

Talk is cheap, but housing isn't: activists and residents



By Brock Weir

If there was one message York Region residents wanted local politicians to take back to them to Ottawa and Queen's Park, this was it: "Talk is cheap, but housing isn't."

According to groups of residents and activists alike who gathered at the York Region headquarters last week at the invitation of York Region Members of Parliament to brainstorm input on the developing National Housing Strategy, a plan with no concrete consideration for affordable housing "is like a car with no wheels or steering wheel. [A housing strategy] is a great idea, and we would love to see it happen, but how do we get to that point?"

A blueprint is the ultimate goal as the Federal Government, along with representatives from the Provincial and Municipal levels, carry out public consultations across the country. Consultations were launched in June and last Wednesday was York Region's turn to chime in on both the National Housing Strategy and a plan to tackle homelessness.

Speaking to the crowd, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev said that over the next few months the Federal Government will work with all levels of government, in addition to housing experts, indigenous governments and organizations "to help create new and innovative solutions to housing challenges."

"You are here today because you have a very important role to play," said Ms. Alleslev. "We want your suggestions for how we can ensure all Canadians have access to housing that is sustainable, affordable, inclusive and flexible."

Indeed, that is exactly what the assembled crowd was asked to do.

Given a set of questions to consider in breakout sessions, they were given the statement, a Vision of Housing, as a starting point: "All Canadians have access to housing that meets their needs and they can afford. Housing is the cornerstone of building healthy communities and a strong Canadian economy where we can prosper and thrive."

If housing is the cornerstone of building "healthy communities" and a strong economy, this statement is set to be the cornerstone of the National Housing Strategy and each breakout group were asked if they subscribed to the vision, how it could be tweaked and how the goal could be ultimately realised.

The Auroran sat in on one breakout session, which included representatives from Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, which operates Belinda's Place women's shelter, and representatives from the local real estate market with Aurora realtor Beverly Varcoe, and members of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

"I think it is a vision that is definitely attainable, but I don't think it is impossible," said Sukaina Sumar Ebrahim of Habitat for Humanity. "Everybody has got to own it and really believe in it to make it work."

Added Theresa McLeod Treadwell of the Salvation Army: "If [homelessness] was a priority and a number one initiative we wanted to end I think it could be attainable. The issue is that not one type of housing is right for every family or every individual. There is a lot of flexibility that is needed."

Flexibility, in fact, was the common denominator of just about every breakout group. In this roundtable in particular, a number of shortcomings in the local housing market were identified. A positive example was cited in cases from York Region's southern tier

that require rental suites be built in every unit with a detached garage to boost rental opportunities, something that continually falls short. Additional topics included tackling the growing issue of houses sitting vacant and inaccessible to buyers and renters, putting a tax on foreign investment, exploring rent control, and looking at putting housing assistants programs such as ODSP on a sliding scale determined on where one lives and the prevailing prices in each individual housing market.

‘Housing is the cornerstone of building a strong country because if people don’t have houses, they fall into trouble,’ said Jay Reesor. ‘It is a challenge that effects so many things. I would like to affirm what they have [in the Strategy]. It is not just a vision that everybody be housed, but the recognition that housing is the basis of everyone having a much better life.’

The group’s ultimate conclusion that the vision outlined in the draft National Housing Strategy resonated ‘overwhelmingly’ with the group but it is an uphill battle.

‘In practicality, finding housing that is affordable and meets the needs is impossible,’ said Ms. Ebrahim on behalf of the group. ‘It feels unattainable and it needs to be a priority at all levels of government, not for profits, individuals, communities to work together to come close to achieving this vision. It is a cornerstone of a strong country, a strong community and strong individuals.’

Suggestions for solutions included clarity and guidelines on in-law and secondary suites to boost the availability of rental units, partner with builders and provide incentives to include some forms of affordable, subsidized and accessible homes in each new housing development, and provide incentives to current housing and home owners to add apartments to their investments and make that the new normal.’

For other groups, a shortcoming in the vision statement was a lack of measurable outcomes. These, they said, were essential in knowing whether goals outlined had actually been achieved.

‘We don’t think Canadians’ needs are met and they can’t afford the housing that is out there,’ they said. ‘Affordability is dependent on one’s income. There is a disconnect between income and housing prices. We need more housing on the market until the demand is met.’