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Affordable and Attainable Housing in Eastern Ontario

2022 ROMA Delegation Briefing Note

Introduction

Housing affordability and attainability remains a key priority for the EOWC. Ever-increasing rental costs and housing prices across the province are not solely an urban issue. These market pressures have extended into rural areas and have exacerbated the gap between those who can afford to live in our region and those who cannot. The EOWC is committed to working in partnership with the Province to find innovative ways to encourage private sector developers to pursue rural housing projects while ensuring that programs and tools to foster and support affordable and attainable housing meet the needs of our rural communities.

A Locally Driven Solution: Filling the Housing Information Gap

To address the housing shortfall in rural Eastern Ontario, the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus (EOWC) and the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) are partnering to create a robust data platform that would provide valuable information to various housing stakeholders. Access to this data would help and support public sector, private sector and non-profits to develop more affordable and attainable housing in rural communities.

The EOWC was chosen as one of 21 successful projects across Canada, and indeed while this project will begin in eastern Ontario, it is an application that can be expanded to cover municipalities across the country.

Funded by \$1.4 million in grants from the CMHC's Housing Supply Challenge, this digital tool aims to provide local, reliable, salient, and current rural data to assist proponents and municipalities in the planning and construction of new, affordable housing.

Data will be collected using automated functions, pulling data from the internet (e.g. websites advertising rentals) as well as government agencies (e.g., Statistics Canada, Municipal Property Assessment Corporation). This ensures information is accurate and reduces the burden on small municipalities with limited staff capacity.

In rural areas, data sets are often poorly managed, underpopulated and different between jurisdictions. This data portal aims to address many hurdles experienced by various players in the housing field such as:

- **Municipal Staff and Council:** Rural Municipal budgets rely heavily on residential property tax levies therefore Councils need credible data to justify municipal investments in affordable housing
- **Developers:** Construction rules and incentives vary throughout Ontario's small communities. Time is money, and developers would be encouraged to consider rural developments with easy access to reliable information on rules and incentives. Developer pro formas and investment, both large and small scale, heavily rely on immediate, accurate and reliable information.
- **Economic Development/ Real Estate Professionals:** Rural data is often skewed when combined with urban centres and is not granular enough for use in developing investment cases for rural communities.
- **Social Services/Housing Managers:** Reliable data is not often available (such as average market rents and vacancy rates), but it is essential to plan and implement housing plans and understand trends across the region.

EOWC staff have already had encouraging conversations with provincial staff regarding the sharing of provincial data sets to help populate this ambitious new tool. We are looking for provincial partnership to help make this data portal an effective solution to address gaps in our rural data and support the creation of new affordable/attainable units.

Flexible Funding Programs

The EOWC appreciates current provincial funding programs and investments. We would encourage the province to build on this commitment and offer funding that provides greater flexibility to fund capital projects specific to homelessness, such as shelters and transitional/supportive housing. While homelessness can often be hidden in rural communities, it is exacerbated by the current lack of rental units, a situation worsened by the pandemic. Greater flexibility would allow rural communities to deploy resources to address this need. Home for Good presented an opportunity for these projects; however, many communities in the EOWC did not receive this funding.

The Province's substantial investment in the Social Services Relief Fund was also much appreciated. This funding permitted capital investments and demonstrated that when Service Managers have this flexibility, they implement meaningful, local capital projects. By incorporating additional funding into Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) allocations, and permitting capital projects, Service Managers would be able to fund initiatives to meet local demand.

Service Managers in the EOWC continue to explore opportunities to partner with the private sector to increase the availability of affordable housing units. The Ontario Priorities Housing Initiative guidelines prohibits funding to private sector proponents without non-profit/municipal/cooperative partnership. If this limitation were lifted, local managers could provide incentives to local developers and increase housing units.

Flexibility in Long-Term Planning

The EOWC encourages the Province to use funding programs to support long-term planning. Rather than limiting funding allocations to a single year, the capacity to carry funding forward would help Service Managers plan for future years and align projects with local 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plans. Service Managers rely on various provincial funding envelopes to promote and expand affordable housing in their communities. Multi-year funding agreements would provide more flexibility for better long-term planning, as seen in the first three-year cycle of COCHI-OPHI.

Provincial Commitment

The EOWC asks for a commitment from the province in the following areas:

1. To work with municipalities to not only ensure access to the available and appropriate necessary tools, but to guarantee municipal housing programs reflect the needs of rural Ontario with a process at the policy level to explore this in detail, and;
2. A commitment to be a partner in the EOWC's CMHC Housing Supply project through the exchange of available provincial data.