

## Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

# The low-cost housing crunch

More York Region families are looking for subsidized housing, which is already in short supply

BY LISA QUEEN  
STAFF WRITER

The answering machine message for the Bethany Co-op in Keswick offers cold comfort to callers looking for a decent and affordable place to live.

"I'm sorry, but the co-op currently has a lengthy waiting list and has no vacancies," says co-ordinator Dayle Yardley, adding new applications will be accepted in January.

It's a story repeated across York Region, where waiting lists for subsidized housing are overflowing and affordable rental accommodation is at a premium.

There's nothing new about that — low-cost housing in York, one of Canada's wealthiest real estate markets, has always been in short supply.

But in the 11 months since the province downloaded funding responsibility for social housing — everything from co-ops to non-profit private projects — to regional governments, the situation has become worse.

According to Martin Silver, general manager of the Region of York Housing Corporation, the waiting list the corporation shares with the York Region Housing Authority has jumped 50 per cent this year.

Last December, 1,200 residents were looking for subsidized housing. Today, 1,800 seniors and families are on the list.

But that registry doesn't tell the whole story.

There has never been a centralized waiting list in York, where 54 housing providers operate about 7,000 units.

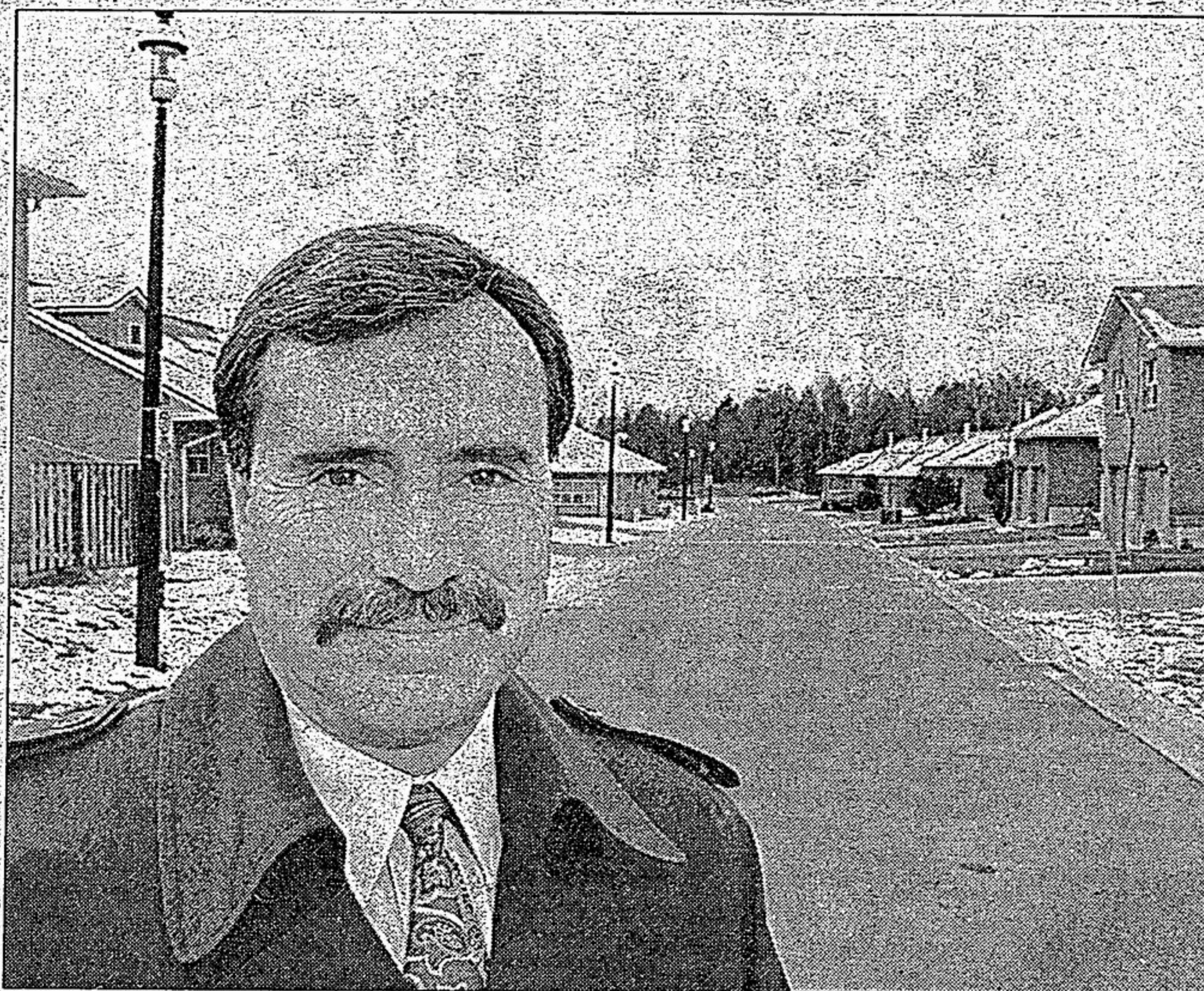
Silver estimates there are about 4,000 people on individual waiting lists around the region.

As a result of provincial downloading, in which Queen's Park assumed half of homeowners' education costs in return for the region paying for social services and provincial highways, York taxpayers will spend about \$73.5 million on social housing this year.

But most of the money won't be spent on housing stock within the region.

While \$33 million will be spent in York, the region is forced to contribute \$40.5 million to Toronto's social housing under the Tories' pooling strategy.

In fact, because pooling is based on each region's property values and York has a healthy assessment base, we are responsible for more than half of the \$79 million in pooled funds.



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Martin Silver, the general manager of the York Region Housing Corporation, believes the provincial government's decision to download social housing costs to municipalities will compound York's shortage of low-cost accommodation.

Durham Region's share is only \$3 million, Halton contributes about \$16.5 million and Peel kicks in \$19 million.

"I can never figure out why their (other regions') piece is so much less than our selves," Silver said. "It always astounds me."

He is also concerned that while the region is on the hook for funding social housing, it doesn't administer social housing.

"It's pay for no say," said Silver.

He said the province won't hand over the administration until 2000, after it has finished reforming social housing to reduce costs.

But what upsets Silver most is the decision to download housing to property taxpayers in the first place.

Ontario is the only jurisdiction in North America, possibly the world, that has made that decision.

Silver is concerned about the region's ability to subsidize housing.

"I think most of us (housing officials) will

say it wasn't the right thing to do," he said, adding the housing shortage is compounded because provincial incentives have done little to entice the private sector into building more rental units.

"We'll be competing against police, roads, health care and social assistance for funding (in the region's budget)."

York Mackenzie MPP Frank Klees could not be reached for comment.

But in the past, he has said that in an ideal world, the province should pay for social housing, which is an income redistribution program.

But he argues the province can't afford the program after assuming half of homeowners' education costs.

However, housing officials are convinced the province has made a disastrous move.

"I just think it's going to be a horrendous nightmare," Yardley said.

"Worst case scenario, we could be losing a lot of subsidized units. We won't be able to

provide affordable housing in the way it's needed."

Kerry Hobbs is the housing administrator with Parkview Village, a non-profit development for seniors in Stouffville.

"Waiting lists are already years and years long. There are hundreds of people waiting for spaces," she said.

"We have people frequently calling urgently asking for housing for their mother or grandmother and we have to tell them it's years."

Hobbs fears the situation is getting worse under downloading.

Vaughan Councillor Joyce Frustaglio, chairperson of the region's social services committee, said there are many unanswered questions about how social housing will operate under the region's wing.

"For us, it's going to be a major undertaking. We don't have the money but obviously we'll have to find a solution," she said.

"It's not something we're embracing with open arms. But there are worse things we have to embrace than social housing, just because we don't have that many units in York Region."

Frustaglio argued the pressure for social housing will mount as York's population increases by 435,000 people to 1.1 million in 2021.

"It will be just a challenge, how to deal with the needs as the region grows by leaps and bounds."

Robin Campbell, executive director of the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, pointed out that the majority of costs associated with operating social housing, such as mortgages, are fixed.

While regions must meet those payments, Campbell fears they will be forced to cut corners on discretionary spending, such as maintenance.

"There is a grave concern if there are cut-backs, we'll see an incredible deterioration of properties," she said.

Campbell believes society has to make affordable housing a higher priority.

"When you look at what's happening with homelessness, particularly in the City of Toronto and the GTA, we're seeing every day the consequences of the lack of affordable housing. We're seeing increased homelessness and people who are not able to stabilize their personal situation," she said.

"It's in everybody's interest that people have a place to live, to raise their children and to grow old in."

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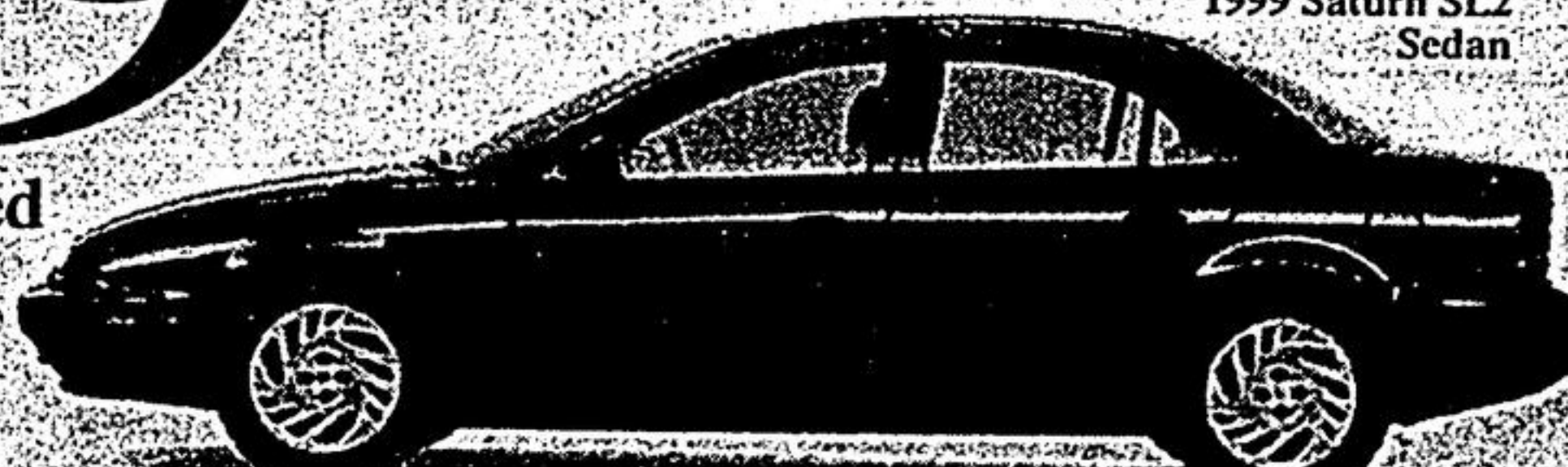
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