

Housing

Bureaucratic delays plague affordable housing

By ELIZABETH GALVIN
the Herald

There are many creative solutions to the problem of finding affordable housing in Halton, but bureaucratic delays at all levels of government slow down projects so much, thousands are left waiting, according to the majority of those in the audience who gathered to hear a panel discussion on the issue last Thursday at the Halton Cultural Centre.

Panel guests gave presentations on several topics and audience members were given the chance to ask questions of the speakers.

One developer wanted to know why the government doesn't "have a fast track" on re-zoning, citing the fact that it took him two years to obtain a land severance and another two years to obtain a sewer allocation.

Councillor, Rob Heaton suggested that developers approach their local councils for help with the mountain of red tape they must go through before beginning a housing project.

Emotions ran high as another member of the audience charged that builders and developers in Halton Hills know most town employees by their first name, calling Coun. Heaton's remarks "insulting".

Panel guest Jim Douglas, representing Milton's Rotary Club which was instrumental in getting a private non-profit housing complex built in their town, suggested to builders the best way to get through the government and legal maze is to hire a development consultant.

Elaine Eastman, Chairperson of the Halton Access to Permanent Housing Committee who organized the panel discussion, pointed out that most towns are made up of 55 per cent owned and 45 per cent rented accommodation. In Halton Hills, that ratio is 70 per cent to 30 per cent, however.

Cobble Hill Co-op, in Acton. After he and his wife got fed up with "sub-standard housing for high standard" rents, they decided that co-operative living would be a good idea and started the Co-op.

"It was encouraging, frustrating, rewarding and a long process," he said, and he urged the audience to consider the points he raised.

Mary-Jane McGinn, a resident of Glen Mills Co-op, in Georgetown, and a member of the Boards of two other co-op projects, explained what co-operative living is like. "It is not the housing of choice for everyone," she admitted.



Walter Mulkewich

The idea of a co-op is that "a group of people form a corporation to provide services to themselves, such as daycare." Residents become voting members who elect a Board of Directors to conduct the day-to-day affairs of the complex. The unique features are that there are no landlords, money taken in rent is enough for the corporation to break even, and there is a real sense of community.

Ms. McGinn, of Homestarts consulting groups, was also involved with the McLaughlin and Steeles Co-op project in Brampton and remembered the many hours people involved with the project spent in OMB hearings.

One year of delays, she said later, cost \$2 million. With land costs and interest rates going up daily, the McLaughlin and Steeles project went from a planned cost of \$8.5 million to an actual cost of \$10.5 million.

The third speaker, Jim Douglas, explained the trials and tribulations involved in building a private non-profit project. After assessing housing needs in Milton, a plan was developed to build a mixed townhouse and apartment complex with two, three, and four bedroom units.

"The overall concept is great," the Rotarians thought at the beginning, "there is the government aspect, with checks and balances; local people, members of the community; and professionals from the private sector to finance" the plan.

It wasn't long, however, before they ran into problems with the Ministry of Housing. Explained Mr. Douglas, "they never properly explained how it was supposed to go." Planners were "not very good at" catching the Ministry's "hints".

Milton Council was very supportive, said Mr. Douglas, and as for adverse community reaction,

planners decided to be completely open about everything, with very positive effects.

In retrospect, Mr. Douglas admitted that the biggest problems they encountered were with bureaucracies. Logical things, like the fitting of the handicapped unit, couldn't make it through the system, he said. It was always a problem of which budget expenses would come out of and who would come to inspect and when.

As for an old house that was on the property, it took so long to get approval to take it down, that planners just took it down themselves. Children were playing in the house, which was extremely dangerous.

Amy Smith, also from Milton, gave a short speech about a group home on her street and the attitudes that preceded its opening. A key scratch on a car and a silly putty in a car door lock made her realize that nothing had changed on the street - those two incidents happened before the group home opened. Nothing earth shattering has happened since.

David Barkely, who detailed municipal non-profit housing,

was the last speaker on the panel. He informed the audience that the regional planning department found a need for 3,000 units in Halton. This figure was the result of studying lists provided by local housing authorities.

After finding a location, proving there is a need, targeting a group, and surveying the area for special needs, the planning department received planning approvals and is currently developing 300 units, including a 57-unit complex in Burlington that has two disabled units.

Several angry questions concerning government delays were fielded by Mr. Barkely.

One member of the audience encouraged everyone in attendance to participate in the official plan review that takes place "this year" to ensure that more affordable housing is built in Halton.

Committee Chairperson Eastman also encouraged those who are looking for affordable housing to be sure and phone the local housing authority and get their names on waiting lists. "The governments use those lists" to determine need in any given area," she explained.

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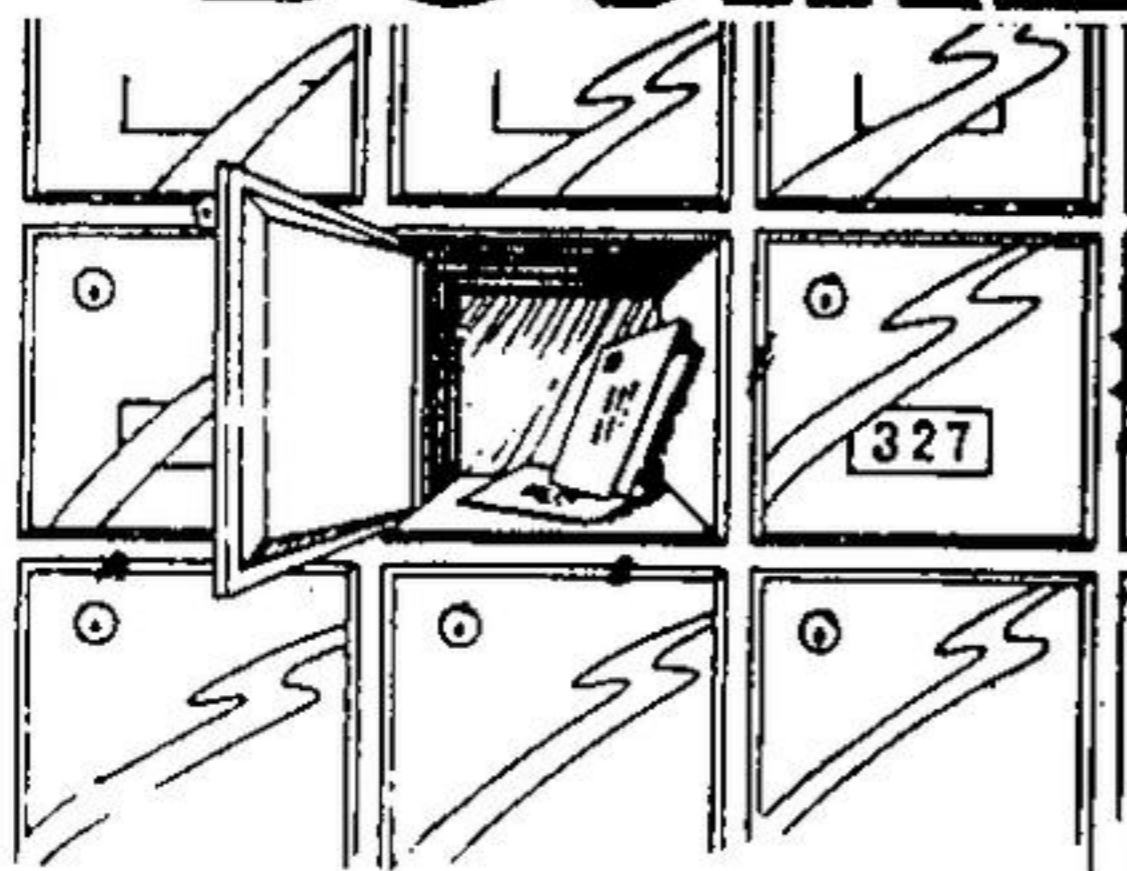
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