

**Policy Change from the Ground Up – Housing Policy
Lessons from Niagara, Saint John, and B.C.'s Capital Region
June 14, 2006**

As you all know, housing is a major piece of the poverty puzzle. In fact, all six of the Vibrant Communities Trail Builder initiatives have targeted housing as a key component of their poverty reduction strategies. Housing is vital not only because it represents such a large proportion of the household budget but also because it can and should provide a foundation for so many of the other factors that impact on poverty: health and safety, social relations, education and training, access to services and employment opportunities. So, housing affordability as well as the quality and character of housing are both critical ingredients in efforts to counter poverty.

You also are likely aware that housing has become even a greater challenge in recent years due to overall cutbacks in government support for the development of affordable housing. To some extent, the pendulum appears to be swinging back again toward more investment in this area but there is still work to be done.

Interview with Mabel Jean Rawlins-Brannan, BC's Capital Region's Quality of Life CHALLENGE and Lee King, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

What issue or challenge were you facing with the Regional Housing Trust Fund Initiative?

- *Significant erosion in rental affordability.*
- *Over 24,000 households in core housing need.*
- *Service sector economy was affected by the reality that people couldn't access housing.*
- *A number of players at the regional level worked together on the Regional Housing Affordability Strategy.*
- *In terms of context, in this region of 350,000 people we have 13 different municipalities to work with when we are trying to bring about policy change.*
- *The housing vacancy rate is 0.5% - the lowest vacancy rate of any CMA in Canada.*

What was your strategy?

- *Housing Affordability Partnership of housing stakeholders was formed over 5 years ago.*
- *Quality of Life CHALLENGE was developed around the same time to challenge the broader community to take action.*
- *These two worked together to ensure that a solid RHAS was developed, approved and implemented.*
- *Focus was first on the establishment of the RHTF.*

- *Specific actions over the past 5 years:*
 - *Sitting on RHAS Steering and Advisory Committees.*
 - *Releasing and distributing “Making Room” just before the first draft of the RHAS report was going to municipal councils.*
 - *Making joint presentations to municipal councils.*
 - *Annual Housing Affordability Week Events (media etc), 2004 focused on the Trust fund.*
 - *Individual lobbying from HAP members and from citizens informed and engaged through the CHALLENGE.*

What outcomes were achieved? What further outcomes are anticipated?

- *Establishment of a Regional Housing Affordability Strategy, and the Regional Housing Trust Fund within that.*
- *Almost at \$1 million in the fund, with \$450,000 additional that has already been distributed.*

What advice could you offer to another group thinking about undertaking a similar initiative in its community?

- *The strength and importance of multisectoral partnership (HAP).*
- *This kind of change takes a long time, don't get discouraged.*
- *Monitor the RHAS and RHTF month by month (hot spots, other influences pressing on each municipality).*
- *Use diverse voices to make the same argument (developers, non-profit housing providers, advocates).*
- *Have solid information, facts, figures, economic impact.*
- *Find ways for people who need housing, and whose lives have changed because they found it, to tell their story (media, at events, in print).*

Questions & Answers

What is the trust fund money used for, and who can access it?

It is available to non-profit groups who want to acquire existing buildings to renovate or to do a new build project. There are quite exhaustive criteria which look at project viability, the group's track record, etc. The proponent must make a detailed presentation and application.

Would it be a group using the Federal Government Affordable Housing money who need extra funds?

It could be, but not necessarily. It is not a cookie cutter process. The RHTF monies are one part, but not the only part, of putting a pro forma together. Last year, a women's group received funding to put up housing for women, they had also done fundraising from other sources.

When did CMHC become involved in the housing affordability work, and is CMHC a formal partner in the work?

The housing partnership stemmed from a City of Victoria process. CMHC is one of a number of partners comprising the HAP steering team. CMHC has co-chaired this committee for the past five years or so.

Can you give advice to others who want to work more closely and cooperatively with CMHC?

The corporation is very interested in being involved on the ground in local communities. The engagement of the business community has been instrumental in this. The strength and the credit goes to those groups, not CMHC.

Is any information available on the Web?

HAP has a website, www.housingaffordability.ca. They are linked through the Quality of Life CHALLENGE website at www.golchallenge.ca. Caledon has also written a story about the RHTF, available on the Policy Change from the Ground Up website.

Interview with Monica Chaperlin and Kurt Peacock, Vibrant Communities Saint John

What issue or challenge were you facing?

- *Like most cities, Saint John has a critical shortage of decent, affordable housing for low income households.*
- *Saint John also has an “old” housing stock. Many buildings are more than 80 years old and some (particularly rental units) are in poor state of repair and tend to be clustered in a few neighbourhoods. The buildings are owned by absentee landlords. Below market rents attract low income tenants.*
- *Since mid-1980’s, loss of federal non-profit and cooperative housing programs, loss of CMHC presence and office in SJ, lack of rental housing development activity, decline in population in the City proper, further exasperated the housing problem in our older, inner city neighbourhoods. Provincial government provided only modest help - Rental RRAP, Rent Supplement. Municipal government unable to help.*
- *The new Federal Affordable Housing Program, received little take-up in Saint John. Lack of awareness/interest by local developers; non-profit developers were challenged to make the numbers work.*

What was your strategy for addressing it?

Opportunity:

- *Former Housing Minister, Joe Fontana, was leading a cross-country consultation (2004) - Saint John was the New Brunswick stop.*

Strategy:

- *Believing that the Federal government held the key to “housing” resources, we decided that Saint John’s story must be told. Our goal was to “wow” our visitors and compel them to help.*
- *Housing Working Group – a coalition of informed business, non-profit and gov’t reps - prepared and delivered “one” community presentation describing Saint John’s poverty and housing situation and our preferred future for inner city neighbourhoods. We impressed the visiting bureaucracy, with a common voice, a comprehensive vision.*
- *Local MP arranged for a special meeting of Saint John leaders and Minister Fontana.*
- *Only “one” ASK: We requested “one” dedicated/connected/skilled staff person from the Federal government to help Saint John achieve our preferred future. Why? We needed paid dedicated/skilled leadership, connection to funding opportunities, a bureaucratic bridge to open the doors between Saint John and federal government staff and the Province.*
- *Our “one” ASK was supported by Minister Fontana; staff person in place within 3 months.*

What outcomes were achieved or are anticipated?

Achieved:

- *The Housing Working Group efforts and response by the Minister, attracted the interest and participation of municipal and provincial leaders.*
- *CMHC staff presence has helped to:*
 - *Strengthen relations at three levels of government.*
 - *Facilitate collaborative promotion of existing government programs, resulting in 100 approved housing units for Saint John and more applications awaiting approval/funding and Saint John receiving its fair share and more of provincial housing dollars.*
 - *Access to CMHC funding for neighbourhood planning/citizen leadership in two neighbourhoods.*
 - *Learn about best practices elsewhere.*
 - *A full time staff resource dedicated to housing improvements/neighbourhood revitalization, poverty reduction and collaborative action.*

Anticipated:

- *Continued growth in actions to revitalize neighbourhoods, develop housing solutions for modest income households.*

4. What advice would you offer to another group thinking about undertaking a similar initiative in its community?

- *Pounce on political/funding opportunities.*
- *Multi-sector leadership, within communities, impresses senior governments.*
- *Do your homework....Investigate and clearly define the problem and its roots.*
- *Determine the “catalytic” actions that will most “effect” and sustain change over time.*
- *Don’t ask for too much, in the beginning. Learn together, then act together.*

Interview with Peter Papp, Opportunities Niagara

Niagara Region, like other communities, also faces significant challenges with respect to its supply of affordable housing.

That’s right. Unfortunately, Niagara is ranked as one of the top five municipalities in Ontario in terms of need for affordable housing. There are over 4,000 households on the region’s affordable housing waiting list.

Opportunities Niagara is involved in a number of housing initiatives. Today we’re going to focus on one. Can you briefly describe the Bethlehem Place/Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) project?

- *Bethlehem Projects of Niagara is a multi-service organization providing transitional housing and life skills support for low-income households.*
- *It was looking to build a new affordable housing complex.*
- *Through Opportunities Niagara a partnership was developed between Bethlehem and the CAW Local 199 in which union members will contribute a huge amount of the labour required to develop the 40 unit complex from mechanical and electrical work through kitchen installation and landscaping.*
- *The CAW involvement is vital to making the whole project affordable.*

There are other aspects of this project involving the City of Saint Catharines and the Region of Niagara that are also critical ingredients for making it work and that’s what we want to focus on now. First, let’s talk about the support that the City of Saint Catharines has provided and how it came about.

- *The intention of the project was to develop this housing complex on a piece of land in downtown St. Catharine’s. To do this in an affordable way, we needed the City to contribute the land or sell it to the project at a particularly good price.*
- *The land was considered surplus by the City and according to guidelines for disposal of surplus land, it could either be sold through a competitive tendering process or made available by the City in some other way that served the public need.*
- *While the city had the option to make the land available at a reduced price, the usual practice was to seek the highest price by putting such land for sale on the open market.*
- *The challenge was to convince the City both that it could contribute the land or*

sell it at a fair price to the community group and that doing so served the public need.

How did Opportunities Niagara and its partners go about getting the City's support?

- *Basically, we developed a 'case for support' and used our wide array of contacts with the City to make that case and work through the various questions and concerns that were raised.*
- *A committee led jointly by the Mayor (a key supporter of the project) and Opportunities Niagara developed the case. Bethlehem Place, the CAW and others were represented on the committee as well. Then key players with the City were approached, particularly the staff from whom a recommendation was needed and the councilors who would ultimately make the decision.*
- *In addition, one of the board members of Bethlehem Place volunteered her husband's time to actively pursue the legalities of the purchase and also to convince both Council and staff that this was in the best interest of the community. In part, he made the case that, in fact, the Municipal Act of Ontario does allow the local municipality to dispose, sell, or give properties to community agencies where seen in the "best interests" of the local area. In the end, Tom Richardson, one of the top municipal lawyers in Ontario was responsible for putting together the rationalization for the City to sell the property to Bethlehem Place, and his influence was an important one.*

What was the end result?

- *First, the land was sold to Bethlehem Place at a reasonable price, considered to be below market value by private developers. So development of the complex was able to proceed in the strategic location sought.*
- *But, the support from the City also gave the green light to Niagara's regional government to provide much needed interim financing to the project. The Region had earlier indicated an openness to providing this support but it's doing so depended heavily on whether the City would make the land available.*
- *Further, federal funding for the project (\$200,000 through the Supporting Communities Partners Initiative) depended somewhat on appropriate land being secured.*
- *So, in the end, the willingness of the City of Saint Catherines to alter its past practice and make some of its surplus land available to support this community initiative was vital for triggering other support that allowed the project to go forward.*
- *Moreover, since this all happened, the same process has been attempted and leveraged with another city (City of Welland), in the proposed development of 10 Townhouse Units under the umbrella of Habitat for Humanity. The same scenarios are starting to come to play. By showing and demonstrating this project, they can carry forth in the development of a project within the context of the municipal jurisdiction, which definitely encourages this type of commitment.*

In conclusion, based on this experience, what key lessons or advice would you offer to other communities trying to secure government support for similar sorts of projects?

- *Full commitment of both the political and local staff.*
- *Identification and the “Case for Support” to use surplus municipal property for positive community development.*
- *Get the support of the local neighbourhood, including local businesses, to ensure that they understand the mandate and scope of the project.*
- *Prepare your case in a way that is shown as being beneficial and positive to all of the groups*
- *Ensure that any policy considerations in this particular case by both levels of government would not in any way jeopardize or prejudice future considerations of similar properties*
- *Market the experience and capability of the local community group, particularly one which has been actively involved in this type of area that has the credibility and viability of a housing project.*
- *Lobby and inform...inform...inform.*
- *Do one-on-one as well as collective community consultations to ensure that everyone is familiar with the whole scope and nature of the project.*
- *Concentrate on the positive benefits.*

Questions & Answers

Is this work as clear cut as it appears when we tell the stories in retrospect?

Mabel Jean – The work has had its ups and downs. The strength of what is happening here is that we’ve been at it for a long time now and there is a commitment of several key individuals in key organizations. That continuity is very helpful. We have lines of communication in place so that when things get bumpy, we can work it out. We have leadership that doesn’t fly off the handle, but says, “Let’s work through this,” so we’ve developed a system by which we strategize very quickly.

Peter – It is complex and has moments of intense negotiation. For example, during the course of this, it was clear that the Region’s housing corporation thought we could be encroaching on their role and responsibilities.

Monica – We didn’t have municipal leadership to bring the partners together. We found it very hard to maintain a strong momentum because the working group were all volunteers, addressing a complicated issue with limited resources. Vibrant Communities has allowed us to put staff time into this.

Are any of you advocating with the province or federally?

Peter – I sit on the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. I advocate, lobby, inform. We are finally seeing people begin to understand the critical nature of it all.

Mabel Jean – Everyone around the table at HAP has their own agenda with the province and their own way of influencing the province. ROMA (the rental owners and managers) are working directly with the province to lift rent control, while others at the table think that is a bad thing. So we have very interesting discussions, which then informs what others at that table may take up to the province from another perspective. I don't think there is any way one can track the impact of this kind of thing. How do we know we wouldn't have had an RHTF if HAP or the CHALLENGE hasn't been involved? We don't.

Monica – There has absolutely been effective policy change in Saint John, although we can't prove it. There has been a provincial policy change that now will cause landlords to be subject to fines if they don't meet certain standards. One of our provincial legislators was very interested in sharing our information with his colleagues. Changes in people as a result of collaborative efforts lead to better solutions.