

PROVINCIAL HOUSING STRATEGY – AN AFFORDABLE HOUSING ASSOCIATION PERSPECTIVE

It has been 30 years since the Province of Nova Scotia has had anything resembling a Housing Strategy. There is a very great danger that in spite of the recent momentum generated by the Consultation, Housing Services will do tomorrow what it did today because it was what was done yesterday. Significant change is proffered and many of us know how hard significant change is to accomplish. As one of the table presenters warned the Minister at the Consultation in Kentville - “Beware because Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast”.

AHANS has attended several of the Minister Peterson-Rafuse’s presentations and do not doubt her passion and commitment to the task ahead; we welcome this Consultation and have already expressed our support for the principles of the Strategy directly to Minister Peterson-Rafuse. We have also spoken with Senior housing staff and their desire for a different path is evident. We are encouraged by the continued acknowledgement that the creation and implementation of a successful Strategy will take the active participation of the other 2 levels of government and the private and community based non-profit housing sectors.

The AHANS membership is not naïve, and its support acknowledges the very significant challenges presented by limited resources, extensive and long standing needs and the length of time it will take to implement the required changes. AHANS believes however that action, not just words, is needed to demonstrate that the Government is serious in its intentions and in spite of these obstacles there are immediate steps that can be taken to begin to implement its new vision.

First and foremost the Strategy needs targets. Housing Services should immediately begin to do the research needed to establish the Strategy’s goals and objectives and the resources required to meet them. For instance

- What is the quantum of deferred maintenance and capital improvements needed in the social housing portfolio?
- What is the quantum of major repairs needed to keep seniors in their own homes longer?
- How many households in what income ranges can enjoy home ownership with assistance through lease purchase or shared equity programs?
- What is the anticipated need for affordable rental housing and where does this need exist?
- What will be the measures of “affordability”?
- What has been the experience of the housing support workers’ in the private sector “Housing First” initiative? Should it stop? Should it expand?
- Where will the money needed come from?

Answers to these and other similar questions will be needed to create a Strategy that is knowledge based and outcome targeted. To paraphrase the Cheshire Cat – any road will take you there if you don’t

know where you are going! Only government has the resources to provide for this research and to prioritize the outcomes it wishes to achieve with the resources at hand both now and in the future.

Here are other immediate possibilities that will demonstrate the Government's seriousness:

- Place responsibility for the Strategy within the NS Housing Development Corporation, not the Department of Community Services, and construct a sector based governance model for the Corporation as AHANS suggested.
- Have a good hard look at the "outcomes" that have been achieved through 6 decades of public housing. Explore the benefits and challenges of taking public housing management out of the civil service and putting it back into community. Find a community/municipality ready to accept the challenge and learn from the experience.
- Are there other management options and subsidy models that will produce desired outcomes at the same time as saving subsidy dollars for reinvestment in other initiatives?
- Explore the benefits and challenges of contracting with the non-profit sector to deliver portions of existing Residential Rehabilitation, Shelter Enhancement and the Provincially funded repair programs. Identify willing partners to test the possibilities. HRSDC and the Canadian International Development Agency use 3rd parties now to deliver programming and RRAP was once community delivered.
- Put more resources into the Strategy by maximizing the Social Housing Transfer Agreement. Rationalize the Rural and Native Housing and public housing portfolios by taking an asset management rather than a program approach to decision making. Cash flow the projected savings in the years they are achieved rather than continually increasing the liability accruing to the Deferred Federal Contribution line of the NSHDC's balance sheet.
- Stop using the Housing budgets to subsidize the Income Assistance budget line.
- Begin a conversation now with sector representatives before formal structures are put in place. Conversation can be extremely useful. HRM's recent decision on the development of the Bloomfield site offered an opportunity for such engagement.
- Have the Housing staff of DCS actively participate as members of AHANS, the Nova Scotia Housing and Homelessness Network, Nova Scotia Home Builders Association, the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia, the HPS Community Advisory Boards and other related sector organizations.
- Explore the benefits and challenges of introducing something akin to CMHC's former Community Resource Organization Program funding which had as one of its goals increasing community capacity to deliver community based housing projects. The Community Interest Companies legislation has the potential to be a great tool but keep this analogy in mind. If the playing field is like a Monopoly Board the private sector is starting at Pacific Avenue – the non-profit sector at Baltic.

There is much to be done but there is much that can be done immediately. The Province will find a willing, knowledgeable and capable partner in the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia.