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COMMUNITY • *United Way gets \$240,000 boost at meeting of builders and bankers*

Lack of affordable housing a crisis

Everyone needs a roof over their heads, builders told

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

Despite a booming economy and the lowest unemployment rate in a decade, Greater Toronto is faced with an affordable housing dilemma that has become a crisis builders must face for years to

come.

Speaking to more than 600 representatives of the construction and banking industries last Tuesday afternoon in Markham, Greg Sorbara urged his colleagues to address the problem in the wake of a new affordable housing report that paints a grim picture for the future.

The study, conducted by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, states the need for affordable apartments is growing at a much faster rate than construction.

The construction of rental housing dropped from 27 per cent of all Ontario housing starts between 1989 and 1993, to just 6 per cent of starts between 1994 and 1998, the study reveals.

"To use a baseball analogy, this group, together, are World Series champions, but we do have a lot of problems," explained Sorbara during the keynote speech at the 17th annual building industry luncheon in support of the United Way of York Region at LeParc banquet hall.

A partner with the Sorbara Group, a

family-owned development business based in Woodbridge, Sorbara is also a director of Royal Group Technologies, Vic de Zens' plastic extrusion firm that manufactures and sells plastic homes and garages in countries across the globe.

"There are problems with rental accommodations. Government rent controls, lot levies and building controls have virtually destroyed rental accommodations in Ontario. If the industry is healthy, there should be programs for renovations. And we have a terrible problem with homelessness, where the most startling difference to the casual observer is that people are living on the streets and on heating grates.

"This great society produces hunger, poverty and distress, but it is the system that provides solutions."

"We need solutions," said the Richmond Hill resident. "We don't need the Ontario and federal governments to get into the housing business again. We need transitional shelters and roofs above every head 365 days of the year."

Sponsored by Fred De Gasperis, president of Metrus Development, nearly \$240,000 was raised at the luncheon to set the pace for the United Way's 1999 fundraising campaign.

The amount represents a 12-per cent increase from last year's achievement.

A majority owner of the Toronto Blue Jays Class A affiliate St. Catharines Stompers in the New York-Penn League and a partner with Sportsco International Corp. that purchased the SkyDome in February in a public auction, Sorbara urged executives to incorporate society's problems into their business plans.

Adopt a formula to determine what you are going to allocate to deal with society's problems, he said, citing examples ranging from payroll deductions, the number of people employed, gross revenue or net income.

"We are out of intensive care. Go from an afterthought to making business plans in the boardroom to help society's underbelly," added Sorbara, a former Ontario Liberal cabinet minister who admitted not missing his duties as an elected official, especially with a provincial election next month.

"We are thriving in the province in a way we have never thrived before. Growth in the United States and Ontario is exceeding all expectations. We are an important part of the system, but we have to address the side effects. This great society produces hunger, poverty and distress, but it is the system that provides solutions."

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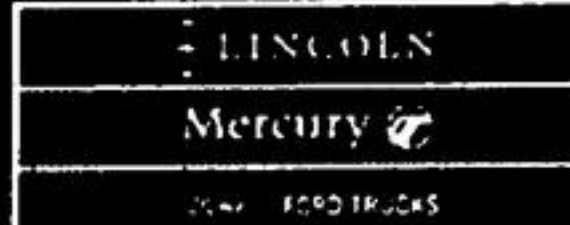
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