



Surplus school sites hold potential for affordable housing

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The province will allow surplus school sites to be converted into fire halls, police stations, libraries, daycares and affordable housing. The legislative change introduced last week releases a valuable source of new land supply for affordable housing. It was a key Chamber recommendation made in a submission to the Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force.

"The Chamber recognized through its research that there was a clear link between housing affordability and the ability to attract and retain workers," says Geoff Pradella, Vice-President of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce.

In response the Chamber brought together members to submit ideas to the Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force in 2007. Recommendations focused on four main areas:

- Strategic leadership - create an Alberta Commission and develop a 10-year plan for affordable housing supply
- Land supply - develop policies and programs to dedicate surplus or underutilized provincial properties (i.e. abandoned school sites)
- Development incentives - enable municipalities to streamline regulatory processes, such as the fast tracking of permits, waiving of permit fees, and elimination of development fee levies for affordable housing
- Secondary suites - legalize and ensure appropriate building and safety standards

The City is currently investigating the exact number of school sites that could be made available. Preliminary analysis indicates that they are typically located in existing communities built in the late 1970s, 80s, and 90s and are well situated for new housing. If affordable housing is integrated with new daycares, libraries, retail and other key services, these developments will be valuable additions to communities.

The Chamber continued to focus on improving housing affordability in 2008.

In May, it released a major research report that investigated Calgary's housing affordability since 1980, discussed the factors that affect housing prices, and provided recommendations to improve the affordability of Calgary's residential real estate market.

In June 10, 2008 speech at the Chamber, Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs Yvonne Fritz praised the report, characterizing it as thorough and an excellent primer on the issue.

"Many of its recommendations encourage further partnership between the city and the province; between the city and industry; between development and transit; and between city planners and City Council," said Yvonne Fritz. "I commend you for doing such a fine job."

Fritz acknowledged that City Council, non-profit organizations and community leaders like the Chamber are closest to local housing needs, and therefore, best able to identify solutions. She expressed appreciation for the Chamber's submission to the Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force last year, and stressed the need for partners and new ideas.



The Chamber is working hard to convince City Council that secondary suites, perhaps limited to owner occupied premises, represent a cost-effective and timely solution to the housing affordability challenge. They make better use of existing infrastructure, reduce demand for new development, and if properly constructed, increase property values.

Cities such as Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver, and Saskatoon have changed their zoning to allow suites in all residential areas and in all types of housing: detached, semi-detached, and duplexes. To address community concerns about parking, character, infrastructure and safety, they have imposed owner-occupancy requirements, set parking and apartment size restrictions, limited exterior changes, and provided incentives to legalize existing suites.

"We hope to report back positively on this issue in the near future," says Pradella.