



City of St. John's Affordable Housing Strategy  
Annual Update - November 2020

The City of St. John's approved the [Affordable Housing Strategy, 2019-2028](#), in November 2018. The strategy will address the municipality's housing needs by working in step with partners, stakeholders, and residents to create and maintain safe, suitable and affordable housing throughout the city. The strategy is designed to be flexible and to address issues related to affordable housing as the cost of living, the housing market and vacancy rates fluctuate. This is an important feature given the unpredictable nature of COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the housing sector.

The following is an annual update on the Affordable Housing Strategy's main areas of work and other housing-related initiatives that the City implemented to support residents during the pandemic.

### **Emerging Responses**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many vulnerabilities in the housing and social sector. Access to safe, stable and affordable housing is pivotal in the response to the health crisis we are currently facing.

#### Community Response Fund

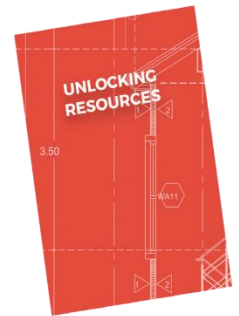
The City of St. John's is a recipient of the COVID-19 Community Response Fund for Vulnerable Populations - a collaboration between the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Canadian Medical Association Foundation. This funding allows recipients to support vulnerable populations struggling with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The City has used the Community Response funding to establish public Wi-Fi access points at Bannerman Park and Victoria Park that are near non-market housing and outreach service locations. This was announced to the public in October 2020. Internet services will be in place for 3 years. Many low-income individuals rely on public internet, but COVID-19-related closures and restrictions have made libraries, coffee shops and cafes less accessible than they were prior to the pandemic. This project will help close a digital divide that has emerged in the pandemic and allow residents to remain connected to health and support services.

Remaining funding will be used to set up touchless hand sanitizing stations in the same areas. We have released an RFP for these stations; next steps and further timelines will be shared once a proponent has been chosen.

#### Non-Profit Housing

The City of St. John's was given permission to relax criteria around the application process for its partner-managed housing. This helped the City move people into permanent housing faster.



## Unlocking Resources

Identify and draw on the City's resources and assets to advance housing initiatives and create new opportunities.

- Create a Civic Housing Action Fund

Following best practices from other municipalities, Council approved for a civic housing action fund to be developed. This fund would support the development of affordable housing opportunities and provide a means to leverage provincial and federal funding. In evaluating current non-profit housing assets, a property that does not fit the current needs of the housing demand was identified. Council approved selling this property and revenue would serve as the initial investment into the Civic Housing Action Fund supporting the housing strategy. The City of St. John's would also avail of a savings on the upkeep of this property.

- Create an Interdepartmental Committee to coordinate internal components of this strategy

An Interdepartmental Committee was established in 2019 to lead internal components of the Affordable Housing Strategy. Representation includes Transportation, Communications, Family & Leisure Services, Planning, Regulatory Services and Housing. Additional Divisions are brought in as necessary. The committee continues to meet on a quarterly basis.

- Continue to create a list of city-owned vacant land and buildings and evaluate the inventory for potential redevelopment as affordable housing

The Legal Department has been working with the Housing Division to identify parcels of City owned land for potential projects. Four parcels of land have been identified as viable options for redevelopment as affordable housing.

Recommendations were presented to Council on one parcel of land - 28 Eric Street. A letter of Intent with Habitat for Humanity has been formalized which outlines the intended gifting of the property subject to successful rezoning, development approval and collaboration with the Eric Street Community Garden located on this site to either leave the garden undisturbed or to incorporate the garden into the design. The garden is to remain on this property owned by the City and retain open space zoning. Council has also committed \$2500 should rezoning be successful to support the redevelopment of the garden.

- Work with the Provincial and Federal Governments on identifying land and surplus buildings in St. John's

The City of St. John's provided support to the Federal government in the assessment of parcels of land located in Pleasantville under the Federal Lands Initiative.



## Building Homes

Increase the stock and sustainability of affordable rental and home ownership opportunities.

- Make creating successful tenancies a priority

The Your Rights and Responsibilities as a Tenant document, developed by the City and our affordable housing partners, was updated in 2019 to reflect changes to the Residential Tenancies Act that came into effect in 2019. In 2020, this document was translated into both French and Arabic to expand its reach. All versions are posted on the City website.

- Focus on producing sustainable rental opportunities

There is continued work with NL Housing on their Rent Supplement Inspection Program. The Department of Regulatory Services provides inspections for NLHC rent supplement units upon move in and with any change in tenancy. The Department of Regulatory Services is now also inspecting all private emergency shelters every 6 months and nonprofit emergency shelters annually. They also provide the inspection for all new shelters as they are established.

- Continue to work with partners in the community to create a Landlord Registry

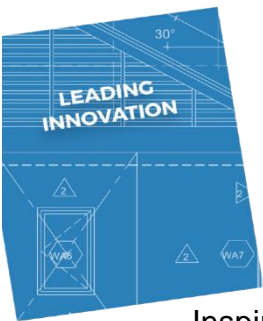
The City supports the work of End Homelessness St. John's and its Home Connect program.

- Continue to engage multiple stakeholders in addressing the under-reporting of property standards violations in rental housing

A 'Safe and Healthy Housing' presentation has been developed to engage service providers in a collaborative approach to address inadequate housing in St. John's. Outreach efforts are underway for presentation bookings for 2021.

- Leverage the existing City-owned housing portfolio to increase the supply of accessible and affordable housing units

The City partnered with Connections for Seniors on a one-year pilot project. In the pilot project, two vacant City-owned lower end of market (LEM) housing units were converted into six supportive housing units for Seniors.



## Leading Innovation

Inspire and facilitate creativity in affordable housing projects.

- Continue to offer the Housing Catalyst Fund grants yearly for affordable housing projects

Seven Housing Catalyst Grants were awarded in 2020:

✓ Organization	Project	Grant Amount
Fundamental Inc	Net Zero Ready Affordable Tiny Home-Prototype Unit	\$10 000
Power Brothers Inc	Design costs to make affordable housing units accessible as part of retrofit build	\$10 000
Stella's Circle Community Services	Consultant costs to expand housing portfolio and maximize current units/land	\$10 000
L'Arche Avalon	Floor plan design for the construction of two l'Arche Avalon homes and a day centre	\$10 000
Connections for Seniors	Supportive Housing Needs Assessment for Older Adults	\$10 000
NL Gray Gays	Housing and care needs assessment for LGBTQI2S community	\$ 5 000
Universal Design Network	Universal Design Education	\$ 5 000

Applications for the 2021 Housing Catalyst Fund grants are being accepted until the last Friday in November. Thanks to a new partnership between the City of St. John's and The Community Housing Transformation Centre (CHTC) an additional \$100,000 has been added to the City's \$50,000, creating a new Catalyst Fund to improve access to and availability of affordable housing in St. John's. Grants will continue to fund short term projects with a one to two-year timeline of completion, however the maximum grant amount available to applicants will increase from \$10,000 to \$30,000. The collaboration between the City and CHTC is intended for a minimum of two years with potential for continued partnership following this time period.

- Facilitate an Energy Efficiency Pilot Project, bringing partners together on a collaborative project that is aimed at reducing power costs and increasing affordability.

An energy audit was conducted on a vacant Non-Profit unit targeted for an energy retrofit project. Energy upgrades are being implemented. The City will also be installing additional insulation in the rooves of 26 units of Non-Profit Housing in fall 2020.



## Revitalizing Policy

Create municipal policy and plans that strive to meet affordable housing needs of residents

- Support building a diverse and inclusive housing stock.
- Support intensification and mixed-use developments throughout the City of St. John's

Envision St. John's, prepared as a result of a comprehensive review, will replace the current St. John's Municipal Plan (2003) and Development Regulations (1994). The Envision St. John's Development Regulations were presented at Council on March 4, 2019 for adoption-in-principle. With the formal adoption-in-principle, the draft Municipal Plan and Development Regulations documents have been sent to Municipal Affairs for provincial review and release.

The following is reflected in Envision St. John's:

- ✓ Allow subsidiary dwelling units in as many residential zones as possible
  - ✓ Incorporate provisions for tiny homes
  - ✓ Support intensification and mixed-use development
  - ✓ Allow small apartment buildings in some residential zones
  - ✓ Make best use of land base to provide affordable housing
  - ✓ In new neighbourhoods, plan development around the parks and open space network, with an emphasis on compact, walkable residential neighbourhoods, with a mix of uses and employment areas along primary transportation corridors
  - ✓ Continue to require new developments to consult with the St. John's Transportation Commission regarding public transit infrastructure requirements.
- Provide incentives for affordable housing developments.

**Parking Requirements:** when affordable housing applications are received, flexibility for parking requirements is considered on a case by case basis.

**Municipal Fees:** an exemption of municipal fees is given to all registered charities. The exemption expanded in 2019 to include private developers of affordable housing who have confirmed:

- ✓ 'Investment in Affordable Housing' funding from NLHC
- ✓ 'National Housing Co-Investment' funding under the National Housing Strategy
- ✓ 'Federal Lands Initiative' investment under the National Housing Strategy
- ✓ 'Innovation Fund' funding under the National Housing Strategy

**Property Taxes:** Real property may be exempted from the real property tax that is: held and occupied by a charitable organization or institution which is so registered under the *Income Tax Act* (Canada); or part of a low rental housing project as defined in the *National Housing Act* (Canada).

- Advocacy effort

The City of St. John's Housing Division signed on to advocacy led by End Homelessness St. John's to the Provincial Government. The call was for a one-time amendment to the *Income and Employment Support Act* to waive the penalties imposed upon income support recipients who receive the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. A copy of the letter can be found at [www.wecanendit.com](http://www.wecanendit.com) under 'Resources'.



## **Cultivating Partnership**

Work with all levels of government, private and community partners to address housing issues, support partner efforts and work collectively to create solutions.

- Continue efforts to align and combine the City of St. John's Non-Profit Housing and NL Housing applications and wait lists.

The City of St. John's had several conversations with CRA regarding granting direct access to Option Cs for applicants and tenants. CRA requires legislation that states that we can collect this information. The City of St. John's Act that governs the municipal affairs of St. John's does not reference setting rents, collecting rent, or verifying income. We are advocating for this to be addressed in the review of the St. John's Act that is currently underway.

- Continue to act as an affordable housing facilitator.

The affordable housing facilitator continues to share housing related research, contacts and supports within the community. The Affordable Housing Newsletter continues and is released approximately every two months.

The Affordable Housing Working Group continues to meet every 2-3 months to inform priorities and actions under the Affordable Housing Strategy 2019-2028.

- Continue to support the work of End Homelessness St. John's (EHSJ)

From 2012-2020, the Community Entity for St. John's was the City of St. John's, which assumed the responsibility for contract and financial management through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (now Reaching Home) and employed EHSJ staff. The City provided EHSJ with annual cash contributions of approximately \$300,000 for the 2014-2019 St. John's Community Plan and considerable in-kind support, both administratively and operationally. The City actively supported EHSJ as they transitioned to their own non-profit entity, which formally took effect on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. EHSJ is now the Community Entity under Reaching Home. Continued municipal funding of \$100,000 annually was confirmed for fiscal years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 and will be evaluated in the City's budget cycles for 2022 onward.

The City of St. John's is a member of the Board of Directors and the Community Advisory Board that governs EHSJ's work. The City participated in consultations to guide the development of the new St. John's Community Plan to End Homelessness 2019-2024.

With the departure of EHSJ from the City, Council approved to enhance the link between homelessness and affordable housing initiatives by:

1. Attaching Appendix E: Homelessness and Affordable Housing to the [Affordable Housing Strategy](#) to outline the relationship of End Homelessness and the City of St. John's from 2020 forward.
2. Changing the Affordable Housing Working Group purpose statement in its [Terms of Reference](#) to better represent the scope of advice to Council and collective work being accomplished.

The City of St. John's enjoys a very positive working relationship with EHSJ and we look forward to enhancing that relationship with the organization's new independent structure.

- Support our community partners as they work towards building affordable home ownership opportunities in the community (ex. Habitat for Humanity and NL Housing's First Time Home Buyer's program).

A letter of Intent with Habitat for Humanity was formalized in 2019 which outlines the intended gifting of a property subject to successful rezoning, development approval and collaboration with the Community Garden located on site. The project has not yet received development approval but the process is still active.

- Work with partners to improve transportation systems as they relate to housing affordability

The City continues to engage the Provincial Government and neighboring municipalities in discussions to develop and improve the regional transportation system so that affordable housing units can be accessed, particularly via public transit.

#### Internal Non-Market Housing Mapping Tool

Using the data from the non-market housing inventory for St. John's, an internal urban planning tool was created. Housing was mapped across St. John's and overlaid with transportation routes and proposed intensification areas. This tool (currently in draft form) will help identify how public transportation routes interact with non-market housing inventory, so that the City of St. John's can make recommendations for improved service. It can also be used to help identify and address gaps in inventory of non-market housing.



## Kelly's Brook Shared-Use-Path

On October 2, 2020 the provincial and federal government joined the City to announce funding to move ahead with Kelly's Brook Trail upgrades, with over 80% of the cost being covered by other levels of government. Kelly's Brook Shared-Use-Path is the first catalyst project coming from the Bike St John's Master Plan. The shared-use path will extend from King's Bridge Road to Columbus Drive. It is mostly in place as a granular walking trail today, linking several neighbourhoods through an important east-west greenway that largely parallels Empire Avenue. Its goal is to provide an attractive and continuous 4.8 km active transportation route in St. John's, connecting popular destinations and amenities along the way. The shared-use path will be designed for people of all ages and abilities. More information can be found on the [Engage! St. John's page](#).



## **Informing Action**

Raise awareness and educate the impact housing needs has on our community's health, sustainable growth and economic security.

- Increase the understanding of affordable housing, housing need, and associated best practices

## Information Sessions – February 2020

We were pleased to partner with Choices for Youth to welcome two National colleagues to St. John's in February 2020; Dominika Krzeminska the Director of Strategic Initiatives with the Canadian Housing & Renewal Association and Stéphan Corriveau, the Executive Director of the newly formed Community Housing Transformation Centre.

The week's agenda included

- Individual meetings with community housing providers/ support organizations
- Meetings with City of St. John's and NLHC government officials to discuss regional strategic directions and opportunities for collaboration
- 'Growing Capacity in Community Housing' public forum. This event sought to raise awareness on the two organizations, their programs and capacities. It allowed attendees to engage with these National Organizations and discuss our local context within their National mandates and strategic priorities.
- Choices for Youth and Happy City co-hosted a panel discussion on Affordability in St. John's. Dominika took part in this event as the panelist on housing affordability.

## Let's Talk Housing Event – November 2020

On November 16<sup>th</sup>, the City of St. John's, in partnership with CMHC, will host a virtual event titled 'Let's Talk Housing'. The event will include a presentation from Chris Janes, Senior Analyst Economics at CMHC called 'St. John's Area Housing & Economic Update'. In addition, the following speakers will provide updates on recent successes, programming, new initiatives, and the impacts of COVID-19 on the housing and homelessness sector.

- Deputy Mayor Sheilagh O'Leary, City of St. John's
  - Mike Tizzard, Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Services, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation
  - Jill Snow, Outreach Specialist - Atlantic Region, Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation
  - Doug Pawson, Executive Director, End Homelessness St. John's
  - Curtis Mercer, Interim CEO, Canadian Home Builders' Association
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- Discourage Not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) attitudes

Development of a social marketing strategy that addresses and alleviates concerns related to affordable housing developments is ongoing. A social marketing campaign has been created to tackle the fears associated with affordable housing through increased information (awareness campaigns, success stories, etc.) and focusing on the benefits of affordable housing. A communications sub-committee was struck to guide this work. This campaign "What does 'affordable housing' mean to you?" was launched in November 2020. It uses short videos with inanimate objects that are common to every home and the script is aimed at producing self-reflection for the viewer to chip away at the perceptions of affordable housing. The new campaign aims to debunk some of the myths associated with affordable housing and to encourage individuals to reflect on their own perceptions and beliefs. NIMBY – or 'not in my backyard' - is the resistance to housing projects based on stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes and policies that have the effect of creating barriers for people.

The campaign video describes a typical door on a house in a standard neighbourhood and asks viewers to consider whether or not it matters if that door is on an affordable house. The video is available on the City's YouTube channel and the campaign, running from now until early in 2021, will run on social media channels.

The Affordable Housing Working Group updated the 'Building "Yes": A Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) Toolkit' with current case studies, an updated contact list, and revised CSJ Planning Process. This work was completed February 2020 and the new revised document was uploaded on the Canadian Home Builders of Newfoundland and Labrador website and is linked on the City of St. John's Website under publications > housing.

- Offer Innovative housing workshops where local experts can share practical and innovative housing designs that meet emerging market needs.

In partnership with CMHC, planning has continued for the affordable housing workshop series to assist Affordable Housing stakeholders to build capacity for specific stages of development.

The workshops align very closely with the Alberta Rural Development Network Step-By-Step Guide, therefore we partnered with them to virtually deliver these workshops. The three workshops occurred/will occur on October 14<sup>th</sup>, November 18<sup>th</sup>, and December 9<sup>th</sup> and cover the following topics: Housing Needs Assessment, Organizational Readiness / Developing Project Concept, and Project Feasibility.