

Province moves to improve, safeguard Community Housing across Ontario



By Brock Weir

All three levels of government need to work together to ensure Ontario's most vulnerable have a place to live, according to Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

The Province stepped up to the plate with a series of measures Wednesday morning aimed at helping to sustain, repair and grow community housing and help end homelessness.

Announced in Newmarket-Aurora alongside area MPP ? and Deputy Premier ? Christine Elliott, the Province's new Community Housing Renewal Strategy includes ?early steps? aimed at improving community housing by making rent more predictable, fostering a climate where tenants can seek opportunities for work and education without penalty for working more hours or going to school, and freeing up wait lists by having tenants prioritize their first choice and accept the first unit they are offered, and making housing available ?to those who truly need it? by requiring an ?asset test.?

Community housing, said the Minister, will also be made safer by empowering housing providers to turn away tenants who have been evicted for criminal activity.

?Homes are more than just bricks and mortar; they are the foundation to raise a happy, healthy family,? said Clark. ?A home allows people to participate in their community, whether it is through work, volunteering, shopping at local businesses or attending local events. Our government believes everyone deserves a place to call home.

?Right now, there are too many families living in places that are overcrowded and rundown. Some of them just aren't safe. Across the Province, there is a shortage of good community housing for people who need it the most. York Region is not immune. In fact, it

has the lowest supply of social housing compared to its population in the Province. There are only 17 units available for every 1,000 households. The Region's wait list is well over 14,000, double what it was seven years ago.?

To this end, Mr. Clark said municipalities across the Province are feeling the pinch when it comes to community housing and without any support the situation will only get worse.

?Because much of Ontario's community housing was built a long time ago, and when the original funding agreements that support them will soon come to an end, when that happens we risk losing some of the housing people are relying on. If nothing is done, there is a possibility that over 106,000 units across the Province could be lost in less than 10 years.?

The new measures, he said will help ?meet people's complex and changing needs.?

Housing providers will be eligible for more flexible and streamlined arrangements and may also be eligible for new funding as their original agreements expire to help protect existing units.

The system will go on to make it easier for tenants to predict their rent and make it easier for housing providers to calculate it.

In addition to removing penalties for tenants who might wish to pursue education or further work hours, they will also be protected from being penalized financially for child support payments.

?Of course, our service managers will use their discretion to make sure everyone on the waitlist is respected and finds the home that best suits their needs,? said Clark. ?Our plan will require service managers to set appropriate asset limits for applicants to ensure community housing is provided to those who need it most, and give housing providers the power to turn away former tenants that have been evicted for serious criminal activity so all residents can feel safer in their homes.

?My ministry is providing more than \$1 billion this year to help maintain, repair and grow Ontario's system of community housing; help get those living on the streets into stable homes and continue to support off-reserve indigenous housing in the Province. This money will go directly to the communities and much of it is flexible so that it can be invested in solutions that best meet local needs.

?We're leveraging every single federal dollar that is available to us by cost matching the Federal National Housing Strategy investments. I am so pleased to see the Federal Government's

renewed interest in the Housing file. Our province needs all three levels of government engaged so we can solve our Province's housing crisis. I plan on continuing to push my colleagues in Ottawa to invest their fair share. The National Housing Strategy is a good start, but it is not enough.?

Going forward, Mr. Clark told media at Wednesday's announcement that it is essential to ?make sure all three levels of government are working together.?

?We want to make sure our community partners, those not for profits and existing organizations that are providing housing and housing supports, that we all work together. If the private sector wants to participate in and it results in more stock, renewed stock or renewed opportunities, we will explore every option available to us.?

Asked what the Province could do to incentivise housing companies and developers to allocate units for community housing and make a better climate for public-private partnerships, he said there will be more to say ?in coming weeks? about what has been done.

?I am realistic though,? he said. ?There will have to be other measures that we'll have to move forward on as a government in the fall. There is not one thing I can table in the legislature and then have everyone pat me on the back and say that I solved the housing crisis. That is not going to happen. It is a continual focus on what we can do to make it happen.?

Wednesday's announcement at Newmarket's Old Town Hall was also attended by Mayor Tom Mrakas. Speaking to The Auroran following afterward, he said it is ?always great to see the Provincial government come to the table and say we need to provide some better tools to increase not only our supply, but how efficient we are when we provide community housing for residents.?

?I think it is a good first step, but we need to continue work not just within the Provincial government but all levels of government to make sure we can end homelessness within York Region.?