

New Year could bring new incentives for affordable housing throughout York Region

By Brock Weir

The dawn of a New Year could bring the dawn of a new day in affordable housing across York Region.

This winter, the Regional Municipality of York is expected to receive a report on a new framework which would put in place incentives to bring about more affordable housing.

According to Valerie Shuttleworth, Chief Planner for the Region, staff will be reporting to Regional Council in probably February or March on an incentives framework to foster the development of affordable housing. Until this point, she said, York was waiting for guidelines from the Province on exclusionary zoning such as housing density but something had to give.

By June, a further presentation to Regional Council will delve deeper into how affordable housing is defined.

In June, you will see a much more in-depth report on affordability by type, a little more detail by location, and we're going to look a little more specifically at rental and setting some thresholds around affordability, she said. We have some ability to alter the definition as long as we get the Provincial okay for it.

Currently, the definition of affordable housing in York Region is pegged at just under \$468,000, but that could be up in the air.

Most recently, in the last year-and-a-half, there has been increased interest in rental units throughout York Region, said Rick Farrell, General Manager of Housing for the Region. A significant factor in this surge is a corresponding surge in rental prices, which has climbed up to nearly \$2,000 a month in many cases.

The problem with that this year became that once they introduced rent controls again, some of the [developers] are now thinking twice about it because it does cap the return on their future investment, he said.

While a review of the Region of York's Housing Strategy is still some months away, some local lawmakers have looked at ways Aurora can get its foot in the door on the plan, or even set out with some incentives of its own to increase the number of affordable units here in Town.

It is my impression that Aurora is in need of more affordable housing and more rental units, said Councillor John Abel, who introduced a motion himself last fall to get a head start on some of these incentives. It's acute in our area. The other part is if you're developing a tool kit and a strategy, and if you're aware of a strategy Aurora already has in place, you could then have that as a tool.

While the Region stopped short of telling Aurora to forge ahead on a housing strategy of its own, the Regional representatives told Council the municipality should do what it thinks is best.

I think Aurora should do what Aurora thinks it should do and we will bring our framework forward, said Ms. Shuttleworth. If Aurora has something in place before we report to Regional Council, we will take that into consideration, review it, work with it, see how we can include it and work with our framework together with Aurora's. Having Marco [Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning] and his staff at our local municipal housing working group, I think we're all kind of talking about the same thing.

We're not saying wait. We have a 10 year housing plan. We committed in our 10 year housing plan to look at ways to provide incentives for private, affordable market housing and rental housing. There is a lot of good stuff in there; we're not developing a housing strategy but an incentives framework. In 2018 we will be refreshing that 10 year strategy.

From Councillor Wendy Gaertner's perspective, any further incentives are a long time coming.

I keep talking about trying to get developers to give us affordable housing through bonusing, she said. I have been talking about it for years and I don't believe, to this point in time, we have ever accomplished that. It is very frustrating.