properties... One drive down the street will tell you what's a rental and what isn't."

From talking with her new student neighbours and occasionally going inside the homes, Wiebe said she questions the safety of the rooming houses, many of which are overcrowded and feature converted bedrooms with poor or absent fire exits.

"It's unsafe," she said. "It's an accident waiting to happen."

All at the meeting was Coun. Janice Lukes (St. Norbert). Lukes has been advocating for action on the student housing situation in Fort Richmond since entering office, and said it was "a very positive evening."

"People are lively and they all want to vent about the issue, and that's great," she said. "But, you heard me, enough of that, let's go on with being proactive."

Richard said although community consensus is still a long way down the road, the energy and input at the meeting were promising.

"It's really about getting a broad spectrum of ideas and discussing," she said. "There was opposition, and there are also people that were certainly open minded and wanting to explore ideas."

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