

Tony DuMoulin

Affordable Housing

Part 2

In a previous article¹, I discussed some of the innovative solutions needed to improve the affordability of housing in Canada's least affordable city.

I expressed my concern that Vancouver was at risk of becoming the preserve of the wealthy, with little rental housing available, and practically no affordable private rental housing available.

I concluded that article by hoping there was the political will to solve the crisis in housing.

On October 4, Provincial Housing Minister Rich Coleman announced a new affordable housing strategy called "Housing Matters." Details can be found on the ministry's Website.

In his introductory message, Mr. Coleman points out that 16 percent

of British Columbia households are in "core housing need," and that people representing more than 14,000 households have filled out applications for subsidized housing.

The provincial government should be lauded for recognizing the housing crisis in the province.

"Core Housing Need" is the term given to the national standard measuring housing need. Canadian households are considered to be in core housing need if they do not live in and could not access housing that is in adequate condition and of suitable size without paying more than 30 per cent of their gross household income.

According to the Website, the new housing strategy consists of 2 policy changes and 6 strategies.



The 2 policy changes

1. Individuals or households with special housing needs (frail seniors, people with mental illness or physical disabilities, those with drug and alcohol addiction, and the homeless) will be given priority access to subsidized housing.
2. Provincially owned subsidized housing will be renovated or redeveloped to better meet the needs of low income households with special needs.

The 6 strategies

1. The homeless have access to stable housing with integrated support services.
2. BC's most vulnerable citizens receive priority for assistance.
3. Aboriginal housing need is addressed.
4. Low-income households have improved access to affordable rental housing.
5. Homeownership is supported as an avenue to self-sufficiency.
6. BC's housing and building regulatory system is safe, stable, and efficient.

So there you have it, in outline. The provincial government should be lauded for recognizing the housing crisis in the province. The solutions offered, however, have drawn mixed reaction from the affordable housing advocacy community.

¹ Please see the Summer *Scrivener*, Vol. 15, No. 2, page 70.
www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener



Let me focus on Strategy #4, known as the Rental Assistance Program for families. Note that of the 223,700 households in core housing need, 61,155 are renter households paying more than 50 percent of their income on housing. The Rental Assistance Program is intended to provide direct reimbursement of between 25 and 50 percent of the difference between 30 percent of the family's income and their rent, subject to maximum rent ceilings.

As one part of an overall solution, these direct rent subsidies will assist some families, but the eligibility criteria unfortunately makes them available to only a limited number.

The criteria include

- having at least one dependent child under the age of 19;
- having an annual income (some money must come from employment) below \$20,000; and
- having less than \$10,000 in assets.

So any family earning \$20,000 to \$30,000 will not be assisted by the Rental Assistance Program and will almost certainly continue to find adequate housing in Vancouver at "30 percent of income" very difficult to come by.

Moreover, families receiving income assistance are not eligible for this new subsidy and will have to continue to rely on the shelter portion of their welfare cheques. In the case of singles, the shelter allowance remains at \$325 per month, an amount that has not changed for 10 years.

Minister Coleman has said, however, that the BC budget is now [October 2006] being put together and that the amount to be spent on the shelter allowance is being reviewed and likely will be increased. ▲

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