

Scarborough Affordable Housing Pre-Consultation Forum June 17, 2009

A cool and drizzly evening didn't stop Scarborough residents from coming out on mass to take part in an affordable housing forum at 4205 Lawrence Avenue East, a Toronto Community Housing residence, on June 17. The forum brought together a diverse group of residents from across Scarborough to talk about affordable housing issues in their community, in preparation for the provincial government's community consultation that will take place on July 21 in Scarborough. About 80 participants took part in the forum organized by Social Planning Toronto, East Scarborough Storefront, West Hill Community Services, Residents Rising, Action for Neighbourhood Change Kingston-Galloway, Scarborough Housing Help Centre, the Wellesley Institute and Scarborough Anti-Poverty Coalition.

The evening started with a delicious meal prepared by Nazir Alam and volunteer Mary, followed by a line-up of excellent speakers and an engaging resident discussion. The evening was moderated by Social Planning Toronto's Winston Tinglin who set the context for the night.

Beth Wilson from Social Planning Toronto introduced the provincial government's plan to develop a long-term affordable housing strategy. She emphasized the importance of community involvement in the development of the housing strategy to push the Province to develop a bold plan that makes a real difference in the lives of Ontarians. Residents were encouraged to register for the provincial government's Scarborough community consultation taking place on July 21 (ontario.ca/housingstrategy or 416-585-6377 to register) and to contact their MPP to ask when they will be holding their local affordable housing consultation.

Gopi Krishna from Scarborough Housing Help Centre spoke on the issue of hidden homelessness for families in Scarborough. Gopi explained, hidden homelessness is the concept of multiple families cramming themselves into a space meant to be lived in by one and only one family. While the hidden homeless have a roof over their heads, they are homeless for practical purposes, lacking privacy, dealing with issues of hygiene related to overcrowding and having no dedicated space for children.

Gopi suggested that Toronto's 13 priority neighbourhoods in the inner suburbs are home to large numbers of hidden homeless families. While the extent of hidden homelessness in the newcomer community is not known, he estimated that 30,000 newcomer families may be among the hidden homeless in Toronto based on newcomer and affordability statistics. Newcomer families face particular barriers to accessing housing due to a lack of employment, Canadian references and Canadian credit history. Faced with these barriers, newcomers may find themselves in situations of having to provide 6 months of rent or more upfront to secure housing. With limited resources, the family doubles up with other families to make ends meet. This temporary 'solution' may become a permanent problem for newcomers unable to find suitable employment.

Among the solutions to hidden homelessness, Gopi recommended interest-free loans to cover first and last month's rent for newcomers. He pointed to the success of rent banks in Ontario that save tenants from eviction, and recommended augmenting this program to ensure newcomers have access to first and last month's rent. He also raised the prospect of the government renting apartments in complexes and subletting units to newcomers at reduced rates during the initial settlement period as Australia did until the late 1980s. At the community level, education, awareness and encouraging access to legal remedies are critical. Lastly, Gopi commented that newcomers should overcome the need to be 'model minorities' and acknowledge the existence of widespread poverty in newcomer communities in order to work for lasting solutions.

Sara Clenyg Jones from Scarborough Housing Help Centre spoke on issues of hidden homelessness among youth in Scarborough. She emphasized the impact of living in substandard housing, squats and overcrowded conditions on physical and mental health and pointed to family breakup as a leading cause of youth hidden homelessness. Youth who leave home because of family problems are often leaving school as well, without skills and without opportunities to earn or learn. In these situations, young people are left with few options to make a living, turning to desperate ways to get by. Sara spoke about resulting mental health issues for youth with no way of accessing decent affordable housing, the unsafe conditions they live in, and most discouragingly, the loss of hope for young people in this situation. She recommended outreach efforts to meet youth where they are most comfortable, in recreation centres and malls for example. Sara advised the hiring of peer support workers with life experience of homelessness and the development of programs to eliminate service gaps.

Heather Urbansky from West Hill Community Services spoke on the need for rent control. She asked the forum participants if they could remember what real rent controls were, as it had been many years since a strong system of rent controls had been in place. Rent controls allow landlords to raise the rents annually to a specified amount. Without rent controls, landlords can set rents at whatever the market will bear. While there are rent controls on occupied units today, landlords can charge whatever they want for new and vacated units in Ontario. This has led to large increases in rents, creating a lack of affordability in the private rental market.

Rent controls provide residents with real choice about where they live and options to live in the neighbourhoods where they work. Today a lack of rent control leaves residents with unaffordable rents and no choice about where they live. Many are stuck in substandard housing in neighbourhoods far from their workplace as a result. Everyday, Heather sees residents turning to the food bank because their food budget is being used to pay the rent. While rental increases are necessary, they need to be fair ones. We need a return to real rent control to begin to address the problem of affordable housing.

Dominika Siemiatkowska from West Hill Community Services spoke on innovation in entitlement and accessing affordable housing. She pointed to the need for emergency housing not just emergency shelters, the problem of house surfing and the endless wait for social housing with over 128,000 Ontario households currently on the waiting list.

For bachelor apartments, the wait is between 2-5 years, and for 2-, 3- and 4-bedroom units the wait can be anywhere from 7-15 years. This is a system that is not working. For tenants in subsidized housing, the problems don't end there, with many experiencing maintenance issues. For families that experience a change in their household, a new baby for example, there is another long wait for appropriate units in many cases. Dominika recommends changes to the system to allow subsidies to be attached to the family rather than to the unit. She commented that the current system leaves people stuck, with little choice about where to live.

Brian Eng from the Wellesley Institute concluded the panel with a discussion of major currents in Ontario's affordable housing crisis. He provided some background on the long wait in Scarborough and across Ontario for new affordable housing with little built since 1995. In Scarborough, 50 units of rental housing have been lost in recent years with no new rentals replacing them.

One of the biggest issues is that even when governments build what they call 'affordable' housing, it is often not affordable to low income residents. Brian estimated that 40% of Scarborough residents cannot afford what governments deem to be affordable housing in many cases. The Province's long-term affordable housing strategy must include definitions of affordability that reflect the actual incomes of residents.

Housing funding in the last federal budget included 2 billion with half going to repair existing social housing and half for new housing restricted to seniors and people with disabilities. The budget offered no new money for families, youth or newcomers.

The housing boom of recent years has resulted in no new affordable housing. Brian called for the building of new housing now and for measures to keep it truly affordable for all residents. Among his recommendations, he discussed the need for a universal housing benefit that allows residents to pay no more than 30% of their income on housing.

Residents took part in an engaging discussion following the panel. Topics of discussion and suggestions included:

- Only 1 youth shelter in Scarborough; need to expand
- Housing groups should keep in contact with opposition critics from other parties to advance housing issues
- TCHC needs to help people with housing transfers when they have changes in their lives (new baby; moving in with partner); people are stuck now
- Need for transferable rent supplement that is attached to person not unit
- Need for rent control so landlords don't take all of the rent supplement by jacking up rents
- Units are in terrible condition; need to deal with the problems with the existing housing; roaches, bed bugs; needs to be in housing strategy
- Need to build feeling of ownership within the TCHC buildings; people will take better care of housing if they feel that ownership

- Need real affordable housing, call it subsidized housing; that's what we really need
- Raise money for a 1 cent gas tax to pay for affordable housing
- Concern that seniors will be overlooked on the housing agenda
- Put a tax on big lottery winnings over 1 million to pay for affordable housing
- Need proper supervision of the funding for housing so it doesn't disappear into someone's pocket
- Buildings need fumigating; need to deal with bugs, roaches
- Subsidized housing can be stigmatizing; need to empower families to be able to live where they want to; people feel trapped
- Need more mixed income housing with the proper services in the neighbourhood; not even grocery store close by
- Families are taking substandard housing because they are desperate and have kids who need a home; it results in a loss of pride to have bad housing; no sense of ownership if you get crap; need to have decent housing to begin with to keep it that way
- Native housing in bad repair; needs support
- Need youth, seniors, Aboriginal, First Nations, everyone to be involved to push for strong housing plan; can't just be the housing policy people
- People are spending less money on other things because of how expensive housing is; can hardly afford housing even paying almost 100% of their income; that's where the economy is going
- We spend too much on technology; should be diverted to housing and other issues
- Immigrants are being exploited when they come to Canada; government is making things worse by neglecting social needs
- Inclusionary housing policy will help us build new affordable housing in private developments; municipalities or non-profits could be the owners and rent it out to low income residents with subsidies
- Need a focus on community development to deal with keeping properties clean
- Need 1% solution to properly fund affordable housing

Winston Tinglin concluded the evening with a call out to participants encouraging them to take part in the provincial government's July 21 Scarborough housing consultation or on July 22 for one of the downtown consultations (ontario.ca/housingstrategy). This is a unique moment for residents to contribute to the development of the first-ever long-term affordable housing strategy. Winston reminded participants that nothing happens without residents making our voices heard.

Many thanks to lead organizer Israt Ahmed from Social Planning Toronto and the community partners for putting together this important event.