

Homelessness, Affordable and Appropriate Housing in British Columbia, Canada and Internationally: Some Accessible Strategies for Local Governments.

A report presented to the Futures Committee of the Comox Valley Housing Task Force.

by Roger J.G. Albert¹

This document has three parts:

1.

A short statement about the prevalent and growing role of municipal governments and regional districts (local governments) in dealing with affordable, appropriate housing and homelessness in Canada and abroad.

2.

A summarizing table showing what is working for municipalities, regional districts and other local governments in addressing affordable housing and homelessness; what is working in the provision of supports in establishing and maintaining housing.

3.

A second table that includes an outline of specific formats, what they do, how they do it and what worked or works (whenever it's possible to determine from the literature).

1.

The prevalent and growing role of municipal governments and regional districts (local governments) in dealing with affordable, appropriate housing and homelessness in Canada and abroad.

Whatever we think about whether or not the Canadian federal government should or should not build and fund social housing, the fact is that for over 30 years now, it has systematically gotten out of the business of social housing. The provinces and local governments have been left to pick up the slack. Some provinces have, most have not so the stock of affordable non-market and market rental housing is in serious decline and little is being built.²

In the 1996 federal budget, a complete break was made signaling an end to the construction and subsidization of social housing although the process had been a fact for 10 years.³ Virtually all federally funded social housing construction happened in the 1970s and the federal government will cease to provide subsidies to those social housing projects completely in the coming years as their mortgages come to term. Additionally, the federal government entered into agreements with the provinces (BC in the early 90s) to divest themselves of the management of all social and public housing projects.⁴

Both the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) have decried the federal government's rapidly waning interest in social (affordable or appropriate) non-market housing. In fact the imminent complete absence of the federal government in social housing has forced the provincial and municipal governments to pick up the indirect costs of the federal government's policies. British Columbia and Quebec have been the only provinces to continue building and funding social housing after the early 1990s but even they are signaling to local governments their desire to have them play an increasingly important role in social housing construction and management. Alberta is now way ahead of the curve in Canada in the planning for and construction of new social housing projecting 8000 new units by 2018.⁵ BC, since 1992, requires local governments to incorporate plans to deal with homelessness and social housing in their Official Community Plans (OCPs) while Alberta and Ontario now require local governments to produce 10 year plans to end homelessness. Local governments in Alberta are well on the way with implementation of the plans and Ontario requires local governments to have concrete strategies in place by 2013. Given this situation, local governments have turned to the private and non-profit sectors to help out.⁶ In this, the non-profit sector has so far been the major player in the provision of social

housing. Local governments have ‘incubated’ non-profits to oversee social housing projects and in some cases (BC Non-profit Housing Association) non-profits have become major stakeholders in the provision and management of affordable housing.⁷

Given the vacuum of involvement by the federal and provincial governments, local governments have taken a leadership role in ensuring that their communities are livable and that people get the housing they need to live reasonable lives, to stay out of jail and find employment. This is no easy task given the various philosophical and political perspectives on the issue, public reticence, the extreme needs of the homeless and the fact that affordable housing for low-income working people is becoming a huge issue. There is a continuum of need just as there is a continuum of housing types.

Thirty years ago very few municipalities or local governments even thought about social housing, poverty and homelessness issues, although in reality cities in Canada have been involved in social housing on and off for a hundred years. They were (and still are) occupied with roads, transportation, policing, water, waste management among many other things like sports, recreation and, to some extent, ‘culture.’ More recently, hundreds of Canadian local governments are doing something about social and affordable housing and homelessness, the majority by some accounts. The issue is critical at the local level. Things might be different if all of Canada’s homeless and near homeless were concentrated in Ottawa and the provincial capitals where they would be much more visible to politicians there, but they aren’t. Homelessness is a national (and obviously global) phenomenon, but it’s always expressed locally. For this reason, leadership must be assumed locally and there are many options. The senior levels of government must provide the resources, but local governments must be the designers of the best solution for their local populations. No one local government can do it alone, nor can any one non-profit organization. There is a pressing need for coordinated, concentrated and effective action at the local level to move from managing to dealing more effectively with homelessness, poverty, social housing, mental health and other issues. Thankfully, there are [models](#) available by which we can learn to have a major collective impact on the housing and homelessness problems we all face. The Comox Valley is not starting from scratch here. For example, Courtenay has an [Affordable Housing Policy](#), and a number of zoning initiatives that are aimed at easing the rental squeeze in the Valley and Comox has a favourable secondary suite bylaw. The Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) has a [Regional Sustainability Strategy](#) and a [Regional Growth Strategy](#) that address homelessness and affordable housing and it has commissioned studies on best practices on homelessness and affordable housing.

The tables below address some of the models mentioned above but focus more broadly on what has and is working in the area of social housing and homelessness in jurisdictions far and wide. At this point, it seems to me that many of the resources required to do something about social housing and homelessness are already available in the Comox Valley. The problem is in coordination, leadership (in the form of a backbone organization) and a strategic plan with reasonable timelines and objectives along with clear means of evaluation for all organizations involved, including provincial government departments and many non-profits and, potentially, foundations and economic development organizations.

Table 1: Local Government Tools Used to Address Homelessness and Affordable Housing in British Columbia and Other Jurisdictions⁸

#	Jurisdiction or Activity	WHAT WORKS – more often than not involves the cooperation of the federal and provincial governments and non-profits.	How important is it?
1	Municipalities		
a	Doing homework	This applies to municipalities, RDs and non-profits. Learn about best practices, successful strategies elsewhere and develop innovative approaches suitable to the local area. EVERY municipality that is involved in social housing and the mitigation of homelessness does its homework. The CMHC, BC Housing and the BC Non-Profit Housing Association can all help and do. We aren't starting from scratch here. ⁹	Essential.
b	Preparing the stage	Develop an Affordable Housing Plan (Courtenay has a policy which is a good start towards a plan). As noted on page 3 above, the City of Courtenay and the CVRD have made some important first steps towards dealing positively with homelessness and affordable housing. The Mayor's Task Force was a positive step. Task Forces were the 'in thing' a few years ago. Everyone had to have one. Many are now dissolved and replaced by a backbone housing organizations. Alberta had done planning better than any other province with the provincial governments and municipalities cooperating. Its plan is to spend over \$3 billion on social housing before 2018. See its plan here and report card from 2010/2011 here .	Essential
c	Preventing the loss of Social Housing	Prevent the conversion of housing from rental to condominium (Courtenay has this provision). Maintenance requirements for rental housing. Encourage the use of CMHC programs.	Plugging the hole in the dyke.

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	Jurisdiction or Activity	WHAT WORKS – often involves the cooperation of the federal and provincial governments and non-profits.	How important is it?
d	Creating new social housing	Density Bonusing, Inclusionary zones, trust funds, housing banks, identify publicly-owned property such as unoccupied schools (as in the case of Cumberland where a group of local businesspeople bought the old high school from the School District and converted part of it into a 5 bedroom unit with shared kitchen, laundry and other facilities) that could be used for social housing, incentives for the creation of secondary suites, reductions, redirection or elimination of development fees. The use of North Island College land for the recreation facility and the new hospital are other examples of the use of public lands for alternative uses. As noted earlier, Courtenay has zoning regulations in place to allow for the encouragement of social housing and affordable housing in the form of secondary suites, etc. Lobby hard (standard operating procedure for success): UBCM, FCM, BC government and Federal government. Educate the public to the benefits of new social housing. It's virtually impossible to get anywhere in dealing with homelessness if there's a dearth of social, public and affordable housing. Even Housing First depends on the availability of SOME rental housing.	Plays a vital support role and critical to get things going.
e	Homelessness	Create vibrant communities where social housing and shelters are welcome. Educate regarding community acceptance of social and affordable housing development. Facilitate the construction of new social housing. Create vibrant neighbourhoods and communities.	This is vital and ongoing in the Valley.

Table 1 (continued): Local Government Tools Used to Address Homelessness and Affordable Housing in British Columbia and Other Jurisdictions

	Jurisdiction or Activity	WHAT WORKS – involves the cooperation of the federal and provincial governments and non-profits.	How important is it?
2	Regional Districts		
a	Doing homework	Research in best practices is SO important. Like counties in Ontario and the US, regional districts can play a huge role in commissioning studies on the way to dealing successfully with rebalancing the housing system by creating more social and public housing (in collaboration, often with non-profits, foundations, etc.). The CVRD has commissioned a couple of important studies: Butler , et al. and CitySpaces . This preliminary work has been done in most jurisdictions of any size in Canada and abroad. Moving to action is the hard part but there are models . There is no need to re-invent the wheel.	Critical and ongoing
b	Housing (backbone) organization	Incubation of a backbone housing organization whether in-house, non-profit or other options. This is probably the one most successful strategy as long as it's broadly based and there's buy-in. Portland has over 70 organizations involved in its program. This is a requirement for arriving at a consensus and cohesive community response.	Critical

Table 1 (continued): Local Government Tools Used to Address Homelessness and Affordable Housing in British Columbia and Other Jurisdictions

	Jurisdiction or Activity	WHAT WORKS - involves the cooperation of the federal and provincial governments and non-profits.	How important is it?
3	Supports		
		<p>Housing Information Management System (HIMS). This is an online database system. Facilitates tracking of people in need of housing and support to ensure they get the best housing available and the rehabilitation they need to maintain housing. ALL social service providers in Calgary are involved or will shortly be involved in HIMS reporting. ACT (Assertive Community Treatment) teams, or variations thereupon, are important in some communities, Victoria among them. A coordinated treatment and support team (or equivalent) is essential for the success of the Housing First model. Difficult to implement because of the various jurisdictions and organizations involved BUT not impossible. Calgary is making it work and so is Victoria. Northern Ontario is planning for it.</p> <p>In the Comox Valley, “The Comox Valley Community Capacity Initiative Collective (CVCCIC), a collective of AIDS Vancouver Island, Comox Valley Transition Society, Dawn to Dawn and Wachiay Friendship Centre is undertaking a project to map existing services, and research service models in other communities in order to create more efficient service delivery to the homeless and at risk of homelessness members of the Comox Valley communities.” (quote is from a backgrounder being prepared by Amanda Ridgway, consultant on the project) The Community Capacity Building Initiative is a critical component for the creation of a viable and highly successful service model.</p>	Critical for long term success.

Table 1 (continued): Local Government Tools Used to Address Homelessness and Affordable Housing in British Columbia and Other Jurisdictions

	Jurisdiction or Activity	WHAT WORKS – involves the cooperation of the federal and provincial governments and non-profits.	How important is it?
4	Portland	See Portland’s report card 6 years into their 10 year plan: Portland's report card . Portland uses a multi-pronged approach to end homelessness and to provide more social and public housing. Converting hotels, as in Vancouver’s Bosman Hotel Project , a research project of the CMHC, is one strategy Portland uses, but coordination of existing services is crucial to Portland’s success.	Demonstrates measurable outcomes.
5	Denver	Road To Home on track to end homelessness in that city. Uses a Vulnerability Index (VI) to identify and triage homeless individuals. Employs extensive fundraising activities and involves over 20 foundations in funding its activities.	VI could be useful at the service level.
6	Calgary	The Calgary Homeless Foundation’s Annual Report for 2012 shows a drop in homelessness of 24% over the previous year. A principle source of their success is the Foundation’s practice of buying and building affordable housing. The Foundation is a backbone organization that works to maximize collective impact. This is the most promising strategy I’ve come across to date for the mobilization of a community for social action.	Demonstrates measurable outcomes.
7	Nanaimo	Nanaimo’s Response to Homelessness Action Plan is a model strategic plan for dealing with homelessness and affordable housing. One hundred and thirty six new housing units are currently being built by the City with \$49 dollars out of 50 coming from the federal government’s Homelessness Partnership Initiative and the provincial government. A total of 305 units are (and will be) available via new construction and acquisitions. The city early on adopted a housing first model.	Demonstrates measurable outcomes and what results from local planning along with senior government resources.
8	Squamish and Pemberton	Both small communities engaged CitySpaces to develop affordable housing strategies with concrete plans for implementation and monitoring.	Shows planning commitment.

Table 2: Community-based Strategies and Tools to End Homelessness and Create Affordable Housing.

	Format	What It Does	How It Does It	What Worked or Works
1.	Ten Year Plans (to end homelessness) Widely used in the U.S., Europe, Australia and in Canada more recently. Victoria and the CRD has a plan, not explicitly stated, Metro Vancouver has one. Alberta leads by far in this respect with a provincial plan and many municipally led plans. Ontario is requiring local governments to have 10 year plans, but, unlike Alberta, have no provisions to fund them. Locally, Mayor’s Task Force in 2007 suggested a very ambitious five year plan.	Focuses attention away from managing homelessness to doing something concrete about it, that is, ending it. The goal is to get people off the streets and out of sub-standard or tenuous housing.	Organizes a community to create a strategic plan to end homelessness with a set of concrete objectives and timelines. Moves the discourse beyond ideas and philosophical discussions to action.	Have reduced or at least slowed the growth of homelessness. The situation would be much worse without them.

Continued...

Table 2: Community-based Strategies and Tools to End Homelessness and Create Affordable Housing.

	Format	What It Does	How It Does It	What Worked or Works
2.	Housing First (with supports). Doesn't address the need for more housing, but does provide a way of dealing with the homeless.	Takes people off the street or out of sub-standard housing into homes with no questions asked.	With a very structured, coordinated commitment to house people despite their addictions, mental health or other personal issues that make it difficult for them to get housing.	Only works if there is a strong commitment to follow-up care and treatment once a person is housed.
3	Backbone Organization. This can look quite different given the local context. In some places, the backbone organization is either the United Way, an existing non-profit, a new non-profit, a government agency or it could be a coalition of more than one organization (in cases where there is a larger population to serve).	“Our subsequent research has confirmed that backbone organizations serve six essential functions: providing overall strategic direction, facilitating dialogue between partners, managing data collection and analysis, handling communications, coordinating community outreach, and mobilizing funding.” This quote is from an article (page6) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review .		Calgary is a great example of how this works, but there are many more. See the article highlighted in the cell to the left.

¹ Bio follows as appendix 1

² [Gaetz](#), Stephen. (2010). The Struggle to End Homelessness in Canada: How we Created the Crisis, and How We Can End it. *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*, 2010, 3, 21-26

³ [Hulchanski](#), J. D. (2004). What factors shape Canadian housing policy? The intergovernmental role in Canada's housing system. *Young R, Leuprecht C, Eds. Canada: The State of the Federation*.

⁴ [Shuk](#), Carla. (2009). Overcoming Challenges in Centralized and Decentralized Housing Models: Ontario and British Columbia Compared. *Canadian Policy Research Network*.

⁵ [Government of Alberta](#). (2008) A Plan For Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years. *The Alberta Secretariat For Action On Homelessness*.

⁶ [Torjman](#), Sherri and Eric Leviten-Reid. (2003). The Social Role of Local Government. *The Caledon Institute*.

⁷ [Steves](#), Gord. (2008). Opening Message. Theme Report #4 • Trends & Issues in Affordable Housing & Homelessness.

⁸ <http://www.sparc.bc.ca/resources-and-publications/category/45-affordable-housing-a-homelessness>. The BC Social Planning and Research Council identifies 61 tools used by municipalities in BC and other jurisdictions to increase the stock of affordable housing in their localities. Not all are outlined here so it's worth having a look at the SPARC document.

⁹ As noted in the introductory test, there are studies by Butler et al. and City Spaces and the Regional Growth Strategy and the Sustainability Strategy that demonstrate that work has been done in the Valley and is ongoing with the Task Force funding the Capacity Building Initiative and this work.

Appendix 1:

Bio: Roger J. G. Albert, B.A., M.A. (Simon Fraser University)

A resident of the Comox Valley since 1983, I retired on August 31st from teaching sociology at North Island College for 29 years. Courses included The Sociology of Crime and Deviance, Social Problems, Research Methods and Racism and Ethnic Relations. Before coming to NIC I taught at Douglas and Kwantlen Colleges and in the Canadian Studies Department at SFU. Just this May, 2012, I received an Excellence Award from the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development at the University of Texas in Austin. I served seven years as faculty representative on the College Board of Governors and as department chair for several years, which also led me to sit on a number of management committees over the years. From 1987 to 1992 I hosted 254 live telecourses on the Knowledge network on sociology and study skills for which I received an Innovation in Teaching Award in 1989. I was the first instructor to teach a fully online course at NIC and the first president of the NIC Faculty Association.

Early in my career, in 1976 before I got my BA, I took 8 months off from my university studies to work on Plan Maillardville with an urban planner and a geographer, a project funded by the Canadian Urban Affairs Department (in the heady days of federal government involvement in social housing). I conducted sociological research on the French Canadian community of Maillardville in Coquitlam, as part of a project aimed at massive rehabilitation of the area.

In 2008 I supervised a group of my students as we completed the Quality of Life report for The Comox Valley Social Planning Society.

In 2010 I was external evaluator for Dawn to Dawn's residential program and I'm external advisor on the Multi-Site Evaluation of the Youth Leadership and Resiliency Program (LRP), Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada for youth in three sites in the North West Territories.

I am currently a member of the Courtenay Museum and on the Board of the Cumberland Museum. I'm a member of the Pearl Ellis Gallery as well as president of the Comox Valley Art Gallery. I'm a member of the Cumberland Forest Society and resident quiz master for their biannual Trivia nights.

My wife, Carolyn and I live in Cumberland (10 years) although we've lived in Comox (18 years) and Courtenay (2 years). We have two daughters and two granddaughters. Finally, I'm a practicing artist and artisan in wood. I blog more or less regularly.