

Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity

~ Affordable Housing ~

by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator

For a few years now, it seems that housing in Revelstoke has been much discussed. Housing prices and availability, vacation rentals, maintenance standards, subsidized housing and homelessness have risen to the forefront time and again. Indeed, housing, or adequate shelter, is a primary need and directly impacts a person's ability to function in society. The 'Housing First' model maintains that the first, most primary need for vulnerable citizens is to obtain stable, suitable, safe, affordable housing before any other issues can be addressed.

In Revelstoke, the housing market – both ownership and rental – has had a variety of influences over the past number of years that have impacted housing security for residents. For poverty reduction, access to affordable rental housing and emergency housing is one of the highest community goals in the strategy.

Housing security is usually assessed by the percentage of residents or households in the community in 'core housing need', which is defined as those paying 30% or more of their household income on shelter. Shelter includes the cost of utilities. The Census tells us that from 1996 to 2006, about 36% of residents living in rental housing were in 'core housing need'. By 2011, this increased to 40%. Further, when we did the affordability 'snapshot' for the Poverty Reduction Strategy, we found that housing was the largest single item in the monthly budget, taking up at least 40%. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's annual rental housing survey done in October each year, found that while vacancy rates fluctuated wildly, Revelstoke consistently had the highest average apartment rental costs of all Kootenay centres and compared to other small centres in the BC Southern Interior like Merritt, Oliver, and Osoyoos. Last October, our rental vacancy rate was less than 1%.

A couple of ways to address both the low vacancy rate and high cost of rental housing is to protect existing rental housing stock while increasing the amount of rental housing available in our community.

The City of Revelstoke has policies and bylaws that protect and encourage development of our rental housing stock. 'Standards of Maintenance' and 'Unsanitary Premises' bylaws address quality and cleanliness. The 'Mobile Home Park Redevelopment' and 'Strata Title Conversion' policies protect tenants from displacement and consider the impacts of potential re-development on the housing stock (e.g. from rental to ownership). The new Vacation Rental bylaw is intended to balance the need for long-term rental housing with the need for new vacation rental beds in our community by looking at applications on a case-by-case basis. As well, secondary suites are permitted in all single-family dwelling areas of the community. And depending on the project, affordable, non-profit, subsidized rental housing developments receive up to 50% off of DCC charges as well as permissive tax exemptions. An 'Inclusionary Zoning' policy requires either the inclusion of affordable housing units in larger multi-unit developments or payment of an 'amenity contribution' deposited in a special fund used for the development of affordable housing options in the community.

Subsidized rental housing is an important community asset for lower income individuals and goes a long way to alleviate poverty. In a personal interview, one resident told me, "I was living in a terrible place. It was dirty and very expensive. It was very hard for me. Moving here (to subsidized housing) has made such a difference in my life."

Revelstoke has celebrated success in contributing to affordable housing with the recent addition of 24 new subsidized apartments for seniors and people with disabilities - 16 at Mt. Begbie Villas and 8 at Moberly Manor. The need for subsidized housing for lower income residents under aged 55 as well as for families with children has long been identified as a high community priority. The Revelstoke Community Housing Society, which has a mandate to develop affordable housing options in Revelstoke, owns a duplex and plans to add 12 new affordable rental housing units, which will include 4 accessible 1-bedroom and 8, 2 bedroom apartments.

As well, the need for emergency housing is something that has been talked about in our community for years. The Women's Shelter fills a big gap, but it is transition housing for women and children fleeing abuse, and can't accept everyone who needs emergency shelter. Community Connections Housing Outreach worker assists both the homeless and those at risk of homelessness in our community, but without a shelter it is challenging. The

Revelstoke Community Housing Society is also in the process of conducting a study to determine if an emergency shelter in our community is feasible. Stay tuned for the results. For more information contact Alan Mason at 250-837-5345 or email amason@revelstoke.ca.