

Affordable Housing and Homelessness in the Comox Valley Briefing Note

The Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness works as a collective to plan, coordinate, recommend and implement community responses to homelessness. There are 19 member agencies of the Coalition and numerous advisors and friends. www.cvhousing.ca

Prepared for: 2018 municipal elections for candidates in Courtenay, Comox, Cumberland, Electoral Area A, B and C.

Purpose: To inform candidates about the issues related to housing and homelessness in the Comox Valley including how municipal governments can contribute to alleviating the housing crisis.

Background: In 2015 concerned local community agencies and individuals formed a coalition to create action to address the lack of supportive and affordable housing in the Comox Valley. The same year, the CVRD held a binding referendum asking if voters would pay at least \$5 on their taxes to support local initiatives to help address homelessness. Courtenay, Cumberland and the three electoral areas of the CVRD voted. Comox, Hornby and Denman Islands were not included. 53% were in favour of the Homelessness Supports Service tax allowing the CVRD to fund local affordable housing initiatives based on the Coalition's 5 Year Plan. Decisions are approved by the CVRD board on an annual basis. Comox has found another way to support the Coalition's recommendations to address homelessness through their 5 Year Plan. Since 2015, 42 units of affordable housing have been built and funded in part through this fund. www.cvhousing.ca/the-5-year-plan

Rental housing is considered affordable when rent costs and utility fees are 30% or less than a household's pre-tax income.¹ Since 2015, despite some successes on part of the Coalition, housing options have been reduced and homelessness has increased due to a low vacancy rate and a hot real estate market. Right now, in the Comox Valley homelessness affects *all* populations and there is a need for housing across the continuum, from supportive housing to affordable rentals.

In 2017, the provincial government announced an investment in supportive housing and the federal government announced a new national housing strategy with some funding for housing. In 2018, the provincial government budget included further investments in housing. These new investments recognize the housing crisis in all areas of BC and provide an opportunity for local governments to partner with communities and other levels of government to secure much need housing.

In 2018, the Coalition conducted a Point in Time (PiT) Count where 117 homeless (68 absolute and 49 hidden) were surveyed. Selected results are included below.

Current Situation in the Comox Valley

- The 2017 rental vacancy rate was 2.7%
- There are 40 emergency shelter beds, 13 supportive housing units, 61 transitional housing units, 736 subsidized housing units and 185 low cost rentals
- There was a 13% overall increase in 2 bedroom rental rates and a 15% increase in single family home prices from 2011-2016² while there was a 4% increase in family income over the same period³
- Seniors homelessness is on the rise, up 12% since 2016⁴

¹ Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/developing-and-renovating/develop-new-affordable-housing/programs-and-information/about-affordable-housing-in-canada

² Vancouver Island Real Estate Board Market Statistics www.vireb.com/index.php?

³ 2016 Canadian Census Data for the Comox Valley www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/

⁴ 2016 & 2018 Comox Valley Point in Time Reports – Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness cvhousing.ca

In 2018, the following new affordable housing will be built and funded in part through the CVRD Homelessness Service Fund

- 10 units of housing for youth operated by John Howard Society
- 5 units of transitional housing at for women coming out of Amethyst House recovery program
- 2 homes by Habitat for Humanity at their Lake Trail site (Town of Comox funded and CVRD)
- 34 units of affordable rentals at the Braidwood site operated by Wachiay Friendship Centre & M'akola Housing

In addition, the City of Courtenay, BC Housing and John Howard Society announced in May 2018 that they had partnered to build 46 units of supportive housing in Courtenay. This housing will be finished in the spring of 2019. Courtenay has leased the land to BC housing who will build the housing and provide funding to John Howard Society who will operate and staff the supportive housing.

What Municipal Governments can do

Support Vulnerable Populations Through Supportive and Transitional Housing

- Develop relationships with provincial and federal representatives and advocate for the funding of supportive/transitional housing initiatives
- Identify parcels of municipal-owned, appropriately zoned land that can be allotted for supportive/transitional housing
- Be proactive and 'shovel ready' for provincial and federal housing funding announcements
- Fast track development/zoning applications for supportive/transitional housing
- Provide property tax exemptions for supportive/transitional housing
- Establish land banks/trusts

Increase Capacity for Affordable Rentals

- Remove re-zoning requirements and other unnecessary regulations for secondary suites
- Support the conversion of older hotels/motels to housing units
- Advocate for provincial regulatory change on tiny homes
- Remove minimum unit size requirements
- Reduce parking requirements for units
- Fast track any required zoning changes/development applications
- Limit short term rentals/build regulation (Airbnb, vacation rentals)
- Work with North Island College to build student residences
- Restrict conversion of designated rental units to strata title
- Develop demolition control policies on existing rentals and manufactured areas
- Consistently monitor rental housing stock
- Designate areas as 'rental zones'

Work with Developers:

- Ensure developers of high density developments reserve a certain percentage of units for affordable housing, or contribute a similar dollar value to an affordable housing reserve fund
- Review reserve fund frequently, and create a reserve fund application process that is clear and accessible
- Provide incentives to developers who focus on affordable housing

Questions

If elected, how will you:

- Implement some of the strategies that municipalities can do to address the housing crisis?
- Advocate for solutions to the housing issues in the Comox Valley and for funding to address gaps?
- Collaborate with other levels of government and the community to address issues?