

Ottawa must get back into housing

our key recommendations: 2. housing By Jon Ferry · Metro View columnist

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QUOTES FROM THE SERIES

"For the city, the best thing that could happen right now is if the federal government made the tax changes necessary to make it more profitable to build rental housing. With that in place, we would see a real boom in the construction of affordable housing."

-- Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, Sunday, March 22, 2009

"I think you've got a huge vulnerable population with more complex needs than they've ever had, fewer places to live and more readily available drugs. To call that health care is similar to leaving someone with cancer on the street when you have the right treatment that could make their cancer go away and their life better."

-- Bev Gutray of the Canadian Mental Health Association, May 6, 2009

The recommendation

Ottawa must provide more leadership in the widely supported drive to provide more housing for the homeless and other disadvantaged people across Canada. It should reintroduce the type of national housing program that was scrapped in the 1990s. It should also recommit to the kind of partnership with B.C. that has helped create scores of social housing units in this province. The current level of federal funding for housing for the homeless simply isn't enough to meet the growing demand for it, especially in downtown Vancouver.

why it's needed

Housing is a basic human need. Everybody needs a home. Before people can hope to get a job or otherwise contribute to society, they need a place where they get some sleep, keep themselves clean and feed themselves. If we don't provide for the homeless, the social problems in the Downtown Eastside will only get worse.

Now, there are those who argue that the more "free" housing you provide, the more folks you attract to the area and the more homes you need. However, we can't just sit by and let market forces prevail. As civilized human beings, we must intervene to help the least fortunate members of our society.

The background

There are believed to be at least 3,700 homeless people in Vancouver. And no one can predict exactly how much it would cost to provide permanent housing for all of them.

But the **Streetohome Foundation**, whose 25 board members range from Vancouver city manager Penny Ballem to B.C. Business Council president Virginia Greene to former NDP premier Mike Harcourt, suggests this is not an insurmountable task, given the high level of community support.

Streetohome points out in a new report that, on top of those housing units already planned or under construction, we need to find a way to build and operate homes for an extra 2,000 people. Up to and including the year 2020, the foundation estimates the cost for that at around \$475 million. It's a lot of money, but doing little or nothing could well cost us a lot more.

Libby Davies, the NDP Vancouver East MP, has put forward a bill calling for a national housing strategy to combat homelessness which has received widespread support.

Indeed, Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson says creating and funding such a strategy would be the single most important thing that Ottawa could do to help end homelessness -- and would actually save costs in everything from policing to health care. The issue, however, runs deeper than that. "Morally, it's just the right thing to do," he says.

who is responsible?

As the senior government, Ottawa is ultimately responsible.

what they say

Federal human resources spokesman Ryan Sparrow points to the millions of dollars that Ottawa has either spent or committed to in various programs for the homeless over the years. But housing advocates from across the political spectrum say that what is needed now is not more piecemeal funding, but secure, long-term financing for homeless housing as part of a clearly defined national plan. jferry@theprovince.com

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