

NO EASY SOLUTION TO HOUSING PUZZLE

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The solution to York Region's affordable housing supply problem is simple: build more.

It's the "how" part of the equation that's the problem.

Talk to anyone actively engaged in the housing issue and it won't be long before he brings up one of the predominant challenges facing our rapidly growing region — the private sector just isn't building rentals anymore. In fact, there hasn't been any private rental accommodations built in the region in the last decade.

While it's not a be-all and end-all answer for the region's affordable housing issues, more private rental units would certainly go a long way toward meeting the needs of residents struggling to locate a decent apartment within their means, York community and health services director Adelina Urbanski said, adding the municipal, provincial and even federal levels of government all have a responsibility to help get private developers building something other than single-detached homes, semi-detached homes, townhouses and condominiums again.

The creation of new, private rentals could slash the region's subsidized-housing waiting list, which is more than 9,500 families long, she said.

Some people join the waiting list just because they're in need of an apartment, Ms Urbanski said. "We need to get the private sector back at the table."

York Region has developed differently than Toronto, she said.

Toronto's housing stock is almost evenly divided between rental units and owned homes, at 46 per cent to 54 per cent, respectively, whereas 88 per cent of homes in York Region are owned and just 12 per cent are rentals.

Government-assisted housing accounts for about 40 per cent of the primary rental market in York Region.



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Planners across the region believe more affordable housing buildings such as this one in Vaughan are needed.

What's more, the vacancy rate for housing in York hovers around the 1-per-cent mark, compared to the 3-per-cent target experts say would indicate a healthy rental market.

The dearth of decent rental accommodations is acutely felt in a region of 1.1 million people.

"Our waiting list is growing much faster than we can meet the need," said Newmarket Regional Councillor John Taylor, who also serves as co-chairperson of the region's human services planning board. "It's a huge challenge."

And that's the key challenge with which the aforementioned board has wrestled since its formation in April 2010. To tackle the issue, the board has held multiple meetings, symposiums and consultations to try to locate the missing pieces to the regional housing puzzle.

The board has heard several suggestions.

Some parts of the United States

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have had success constructing inexpensive "shell" buildings that buyers partition themselves, for example, while others have touted the need to legalize second suites, such as basement apartments, in more York Region municipalities, Mr. Taylor said.

Second suites are legal in Newmarket, East Willimbury, Georgina and Aurora.

The board has also consulted with the construction industry and Mr. Taylor and Ms Urbanski say they have heard development charge bylaws, changes to the Landlord and Tenant Act and availability of financing are all barriers for firms seeking to build more rental units in the region.

Given all of that, many builders have said selling condos or houses is just a safer bet that yields a faster return on investment, especially

considering the rising cost of land, Mr. Taylor and Ms Urbanski said.

The Planning Act permits municipalities to offer developers bonus heights, a reduction in development charges and other incentives in exchange for incorporating affordable housing and other amenities, Mr. Taylor said, so part of the answer may be lobbying the province to increase those perks.

Echoing Ms Urbanski, he said all three levels of government have an obligation to work toward some kind of strategy.

"We can't say anything is off the table," Mr. Taylor said. "We need to shift how we do housing in this region."

Opting to re-examine some development charge bylaws in York Region would be a welcome move for builder Brent Fleming.

Mr. Fleming is trying to do exactly what many have said needs to be done: building new, private rental units.

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However, it's poised to be a costly affair for his proposal on Newmarket's Queen Street under the existing development charges bylaw.

The current development charge structure would see him pay about \$192,000 in fees to realize his four-unit vision, which he describes as a "modern-style apartment", Mr. Fleming said in his presentation to Newmarket council.

The trouble is, the town views his application as four stacked townhouses and is charging \$48,000 per unit, rather than the \$35,000-per-unit charged for an apartment.

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