

## Housing Appointment in Saint John Creates New Opportunities

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### • *Challenge* •

As one of the oldest cities in Canada, Saint John has a magnificent collection of heritage homes. In the city's most vulnerable neighbourhoods, however, much of the older housing stock is in need of major repair. The continued presence of substandard housing is preventing entire neighbourhoods from undergoing community revitalization, and is endangering the health and well-being of much of the inner city's elevated low-income population.

Past changes to federal housing policy have added to the housing pressures facing Saint John. In 1993, the federal government ended funding for new nonprofit and co-op developments. Renovation program funding continued to assist landlords and homeowners to repair their housing but, for a number of years, Saint John failed to take full advantage of these programs. After 2001, the federal/provincial Affordable Housing Initiative introduced new opportunities for affordable housing in Saint John. In New Brunswick, the total investment under this program is \$45 million – shared equally by the federal and provincial governments (\$30 million in phase 1, \$15 million in phase 2). A number of Saint John housing activists wanted to see a large proportion of the program dollars come to the city.



The federal government announced plans to develop a comprehensive Canadian Housing Framework in late 2004 which was intended to focus on a continuum of housing. Representatives from Saint John's business, nonprofit and community organizations worked together to prepare a presentation for (then) Housing Minister Joe Fontana's cross-country, information-gathering tour.

### • *Strategy* •

Minister Fontana visited urban centres across Canada, soliciting proposals from organizations with expertise in housing. Key housing experts in Saint John decided to submit one common proposal and were granted an accordingly longer time to speak with the Minister. Because the submission was presented by a united leadership – which included the city's Mayor, business representatives, a prominent city councillor and all the local nonprofit groups involved in housing development – the report's first, short-term recommendation carried significant weight.

Saint John's presentation team asked the Minister to devote one Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) employee to the task of building momentum for new affordable housing in their city. The timing of the request for CMHC support in Saint John coincided with the corporation's own recognition that it needed to expand efforts nationally in the area of community development. This recognition, Saint John's clearly defined need, a community-based plan for improvement and support from the municipality and province made CMHC's evolving role complementary to the community's objectives. By the summer, Don Connolly – a corporate representative from CMHC's Community Development Business Centre (Atlantic Region) – had arrived.

CMHC's approach with Don on the ground in Saint John was to build partnerships with all public and private stakeholders and to assist in bringing greater attention to local housing needs. The ONE Change Inc. – a community organization in Saint John's Old North End neighbourhood – hosted a five-day planning charrette in November 2005. CMHC provided funding and organizational support to assist ONE Change in staging the event. The charrette's primary focus was to develop a community-based vision to help residents with their revitalization efforts. Housing was the focus for one full day. Many partners were involved in delivering and sponsoring the event, which attested to the importance of adopting a partnership approach to community needs. The final report contained 178 short-medium- and long-term projects that the community will use to move forward.

Before Don's arrival, the Saint John housing industry had been successful in securing a first round of funding from the Affordable Housing Program Agreement to allow the construction of 160 mixed-income housing units (of a total of 400 granted for the entire province). These were spread among four projects, including one which will make 30 residence spaces available specifically for people with disabilities (split evenly between market-price and subsidized units).

During the second round of applications in 2005, CMHC was seen as a facilitator that provided expert advice and guidance. This year's application requests funding for a further 135 units.

• ***Impact*** •

The combined efforts of dedicated personnel from various levels of government and a committed community which supports organizations like Vibrant Communities and the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative have had a significant impact on Saint John's affordable housing plans and projects. Don Connolly's relationships with representatives from the private and public sectors have strengthened and extended the multisectoral partnerships already developed by Vibrant Communities Saint John. Don's efforts to date show the effectiveness of having a person on site that can focus on the administration of public policy.