



Housing Now! – an update

by Erin Boutang, Community Services Policy Analyst

It has been nearly one year since the AMM, Manitoba Family Services and Housing, and Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) partnered to facilitate a one-day housing conference for municipal officials and government representatives. The conference was put on to identify housing challenges – particularly in the areas of affordable housing, northern housing, and housing for seniors with disabilities. Since then, the AMM produced the final conference report, *Housing Now! Meeting Manitoba's Needs*, accompanied by a comprehensive list of federal and provincial housing programs, and mailed them to all AMM members.

The conference identified prominent housing challenges that municipalities face in Manitoba and areas in which municipalities are calling for action. What has the AMM learned about housing in Manitoba over the past year? This article provides members with some key considerations when developing a municipal housing strategy, an area in which many conference participants felt they required assistance. Aside from providing AMM members with vital housing information, this article highlights pro-active measures members can take to improve the housing situation in their communities, considering both urban and rural circumstance.

Developing a municipal housing strategy

As a result of many factors, municipalities are finding themselves more directly involved in the planning and provision of affordable housing. As community leaders, local governments have a growing responsibility to provide decent housing, as citizens often look to local government to provide the conditions for an enhanced quality of life. Furthermore, municipalities are in an ideal position to bring on board a wide range of community interests— public and private sector housing providers and community-based organizations – that can contribute to addressing local housing needs. In addition, local governments have control over policy areas that can impact housing affordability and design (land availability, zoning regulations, development fees and property taxes). Thus, the opportunity for municipalities to develop coherent and pro-active approaches to housing has never been greater.

Developing a municipal housing strategy requires a significant commitment of time and resources; however, municipalities are not alone. There are a variety of provincial and federal programs that are designed to help municipalities at various stages of developing housing policy. Furthermore,

there is a wide variety of literature available, offering step-by-step guidance to local governments ready to embark on a community housing strategy. One such guide, published by CMHC and entitled *A Guide to Developing A Municipal Affordable Housing Strategy*¹, offers systematic advice to local governments for developing housing strategy. The CMHC Guide states that, “*A municipal housing strategy is a systematic approach to addressing local housing issues.*” It also provides the community with an opportunity to discuss housing in its broad social development context and reach consensus on what should be done to ensure housing needs are met. By undertaking a municipal housing strategy, the community can inventory available resources, weigh the possible actions, assign responsibility for action to municipal and community-based agencies, and identify those actions and policy changes that they will demand from senior levels of government.

An important point to consider is that it often benefits every aspect of the community's growth when housing needs assessments are completed within the context of total community development. Each municipal approach to housing will

vary, however, as most municipalities in Manitoba do not experience the affordability problems of large urban centres, focusing the municipal housing strategy by responding to one or two key affordability issues will make the best use of the limited tools available to local governments. The importance of a well-planned municipal housing strategy cannot be overstated, but what are some of the steps that local governments should follow when developing housing strategy? *A Guide to Developing a Municipal Affordable Housing Strategy* offers seven steps, briefly outlined here:

1. Preparation and planning: *Local governments who have not already embarked on an affordable housing strategy should consider the following three steps: appoint a project leader, develop terms of reference, and set up a Strategy Development Task Force.*

Setting up the appropriate administrative framework, gathering resources and laying out the objective of the community's housing strategy can help guarantee that the plan is geared toward local conditions and that available resources are used most efficiently.

2. Ensure public participation: *Community involvement in the development and implementation of an affordable housing strategy is a necessity; one of the strengths of an affordable housing strategy is that it provides a vehicle of collaboration among the broad range of community agencies and individuals with a stake in improving access to affordable housing.*

The importance of public participation can not be overstated. By involving a variety of community interests, councils may gain a different perspective on housing issues, may help identify local volunteers who are interested in contributing their resources and can help garner broader community support when implementing a local housing plan.

3. Conduct a needs assessment: *Prior to deciding on an appropriate local housing strategy, municipalities must evaluate the housing stock in the community. This step helps to guide the strategy development process by assembling a detailed and well-*

supported picture of affordability issues. In order to identify those housing needs that will be addressed through an affordable housing strategy, the municipality must be properly informed of the current housing situation and emerging trends. The following three steps are fundamental to a housing needs assessment: 1) Assemble a database on the current housing market, demographic and socio-economic characteristics; 2) Assess future housing needs and determine housing shortfall; and 3) Prioritize needs and identify key issues.

It is important that municipalities have an informed idea of the type of housing that is needed in the community at present, but also to consider future needs. For example, is the municipality seeking to attract new residents or businesses? What type of housing is suitable for these groups?

4. Build the strategy: *There are a number of approaches that municipalities can use to address local affordable housing needs. The practices most suitable for a given community should be identified, analyzed within a local context and integrated into a comprehensive and consistent strategy.*

There are many tools that municipalities possess that can make or break an affordable housing strategy. For example, municipalities can remove barriers to new private-market affordable housing – including streamlining review processes; reducing development standards; establishing fees and requirements; ensuring a full range of unit types and sizes and allowing innovation in subdivisions. It should also be noted that the greatest cost of housing developments is related to infrastructure (i.e. providing municipal services), so municipalities should consider infill housing which makes use of pre-existing services and can contribute to the revitalization of older neighbourhoods.

5. Implement the strategy: *Implementing the strategy is equally as important as planning- it requires its own set of procedures, problems, timeframe, resources, communication plan and leadership. Municipalities should pay particular attention to the areas that it can*

directly influence the implementation of its housing strategy. As such, the municipality could undertake a thorough review of its existing bylaws, regulation and other controls to eliminate potential barriers.

6. Create partnerships: *Today, partnerships have become more and more common in both the private and public sectors as a way of stretching limited resources and achieving strategic objectives. The following six steps should be considered when forming partnerships, although some steps may be skipped depending on what stage of the housing strategy a municipality is at: 1) Understand the housing needs in the community; 2) determine community objectives; 3) understand partnership needs; 4) identify suitable partners; 5) structure the partnership; and 6) implement the partnership.*

Before becoming involved in a partnership, it is useful to gain a clear understanding of the gaps in the municipal housing strategy, what the partnership options are and how to determine financial requirements. Furthermore, local governments should look at a variety of potential partners including local economic development organizations, financial institutions, developers, community groups and chambers of commerce.

7. Evaluation and monitoring: *Implementation of the affordable housing strategy can be strengthened by incorporating provisions for monitoring and evaluating progress towards the objectives laid out in the strategy. On this basis, the municipality and its partners can make adjustments to the strategy and its implementation mechanisms.*

Setting goals and monitoring performance allows all stakeholders to develop a clearer understanding of the expected results for each element of the action plan, as well as helping to focus Council's decision-making and helping municipal staff to understand the level and type of service delivery required.

Every community is different. Each has its own housing issues and its own unique ways of responding to these issues. Municipalities also vary in their involvement

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in housing strategy. CMHC's guide offers valuable information to all municipalities, regardless of their current involvement with community housing issues. All aspects of this guide are relevant to both urban and rural members as each step can be tailored to a specific community circumstance. So how have Manitoba communities been approaching housing challenges?

An excellent example can be found in St. Pierre-Jolys.² In recent years, the community has struggled with the need for more housing options. Although several initiatives have been undertaken, most were done so on a project-by-project basis with no co-ordination with other aspects of community development. The St. Pierre-Jolys Housing Co-op decided to work with the local Chaboille Community Development Corporation and SWB Inc., a project management group, to develop a housing co-op. This process allows like-minded citizens to design, develop and manage housing that is designed to meet individual and common needs. In addition to providing quality housing for members, co-operatives can provide community economic development opportunities and employment, and can help retain community businesses and populations.

A survey was distributed to review the housing needs and requirements in

the community. The group proceeded to concentrate on the development of a condo project. It became apparent at the marketing stage that a more comprehensive approach was required and all groups that were involved in residential development were invited to a round table discussion. This led to the agreement that residential development would be done under the umbrella of the housing co-op.

The steps being taken in order to be ready for marketing in spring 2004 include:

- ▶ an analysis of what has been done to date;
- ▶ architectural drawings offering several different housing options;
- ▶ the creation of multi-use promotional material for the Chaboille region (which includes the R.M. of De Salaberry and the Village of St. Pierre-Joly); and
- ▶ a combining of resources to build a shared home and office to promote and sell the co-op.

Throughout the winter, the community will be provided with information regarding the housing co-op and membership shares will be sold to garner community support.

By taking a pro-active and integrated approach to housing challenges within a community, municipalities can enhance the quality of life of its citizens and can strengthen citizen participation.

To access a copy of CMHC's Guide to *Developing a Municipal Affordable Housing Strategy*, please contact AMM Community Services Policy Analyst **Erin Boutang** (204-856-2371). In addition, here is a listing of further resources that municipalities will find useful when developing a housing strategy for their community.

Further resources

- *The Affordable Housing "Toolkit: A step-by-step approach to deal with your affordable housing challenges.* Published by the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, 2003 (please contact the AMM on how to access this publication).
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation on the web: <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca>. This website has a wide variety of useful information for municipalities wanting assistance with housing issues. Furthermore, it contains a listing of all guidebooks and documents published by CMHC that are **free** to residents of Canada (1-800-668-2642).
- *Affordable Housing Ideas.* The Affordable Housing Ideas tool, on the CMHC website, is a collection of concepts that may help municipalities develop a plan of action to address local housing issues. It presents a range of strategies, illustrated by real case studies, that have been used by private, non-profit and public sectors in varied context and for diverse purposes (from CMHC home page, click on "improving quality and affordability," then "affordable housing," then "affordable housing ideas").
- *Canadian Centre for Public Private Partnerships in Housing.* For more information about the Centres services, contact your regional representative (Prairies, Nunavut and NWT Business Centre: 403-515-3011).
- *Municipal Regulatory Initiatives: Providing for Affordable Housing (CMHC).* This document offers municipalities some ideas about policy areas in which they can provide for affordable housing (to order this guide at no charge, call 1-800-668-2642). ●

(Footnotes)

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² The example of the St. Pierre-Jolys Housing Co-op was provided by Murielle Bugera, Economic Development Officer for the Chaboille Community Development Corporation.