

Land trust could help identify housing options: advocate

York Region municipalities should come together to help form the basis of a land trust to facilitate affordable housing options, according to advocates.

The pitch for a Community Land Trust was made at Council last week by Michael Braithwaite, CEO of Blue Door, a Newmarket-based organization that provides shelter, transitional and emergency housing for youth, families and men in need.

A land trust, with a minimum of five York Region municipalities on board, would help identify overlooked or otherwise undevelopable tracts of land that could be used to help alleviate the housing crunch, according to Braithwaite.

"We have to be innovative," he said. "We have to be creative in how we [meet housing needs] and we believe the Housing for All Land Trust is a piece of that puzzle going forward," he said. "The idea of a Land Trust is to try and get available buildings, access land, maybe remnants of land that developers [have had] for years and might donate and develop housing on that land, or use the vacant homes for affordable housing in perpetuity."

The goal is to have five different municipalities at the table to make 500 new homes a reality.

"What I would love for Council to consider is how can the Land Trust work within your own Official Plan. I would love for Council to direct us to staff so we can work with them and look to see if there's remnants of land that the Town might own. If there [are] remnants of land that developers might have sitting that we can have introductory conversations [with the developers] about working together to develop affordable housing."

Finding the land is half the battle from Blue Door's perspective, he added.

"We will work with Federal and Provincial governments and the Region of York to see if we can build the funding and take on, depending on how big the housing development is, see if we can manage the debt to develop housing for all."

In this context, affordable housing constitutes housing that takes up approximately 30 per cent of a household income. Should a land trust like this come to fruition, Braithwaite added he would like to work with organizations like CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors), Community Living Central York, and Yellow Brick House, to name just a few organizations "dealing with vulnerable populations" and they would lease resulting homes "at deeply affordable rent and they would manage the individuals that would use them, with the caveat that they could not charge more than 30 per cent of the household income."

The concept was of interest to Council members, who had a number of questions related to both benefits and logistics.

"I hope Aurora can be part of this housing land trust you presented to us today because it is evident that we also need to do our part and Aurora definitely is in need of this service," said Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, before asking how third-party partners might fit into the equation.

Braithwaite said it's hoped, should this concept move forward, participating municipalities could open the door to conversations with developers to begin potential collaborations.

"We found a lot of developers are very charitable, want to be a part of the solution in the housing crisis," he said. "It doesn't have to be all where a developer would donate the land; they may donate some of the units within and we can work with them to secure funds to develop affordable housing " private-public partnerships and there is lots of government funding to support that, too.

"I think now is the time when we can access a lot of this funding, where we can have win-wins across the board, and we're working with partners like Ellis Don, Daniels, and others who really know this file and they can get this done."

Looking at the proposal, Mayor Tom Mrakas cited similarities between what a land trust such as this might do, versus work already being carried out by Housing York, an extension of the Region of York. Braithwaite conceded there are similarities in that Housing York is a land trust 'in a sense' but structure on the table would be 'smaller and more nimble with the types of partnerships we can bring together' different groups the Region may not be able to.'

'We're not competing against each other; in fact, I think we really support one another moving forward,' said Braithwaite.

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim stressed that if this type of land trust moves forward, a buy-in from stakeholders is essential for its success.

'Certainly homelessness has been on everyone's radar for many years now and it has only been heightened in the last few years with COVID and other circumstances,' he said. 'This model or structure requires three stakeholders; one would be a private partner like an Ellis Don or Menkes to do a construction for their regular fees; you would need a charitable organization to do the grant writing; and the Federal Government or Provincial Government that provides the funding, and the municipal government and regional government to donate the land, piece it all together, and hopefully we can make a dent in homelessness.'

Council, in a decision that is set to be ratified this week, voted in favour of tasking staff to come back with a report on options available to Aurora in participating in the proposed model.

By Brock Weir