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Unused school sites tapped for housing; First-time buyers will benefit from row housing in northeast, Mill Woods if city approves land sales Sept. 11

The Edmonton Journal

Sat 01 Sep 2007

Page: B3

Section: Cityplus

Byline: Susan Ruttan, Civic Affairs Writer

Dateline: Edmonton

Source: The Edmonton Journal

The city is gearing up to sell two surplus school sites to companies that will build row houses for first-time homebuyers.

Council will be asked at its Sept. 11 meeting to approve sale of one-hectare parcels of land in Mill Woods and in northeast Edmonton to builders.

Terry Loat, manager of the city housing branch, said Friday the process of choosing builders is underway.

"We aren't going to jam cheap housing onto what was formerly going to be a school," Loat said. "This will be very quality housing."

In a complex arrangement, the builders will not have to pay the city for the land. They will build the row houses and sell them, making a profit on the home but not on the land.

Homeowners will then be given five years to pay the city for the land on which their houses have been built.

Loat said that arrangement will keep the original selling price of the houses lower than normal because it won't include the land price. That will allow people to qualify for mortgages who wouldn't otherwise.

Five years later, the homeowners will have to pay the land cost to the city.

"Conceivably, they may have to get another mortgage," Loat said. If they do, they should have no trouble qualifying, he added, because they'll already have a valuable asset in their houses.

There will be some form of buy-back clause in the house sale for the first five years to ensure first-time homeowners are living in them. Details are still being worked out, Loat said.

"We need to make sure that somebody doesn't buy it to flip it at a higher price," Coun. Michael Phair said.

Builders on the two sites will be required to seek community feedback on their housing designs. Phair said both communities support the idea of the school-site housing.

The city plans to create roughly 1,000 townhouses on 20 unused school sites. Demand is expected to be heavy, so the city will likely use a lottery to assign the houses. Wealthy people won't be chosen, Loat said. Money the city receives from the homeowners will be split 50-50 with the school boards that originally owned the land.

The first site, valued at \$1.35 million, is at the corner of Hooke Road and Hermitage Road, near Hermitage Park. The second site, near Grand Meadow Crescent and 38th Avenue in Mill Woods, is valued at \$1.43 million.



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Loat said the new homeowners will get a break on the land price: they'll have to pay the value of the land as it is today, not its value five years from now.

Mayor Stephen Mandel has been a driving force behind the project, seeing it as a way to help working people shut out of the housing market. Houses in Edmonton sold in July at an average price of \$417,000, condos for an average \$272,000.

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Project finds homes for less fortunate; Landlords pleased with setup because it provides them a level of financial security

The Edmonton Journal

Sat 01 Sep 2007

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Section: Cityplus

Byline: Anna Mehler Paperny, Journal Staff Writer

Dateline: Edmonton

Source: The Edmonton Journal

The Boyle Street Co-op's new housing first program helps people find homes while addressing issues such as addiction, mental health and unemployment -- all of which are difficult to solve without a place to live.

"It's going good, but it's in the very early stages," Boyle Street outreach worker Sandy Ericson said.

"Our first month has been spent just trying to find the housing -- it's hard to do housing first in a tent."

Ericson said the program will have 18 people in proper housing as of this weekend, with five or six more next week.

"We have five or six more people we'll be moving on Tuesday out of tent city," she said.

"That leaves about 70 more."

Ericson said all 18 are doing well, and two families they found accommodation for under a pilot program last year are still in their homes.

Many landlords are pleased with the program, which provides them with added security.

"We've been guaranteeing we're going to deal with the problems so they don't have to. It's for their benefit, actually to have these kind of supports in place," she said.

She has had more landlords object to having tenants on fixed incomes than tenants with addiction or mental-health issues.

"They'd like someone with a bit more income, so they know they're going to get their rent."

The main obstacle remains simply that rent is too high for people on fixed incomes.

"If you're looking at a one bedroom, the cheapest is probably around \$600."

Even rooming houses, which don't include a private bath, cost \$500 a month to rent, she said.

Once they have homes, people are connected with programs and support groups dealing with addiction, mental health or groups that help them acquire job skills.

"We deal with them after they're housed because it's hard to deal with something when you're living outside in a tent."

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Mental health centre set for Calgary; New national body aims to educate public

The Calgary Herald
Sat 01 Sep 2007
Page: A1 / FRONT
Section: News
Byline: Deborah Tetley
Dateline: OTTAWA
Source: CanWest News Service

OTTAWA - Calgary will be the home of a \$55-million national mental health commission whose goal is to reduce what Prime Minister Stephen Harper calls the "stigma" faced by patients.

Several sources confirmed the commission's headquarters will be based in Calgary. An announcement is expected next Friday.

Retired Liberal senator Michael Kirby, who will chair the commission, was coy Friday when pressed.

He noted that he and federal Health Minister Tony Clement will hold a news conference in Calgary next Friday, and the inaugural board meeting will be held on Sept. 10 at the Hyatt Regency hotel.

"There has been no official announcement of it being headquartered in Calgary," Kirby said. "You can draw whatever conclusions you want from the fact that the first board meeting is in Calgary on Monday and that we are making an announcement on Friday in Calgary."

Both Judy Martin, executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association's Calgary region, and Jodi Cohen, Alberta president of the Canadian Mental Health Association, said they have known for several months the commission will be anchored in Calgary.

The prime minister said many Canadians deal with mental health issues.

"We see mental health disease everywhere," said Harper, announcing the creation of the commission. "One in five Canadians will develop some kind of mental illness in their lifetime."

"These people have been left, just left, by most of society," said Judy Martin. "There is a lot of misinformation and fear out there, so changing attitudes and behaviours means changing our collective consciousness. But it's going to be a long road."

Martin estimates her association worked with more than 17,000 Calgarians last year on mental health issues ranging from clinical depression to schizophrenia and suicide.

Many of Calgary's mentally ill are homeless, experts say.

Although estimates vary, roughly 60 per cent of Alberta's homeless population are living with some form of mental illness, said Cohen.

Cohen said the commission's mandate to fight the stigma is a step toward addressing discrimination -- provided the appropriate resources are allocated by individual provinces.

"There are towns in Alberta with no psychiatrists," she said. "There are no resources, not enough beds and everyone is stretched. People aren't getting help."

The commission is composed of 18 people from across the country.



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It was one of the recommendations of a 2006 Senate report on the state of mental illness care in Canada.

The report, co-authored by Kirby, said Canada is one of the few industrialized nations not to have a national health-care strategy for mental illness. It recommended a sweeping transformation and integration of what is now a disparate mix of ad-hoc services in different provinces.

The principal theme in Kirby's report was that the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill in recent decades has not been followed up by an adequate provision of services in community settings.

"We have to keep this issue out of the shadows and stop branding people," Kirby said. "We are going to start that long, evolutionary process to change minds now, so that mental illness is no longer a defining characteristic."

The report called for a national commission as a first step toward writing a new mental illness strategy, and integrating health-care services across the country.

It also said the commission should undertake a campaign to educate Canadians about mental illness -- spreading the message that diseases such as depression or schizophrenia are not only common, but should not be accompanied by the discrimination often suffered by people who have them.

The five-year, \$55-million cost of the commission -- already announced in the last federal budget -- is \$30 million short of what Kirby's Senate report was looking for over the same period.

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Mentally ill need housing: advocates; Fix homelessness first, national commission on mental health told

The Edmonton Journal
Mon 03 Sep 2007
Page: A12 / FRONT
Section: Cityplus
Byline: Mike Sadava
Dateline: EDMONTON
Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - The new national commission on mental health should not overlook the huge effect homelessness has on people suffering from mental illnesses, say Alberta advocates.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Friday the membership of the Mental Health Commission of Canada -- which he said will take measures to eliminate the stigma of this illness that affects millions of Canadians at some point in their lives and create a national strategy to deal with it.

But as many as 75 per cent of homeless people suffer from mental illness, and they are unlikely to get proper treatment if they do not have adequate shelter, said Austin Mardon, who suffers from schizophrenia, and who this year was named a member of the Order of Canada for his advocacy work.

"If somebody has problems, how can you take the pills that are necessary for your health if you don't know where you'll be sleeping?" Mardon said Sunday.

"The pills are likely to get stolen or lost."



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Many people with illnesses such as schizophrenia find it difficult to get housing for many reasons, such as discrimination by landlords and potential struggles to handle the demands or follow the rules of running a household, he said.

"For the hard-core mentally ill, it's not just a matter of getting cheap housing, but getting supportive housing," he said.

That means having help from staff to make sure they take their medications, attend doctor's appointments and get some kind of proper nutrition.

A national report released last week by the Canadian Institute for Health Information shows that mental health problems were responsible for over half of the hospital stays of homeless people, compared to five per cent for the general population.

The Canadian Mental Health Association has been dealing with the housing issue for years, including a major conference called Housing First held this spring in Red Deer.

Tom Shand, executive director of the Alberta division of the CMHA, said shelter and safety are fundamental needs for everyone, and being on the street contributes to mental health and addictions problems, and reduces the likelihood of getting access to proper treatment.

"The most important thing is to get them off the street and into a secure place to live," Shand said.

This doesn't mean a temporary situation like a shelter for a day or a week, but a more permanent housing, he said.

"People will have a chance, although there will be setbacks, to recover and to have a better quality of life," Shand said.

"Most of these people have strength to survive day to day that is more than we can imagine, but they don't get a chance to make inroads into these issues."

Shand applauded the goal of removing the stigma of mental illness, which he said prevents people from seeking help.

If people lose that fear and get treatment earlier, their illness will not be as severe and the associated social problems will not be as serious, he said.

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Low-income housing groups get tax break

Edmonton Examiner

Wed 05 Sep 2007

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Section: News

Byline: BY JOELLE TOMEK, EXAMINER STAFF

George Kelly is relieved that no rent increase is in store for his tenants.

The non-profit housing group he heads up was recently refunded its property tax for the past two years, undoing a financial loss that could have been eaten by some of the city's poorest renters.

Until recently, the Edmonton Inner City Housing Society was exempt from the tax roll. In a move to enforce decade-old changes in provincial legislation, a handful of the society's properties were reviewed and charged the levy.

Kelly is expecting a refund of about \$12,000 for the past two years.

Since 1998, charities that charge clients more than a nominal user fee are no longer exempt from property tax. Because rent is more than a nominal fee, non-profit housing projects are under review.

After appealing to city council, the Edmonton Inner City Housing Society got its money back, but Kelly is worried about whether future projects will be exempt.

"If we have to do this every year, it's certainly going to make it hard for organizations like us to know what our financial bottom lines are going to be," Kelly says.

The society houses some of the city's poorest tenants - people he says face the greatest risk of homelessness.

If all of the group's 14 projects are taxed the tab could come to \$55,000, Kelly adds.

"We can try to be more creative in our fundraising, but the reality is it would likely have meant an increase in rents," he says. "Our average single's income is around \$800 a month.

"So what can you charge for rent that leaves them any money to live on?"

If the city waives property tax for all non-profit housing groups, it will lose part of its own income and still have to pay the province for the education portion of the levy.

Mayor Stephen Mandel says affordable housing is a provincial responsibility and the province should pick up the tab.

"We are obligated to do what the province ... regulates us to do and we think it's unreasonable to ask Edmontonians - the taxpayers of Edmonton - to subsidize a provincial responsibility, which is housing," Mandel says.



Real estate reversal. 'Prices have gone up too high, too quickly'; Big inventory and softening demand push prices lower

The Calgary Herald
Fri 07 Sep 2007
Page: E1 / FRONT
Section: Calgary Business
Byline: Mario Toneguzzi
Source: Calgary Herald

The million-dollar question for the Calgary housing market today is: where is it headed after the Calgary Real Estate Board confirmed Thursday the average sale price of a single-family home dropped by about 3.9 per cent in August from the previous month -- a \$20,000 decline?

With the median price also dropping by \$5,000, the inventory of properties at a record level and the sale time taking longer, buyers and sellers alike are wondering what to expect.

Calgary realtor Ted Greenhough, of Re/Max Realty Professionals, who offers a monthly insight on his website about the current housing market, said the month-end inventory of more than 9,000 residential properties for sale is the highest-ever recorded -- "by a longshot actually."

"As far as I'm concerned, there's going to be a market correction. I've been saying that for the last four months," said Greenhough. "I feel the prices have gone up in Calgary over the last 18 months and I feel they've gone up too high, too quickly."

"It's supply and demand. That's pure and simple. The supply is exceedingly high and the demand has fallen off substantially. . . . Right now, it's a little bit scary because you know if we were to say carry 10,000 listings over into January then who knows how long it will take for the market to recover. And how do you define market recovery? Does that mean we get back to the peak prices we had before, because it could take a long time to get back there. I don't think people should wait around for that to happen."

Greenhough said that in the short-term he believes average prices will continue to drop "marginally, but not substantially because you have to be aware that the overall economy in Calgary is still very strong comparatively speaking although not as strong as it has been in the past.

"I believe that there's a big affordability issue in Calgary right now. There's still lots of people moving here, but they can't afford to buy a house," he said.

Real estate board president Ron Stanners said the "market is easing off -- the market is softening a little bit" after the official MLS sales numbers for the month of August were released on Thursday.

"But I don't see this market falling through the floor," he said. "I really believe we'll see this market stumble along.

"It may soften a little more -- maybe not, I'm not sure -- between now and the end of the year and then we'll likely see in January historically the new year starts to pick up steam again."

The previous biggest monthly decline in the average price of single-family homes in the Calgary Census Metropolitan Area was in November 2006 when they dropped by 4.6 per cent to \$392,479 from the \$411,207 registered in October 2006.

The Calgary CMA includes the city, Airdrie, the Municipal District of Rocky View, Chestermere, Cochrane, Irricana, Beiseker and Crossfield.



Lai Sing Louie, senior market analyst for Calgary for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., said there is always a drop or two in monthly average sale prices every year and there have been even bigger percentage declines in past years.

"This (August) drop is large because of the absolute magnitude but in terms of percentage these things happen . . . Even in 2006 when we had a record price boom we had three months where it dropped with the big one at 4.6 per cent. Even more than this one.

"It's normal. You can expect it to happen every year," said Louie.

According to real estate board, the average price of a single-family home for Calgary metro in August was \$485,914 -- a 13 per cent hike from August 2006's \$429,855, but a drop from the record high of \$505,920 in July.

There were 1,314 single-family home sales in August -- down from 1,341 in August last year. The August sales were also down 12 per cent from 1,495 in July.

The average sale price of a condominium in August was \$320,790 -- 13 per cent higher than the August 2006 average of \$283,547. In July, the average price was \$318,582.

There were 598 condo sales during August compared with 679 in August 2006.

The average days on the market to sell a single-family home in August was 39 compared to 25 a year ago while it took an average 35 days to sell a condo in August compared to 21 days in August 2006.

Total inventory for the month of August for all residential properties was 9,634.

Teresa Centanni, with Century 21 Bamber Realty Ltd., said despite the slowdown in the local real estate market, it still remains strong.

"I'm still selling. I'm still busy," she said. "Stuff is sitting and there are reductions (in list price) and lots of vacancies because a lot of people last year purchased on spec (speculation). All these long-term construction dates (for new homes) have caused all that. I'm getting a lot of that as well -- vacant properties. Mainly from purchasers buying on spec."

She said people also have to keep in mind that the average prices are still \$50,000 to \$60,000 above what they were a year ago.

According to Calgary realtor Bob Truman, of First Place Realty, the average sale price in August was affected by the number of sales in the million dollar-plus category for single-family homes.

In August, 38 homes sold for more than \$1 million at an average sale price of \$1.5 million. This compares with 61 sales in the upper-end market in July with an average sale price of \$1.7 million.

Stanners said the median price of single-family homes is a more important number to track than the average price.

That dropped to \$430,000 last month from \$435,000 in July.

"When you look at the median price, the difference is even less. It's down about one per cent. Who's going to worry about one per cent. It's not that big a deal," added Stanners.



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City short 200 shelter beds; Plan for winter looks to warehouses, vacant schools

The Edmonton Journal
Fri 07 Sep 2007
Page: B1 / FRONT
Section: Cityplus
Byline: Gordon Kent
Dateline: EDMONTON
Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - The city is looking at housing up to 200 homeless people nightly in a warehouse, vacant school or other "remote location" this winter because there aren't enough downtown shelter spaces.

The Winter Emergency Response Plan released Thursday indicates an extra 350 beds or mats will be needed from Nov. 1 to April 30, but at best there are 150 spots available with organizations such as the Salvation Army. One option is to transport the remaining people outside the downtown core to an overflow facility, such as a warehouse in an industrial area, according to the plan prepared by the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing.

MIGHT GO ON BUSES

They could be carried on transit buses at a \$150,000 cost, getting picked up and dropped off at an existing shelter. And they could be prevented from arriving at or leaving the overflow centre on foot, to reduce the impact on the surrounding community.

"Our challenge in this marketplace is it's very difficult to secure space for this use for half a year," said Jay Freeman, Edmonton's director of housing services, who remains optimistic a solution will be found in time.

They're looking at churches, closed schools, an exercise room at the downtown YMCA, once equipment is moved to the new Don Wheaton Family YMCA, Freeman said. Other structures with proper bathrooms and large assembly areas are also possibilities, but so far nothing has turned up.

"We're concerned because of how late it is in the year and we haven't found space, and (will) have to go through due process, which will require ... notification of the community. No matter where we locate, there's likely to be some opposition."

The \$2.8-million plan, which goes to city council Tuesday, would also provide homeless people with family and health services, extend the hours of drop-in centres and include a \$1-million contingency fund to create further spaces if there's severe weather or rising demand. Most of the money is being requested from the provincial government. Edmonton now has 786 permanent shelter beds, 250 more than last year.

While Coun. Michael Phair agreed some residents won't be happy if an overflow shelter is set up in their neighbourhood, he said there isn't any choice.

TEMPORARY SETUP

"The city and its partners want to ensure we don't have people freezing in the streets, and that takes priority ... it is temporary."

In the past, Edmonton has opened an LRT station and a firehall to offer protection during extreme cold, but Freeman said this isn't under consideration and would only happen as a final resort. The former city print shop where mats were placed last winter is now the Reuse Centre.



Poverty Reduction Coalition

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However, the need for space is likely to be strong based on the high occupancy rates at existing facilities and a 19-per-cent rise in Edmonton's homeless population from 2004 to last year, he said. There were 2,618 homeless as of 2006.

Calgary is creating a temporary winter homeless shelter in a warehouse in an industrial area after taking over an old Brick store last year, which created fear among nearby homeowners.

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United Way counting on Calgary for \$50M

The Calgary Herald

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Byline: Suzanne Goldman

Source: Calgary Herald

A parade of revellers and corporate mascots descended on Eau Claire Market on Thursday to announce a \$50-million fundraising target for the United Way's 2007 campaign.

Last year's effort attained its lofty goal of \$50 million. The great majority -- \$48.7 million -- was funnelled back into the community through the 138 social agencies and 250 programs supported by the United Way.

As a complex crisis of social ills continues to plague the city, homelessness emerged again this year as a pressing concern. More than 3,400 Calgarians now struggle to survive on the streets -- that's up 32 per cent from 2004.

But United Way chairman Michael Tims also emphasized the importance of supporting other programs that tackle social concerns, such as addressing juvenile prostitution.

To assist agencies in quelling these problems, organizers are hoping to add to the United Way's donor base of 50,000 by encouraging more Calgarians to participate directly in projects that will benefit the community.

"It sounds like a lot, but we'd like to be able to keep growing over time," said Tims. "Calgary is a great city, but there's a lot of things that could be done to make it better."

Tory MP Lee Richardson, along with Liberal MLAs David Swann and Harry Chase, joined Mayor Dave Bronconnier for the event, their red-gloved hands a symbolic play on the United Way logo, intended to represent offering a "hand up" for Calgary's less fortunate.

"We're a very prosperous city, but there are still many people in need," said Bronconnier, who declared September to be United Way Month.

The high-energy crowd of 1,000 corporate sponsors, social agencies, donors and volunteers cheered loudly during speeches and enjoyed a performance by the musical group Mocking Shadows.

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