

Affordable housing plan pushes second suites?

By Brock Weir

As house prices soar across York Region, wages and salaries have yet to follow suit, creating a crunch for affordable housing.

Those are the findings of a new 10-year plan to tackle this shortage of affordable housing across the Region currently under consideration by Regional Council.

According to a report which will be before Regional Council this week, before a final report next year, the average cost of a new, single detached home is hovering just under \$700,000 when the entire Region of York is taken into consideration.

“At one time, the conversation about making ends meet in York Region concerned itself with only low-income earners,” said Sylvia Patterson, Manager of Housing for the Region of York in her draft plan. “Today, that concern has grown and moderate-income earners have been added to those who may struggle financially.”

“York Region has a lot going for it: a rapidly growing and diverse population; business and industry; employment opportunities; farmland, beaches and forests; educational facilities and plenty of services for its residents. York Region also has a high-cost home ownership market, the lowest proportion of rental housing in GTA and “perhaps not surprisingly” a very low vacancy rate.”

Through their 10 year plan, the Region plans to work with all municipalities and other stakeholders to develop a “multifaceted” housing strategy to provide affordable options to residents with four key goals: increasing the rental housing supply, sustaining the existing rental housing supply, supporting home ownership affordability, and strengthening the homelessness and housing stability system.

“The draft housing plan identifies 60 actions in advance that work with the Region has already done and will work towards over the next 10 years,” reads the draft report. “The Region will continue to build new residential housing, support the development of second suites and provide more rent subsidies; take steps to preserve the supply of existing private sector housing and strengthen the social housing system; work with partners to find innovative approaches to addressing home ownership and affordability; and strengthen the system of services that support people who have difficulty finding and keeping housing appropriate to their needs.”

Within the report, York Region specifically earmarks the lack of rental housing as a particularly significant problem, a problem which often forces families to go to places well beyond their individual budgets and price ranges, which has its own dire consequences.

In the first year of the new plan, however, the Region plans on working with each York Region municipality to encourage and develop new rental housing through Community Improvement Plans, specifically targeted areas, along with other incentive and engagement programs. They also plan to encourage an increase of “safe and legal” second suites, accommodations often found in the form of basement apartments. Important in this, they note, will be municipal incentives for homeowners to create legal second suites and get the ones they already have up to code, and “educating” tenants and landlords of everything that is required of them when it comes to basement apartments.

“The need for more housing options has grown into a mainstream issue that impacts everyone in the Region in obvious and not so obvious ways,” concludes Ms. Patterson. “Our young adults need a place to call home. Our seniors and recently retired colleagues may want to downsize or retire without moving to a distant community. Our young professionals and newcomers who come into the Region for employment may want to live closer to work.”

“Council has paved the way, but no one organization can solve complex housing challenges alone. All levels of government, the housing development industry, community agencies and housing providers must work together to develop strategic, holistic and collaborative solutions. By working together, the potential for change is real and the possibilities for innovative solutions are

endless.?

On board with his colleagues at Regional Council is Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who said he has experienced this lack of smaller, affordable, and rentable housing first hand in finding a place for two of his daughters. Going out earlier this month to look at housing options and prices, he said it "mirrored" exactly the situations outlined by Ms. Patterson in her report.

"This is really a start in the Region in terms of recognizing some of these issues surrounding affordable housing and how do you define it," says Mayor Dawe. "Handling second suites is a huge issue. You have to be a little smarter. I don't know how you can be a little smarter, but you have to be."

"It is interesting because we've had this whole discussion when the site proposals came forward for the 2C. We had made this decision we want affordable housing, and the official plan says we'll have two parking spots, when it came forward, Councillors said that was not enough parking. But if you increase the parking on the house, you increase the cost of the house because you increase the amount of land. There has got to be some consistency here in this whole thing."