



Report:

Affordable Housing Community Consultation

Ottawa Centre

Hosted by Yasir Naqvi, MPP Ottawa Centre

August 19, 2009

On August 19, 2009, community stakeholders gathered in Ottawa Centre to discuss the development of a long-term affordable housing strategy for Ontario. The consultation was hosted by Yasir Naqvi, MPP for Ottawa Centre.

Over 100 people from across Ottawa attended the session. Participants represented a broad range of social service agencies, housing organizations, tenant associations, municipal administrators, and active community members.

The McGuinty government is looking for ideas to improve Ontarians' access to adequate, suitable and affordable housing in order to create a solid foundation on which to secure employment, raise families and build strong communities. The long-term affordable housing strategy for our province will be an important component of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

A successful strategy for Ontario must be built on community partnerships. This report outlines the knowledge, vision and creativity of the community of Ottawa Centre.

1. What specific roles should each of the housing partners play in the delivery of affordable housing?

A primary concern of many participants was the lack of coordination of affordable housing between all three levels of government. They spoke of examples to help eliminate conflicting policies and regulations, and recommended the creation of a central organization, modeled after a body such as Ontario's Local Health Integration Networks, to improve coordination and communication.

Stakeholders noted that funding from all levels of government for construction and maintenance of affordable housing has been unpredictable and sporadic. Stable, predictable, long-term funding, especially from the federal and provincial governments, is needed. Too often, housing strategies change when governments change.

Municipalities could create inclusionary zoning practices to require developers to build affordable housing units in new developments. Provincial legislation could establish inclusionary zoning province-wide. It was also noted that the federal and provincial governments, rather than just municipal governments, should purchase and provide land for affordable housing.

Finally, tenants and co-op members should be recognized as important stakeholders and partners with government in the delivery of affordable housing.

2. What changes are needed to our housing programs to better use resources and improve access to affordable housing? Changes could include modifications to the Affordable Housing Program or the simplification of housing and homelessness programs.

Existing services for tenants must be better integrated into affordable housing. This could be achieved by creating a ‘tenant liason’ role, with a high staff to tenant ratio, to better connect tenants to services. Better integration of support services, health agencies, police services, and affordable housing could also occur at the Ministerial level. A provincial advocate for affordable housing would enhance focus on affordable housing issues and increase collaboration between different service providers.

Stakeholders were asked how waiting lists could be improved. Prioritization could take precedence over ‘seniority’ on waiting lists; separate lists could be created for refurbished and new builds; better rental supplements would take pressure of existing waiting lists.

Several changes at the community level would enhance safety and standards. Emphasizing community gatherings would improve safety. Involve tenants in the maintenance of their community by offering them contracts for grass and snow removal or minor repairs. Housing providers could introduce innovative programs such as passing on cost savings from good maintenance to encourage better property maintenance by tenants. A Habitat for Humanity-type program would engage Ontarians in building and maintaining affordable housing on a volunteer basis and help strengthen the sense of community in the neighbourhood.

Stakeholders also discussed strategies to engage the private sector in affordable housing. Competition among affordable housing providers would increase quality and decrease price. Non-profits could be provided with funding to hire professional construction and maintenance workers to assist the volunteers. Legislation or incentives could ensure non-profit housing in private sector developments.

Finally, stakeholders emphasized that stable funding for affordable housing would make planning and resource allocation more efficient and effective. Costs would be further reduced through an emphasis on efficient green technologies, while continued consultation with stakeholders would enhance the effectiveness of affordable housing programs.

3. What changes are required to the *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* to reduce the regulatory burden and improve the management of social housing?

Stakeholders discussed reforming the *Social Housing Reform Act* to be more flexible, less punitive, and less restrictive. The government should consult with non-profit, co-op and tenant associations which have well-developed proposals to reduce the regulatory burden. Clarifying regulations would have the added benefit of reducing OMB appeals by developers.

Tenants need increased flexibility; increasing the asset exemption, annually indexing rent to the cost of living, increasing retained income limits, and clarifying criteria such as the ‘ability to live independently’ would avoid situations where regulations create homelessness or exacerbate housing problems. Ontario could allow housing providers to access equity and asset financing, and allow flexible portfolio management with tenant input.

Stakeholders wanted to ensure that affordable housing is integrated into safe, sustainable communities. ‘Ghettos’ should be avoided in favour of integrated site development. Allowing the screening of new tenants would protect vulnerable tenants. Creating tenant sentencing groups, based on models of restorative or circle justice would also increase community responsibility and safety. Tenant associations should be established in all residences or neighbourhoods.

The Province must upload additional funding for affordable housing away from the property tax base. Uploading funding for capital repairs would be particularly effective.

4. What creative new ideas could improve the current housing system? This could include new planning tools, innovative financial options and new green technologies.

Stakeholders discussed innovative financial strategies to improve the current housing system. Tenants would benefit from accessible micro-financing, which could be offered by the Bank of Canada. Increasing bridge financing and rent banks would reduce dependence on subsidized housing. The federal and provincial governments could also provide incentives for private developers to invest in affordable housing. A public social housing fund could be created to which individuals could contribute money or property through donation or estate. Housing would be more affordable if ‘add-ons’ such as pools were limited in private buildings, or if the size of new homes was reduced.

Increased energy efficiency would bring down costs. A central data and technology repository would make it easier to adopt new technologies. A provincial energy conservation strategy could focus on new builds and upgrades when repairs to existing stock are necessary. Efficient homes would incorporate features such as light wells, solar heating, and green roofs, as well as efficient appliances, toilets and elevator equipment.

Building new homes would be more cost-effective if standard, pre-fabricated designs were used to quickly build houses when money permits. Creating more flexible land use and parking requirements at the municipal level would encourage scattered site development and bring down costs.

Finally, maintaining seniors-only housing in low-rise buildings would greatly improve the quality of life for seniors in Ontario.

5. What should be used as the indicator for Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy? In this context, what do terms like affordable, adequate and suitable housing mean to you?

Stakeholders called for the Government of Ontario to hold itself accountable to results by reporting on indicators such as the length of waiting lists, the annual number of builds, the number of landlords who contribute to affordable housing stock, or the length of time it takes for tenants on social assistance to become self-supporting.

Affordable housing, for most stakeholders, meant that rent does not exceed 30% of gross income. It was also suggested that the rent to income indicator can be varied based on the number of

dependents of a tenant. A single person would be expected to pay a higher percentage of their income towards rent than a person with dependents.

Further indicators to measure adequate and affordable housing include:

- a minimum of one room per person in a housing unit
- living in housing adapted to a person's physical capabilities
- adequate maintenance standards
- the ability to pay rent without sacrificing other necessities
- the ability to become involved in activities outside of a person's immediate needs
- the ability to choose where one lives

Summary

While the participants provided a range of suggestions and comments on the five questions above, the general theme conveyed by the group was the need to better integrate the delivery and funding of affordable housing services between all levels of government. The need for increased investment was also frequently mentioned.

Participants also frequently talked about the importance of energy efficiency and green technology to lower costs for tenants and housing providers. Greater involvement of the tenants in the decision-making and delivery of services was seen as key to implementing an affordable housing strategy.

Detailed proposals submitted by stakeholders at the meeting are included as appendices.