

Growing homelessness issue sparks renewed calls for affordable housing, rentals

By Brock Weir

Brenda Orton has called Aurora home for the past 40 years and, during that time, she has seen Aurora grow and change with each passing year.

One change she's noticed over the last six months, however, has started to raise alarm bells and became a concern she took to Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard last week.

The Aurora Chamber of Commerce hosted Mr. Ballard at the Aurora Public Library on Friday afternoon to give its members a chance to learn more about and question the Member on some of the initiatives proposed in the recent Provincial Budget.

But, it was an issue not directly in the budget that was top of mind for Ms. Orton.

"I am really concerned," she said. "I am meeting a lot of homeless people in Aurora and talking to them."

That week alone she had the chance to talk to four individuals, she said, noting she directed them to the Canadian Mental Health Association for assistance and, while this community-based resource has been an asset, more needs to be done to address the local affordable housing crunch, she contended.

Mr. Ballard, who also serves as Ontario's Minister of Housing and minister responsible for the Province's poverty reduction strategy, said he too would "love to see a lot more affordable housing" in the area, particularly when it comes to more rental accommodation in both Aurora and Newmarket.

"I can tell you through my Ministry of Housing, one of the major funds we administer is called CHPI (Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative) which is basically funding for finding homes for people who are homeless and accommodating people who are homeless. We increased York Region's amount last year by over 54 per cent and I did that for all the regions around Toronto because so many of the people who start out here or are maybe moving through here end up in Toronto and Toronto is really overburdened, quite frankly, and it is not fair to Toronto to have them take care of people from York Region."

For Mr. Ballard, with this funding in place, it is up to the Regions to carry the ball over the line.

"It is our belief that municipalities know best how to serve their people so we don't want a one-size-fits-all that comes out of Queen's Park, but I am quite happy to give York Region a good chunk of change and have them work with shelters to provide the service. If there is an increase [in homelessness] in Aurora, the Region needs to know that."

"One of the things I did put in place with this round of funding is every Region and York has been good at this and has to enumerate homelessness. If this is happening in Aurora, it should be counted by the Region to see what the trends are and then they can provide service when it is needed."

But, while rental properties have been a focus for the Region in Newmarket, is it a model that is working in Aurora? The Aurora Chamber's Budget briefing was not the only place where this issue cropped up last week.

Over at Town Hall last week, Councillors also raised the issue of affordable housing following a report projecting Aurora's long-term development activity over the next 10 years.

In reviewing the figures, Councillor John Abel questioned whether any of the projections would be considered "affordable" and go any further towards bridging that gap in finding housing solutions to local residents feeling the crunch.

"We are moving forward Federally and Provincially and before long we will have to incorporate that into our projection of buildings," said Councillor Abel.

In response, Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, said there are indeed some "shifts" coming Aurora's way.

"Our projections do anticipate a shift in the built form, so moving forward the majority of those units will be in apartment forms of development: a combination of condominiums and the odd purpose-built rental," said Mr. Ramunno. "We are having conversations with developers who are interested in doing that. Moving forward because we're out of green field lands, the majority of the shift will be towards more apartment-type units as opposed to single detached units."

"The legislation is already in place with respect to requiring municipalities to intensify. We have already addressed the second suites legislation. That was put in place a number of years ago. We were one of the first municipalities at least in York Region to permit second suites as a right in our zoning bylaw. There is a discussion at the provincial level regarding inclusionary zoning. I don't think that has been approved yet, but just general intensification policies at the provincial level is really seeing that shift more towards apartment type developments and we are seeing that as well."

Over the last few years, the Province of Ontario updated its Long Term Housing Strategy, which addresses homelessness, and made the commitment to end chronic homelessness by 2025, resulting in a \$100 million boost to CHPY.

?The old model is you get paid for every person who is sleeping in a bed,? said Mr. Ballard. ?The new model is you get paid regardless but what you have to do is take people, stabilize them for a few days and then we get them into an apartment with wraparound care. It is working very well in London and it is working well in Peterborough and Hamilton. We have the problem here in York Region: we don't have the apartments to put people in. We have to work with our municipal partners to make sure we have affordable housing.?