



Street Talk column September, 2006

Conservative Leadership Candidates Respond – Question One

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Conservative leadership hopefuls comment on affordable housing and homelessness

This fall, the most anticipated election race in 14 years will begin in Alberta. Ralph Klein is stepping down and a handful of contenders will campaign for the Conservative leadership position.

With this in mind, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) offered all Conservative leadership candidates the opportunity to comment on three poverty-related issues, including possible policy solutions to help address these issues. Results will be published in the September, October and November editions of Calgary Street Talk, with each month highlighting a different question.

In coordination with Homeless Awareness Week – running September 17 through to September 24 – this month's question focuses on the growing problem of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing.

Approximately one in four Calgarians are spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing and the recent City of Calgary 2006 Biennial Count of Homeless Persons revealed there are over 3,400 homeless in Calgary, a 32 per cent increase since the last count in 2004.

We asked candidates, if elected, what are their plans to address the need for affordable housing and homelessness in Alberta.

The following is what hopefuls had to say. Dr. Lyle Oberg and Dr. Ted Morton had not responded by the deadline.

Alana DeLong

There are many who are homeless as a result of mental illness. They need community based treatment and specialized care delivered along with compassion from us all.

Another large segment of the homeless are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Addiction treatment centers based upon scientifically evaluated methods should be available to all those trapped in addiction.

Regarding affordable housing, the most important move that we need to take is to release the new Alberta Secondary Suite Safety Regulations and encourage municipalities to make good use of it.

Owner occupied homes with safe and legal "Granny Suites" spread throughout our cities will help young families afford their own homes, and will provide the affordable rental housing that was available previously to past generations.

Any affordable housing paid for by the Alberta Government should be accessible housing for the disabled and for seniors.

Jim Dinning

Thirty-four-hundred-plus homeless Calgarians—including 145 homeless families—is a problem that must not be ignored. For those in poverty—or even on the cusp of poverty—the struggle to improve their situation gets more difficult as costs—for almost everything, including housing—rise out of sight.

One of my volunteer activities is with the Calgary United Way's Sustained Poverty Reduction Initiative (SPRI). It's a local initiative that takes community-based action to reduce poverty in Calgary.

As a Conservative, I believe in supporting folks to achieve greater independence. At the United Way, we're focused on efforts that will increase the amount of affordable housing; promote community economic development through micro development initiatives; focus on kids who are living in poverty; reduce policy and procedural barriers; and build public awareness and citizen engagement. The government should do the same thing as part of a comprehensive plan.

Specifically on affordable housing, I'd reach out to the Calgary Homeless Foundation, the United Way and other agencies province wide. I'd work with them to build a plan, one that sees sustained, predictable, multi-year funding from all three levels of government and engages the home builders in Alberta in building and operating affordable homes.

Dave Hancock

Alberta's robust economy continues to draw people here in record numbers. Our unprecedented population growth has created a growing and vibrant province, but it is also putting a strain on virtually every aspect of our society. Of particular concern is the growing number of homeless people in Alberta. This is an important social issue we must address.

The problem of homelessness is different from that of the past. What we already had to deal with in terms of persons with mental health or other personal barriers affecting their ability to obtain safe, affordable accommodation now includes the working poor.

What is the solution? Our government needs to do a number of things. First, we must engage those working in this field to develop effective solutions for both the short and long term. Two areas I would focus on include income support and/or supplementary assistance to help individuals and their families overcome their financial barriers, as well as working with municipalities and developers to increase our province's housing capacity so there is affordable housing available to meet the demand resulting from population growth.

Secondly, we need to do more to ensure that assistance programs are not so rules based as to be ineffective. Programs must be flexible so we achieve the outcomes we seek as opposed to being costly to run and hard to access by those who need them most. The key is greater collaboration between the province, local municipalities and community organizations, together with appropriate resources and outcome measures.

Mark Norris

Under a Norris government, we would ensure proper funding for existing programs specific to low-income housing was budgeted for and paid out.

Further, I want to increase the amount of money available to developers to create more affordable housing and make sure they adhere to the “market rate less 10%” rule. This problem is province wide and severely affects our ability to attract and retain badly needed workers.

With regards to the homeless situation, I propose a “Premiers Council” be struck to review our current support levels and forward suggestions on how to improve our involvement.

Ed Stelmach

There is a need for helping those in our communities that fall on hard times. There is also a need to provide affordable housing so that more people can find appropriate accommodation, and can afford to make other healthy choices.

The rapid growth of our economy is fuelling property inflation that is felt everywhere and is causing acute social problems in many Alberta communities.

The housing market is in a temporary imbalance and an immediate provision of affordable housing will help the supply of housing catch up with demand and reduce speculation in the housing market. It is critical that we find immediate shelter for people living in our communities without a home or a place to sleep.

Government must also speed up provision of long term care and assisted living accommodation to help those seniors who are ready to move into these facilities. This may help to put more homes on the market.

Over the long term, we need to work with municipalities, the private sector and not-for-profit organizations to develop a long term plan that meets the future needs of our communities.

It is so important that there are organizations like Vibrant Communities that are community-driven, local organizations that can best help identify and meet local needs.

In October, VCC will ask candidates about their views on affordable transportation and November’s question will look at low wages and the working poor.

(Ramona Johnston is Manager of Vibrant Communities Calgary, a local non-profit poverty-reduction organization. For more information about or to participate in Homeless Awareness Week, please contact Bonnie Malach, Coordinator, Homeless Awareness Calgary, at (403) 205-6628 or blmalach@shaw.ca)

