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FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Manitoba municipalities struggle to meet housing needs: Mayors

Cities and towns across the province are learning to work within their unique economic climates and available policy tools to deal with housing needs.

That was evident following a panel discussion with Manitoba mayors as part of *Building Partnerships 2016*, the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association's fourth annual conference in November.

A 2015 report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in Manitoba analyzed data from Statistics Canada and findings from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). It found that over a million households in Canada are living in unacceptable housing and unable to access adequate housing. Community representatives from different parts of Manitoba have made it clear they're working on finding the best ways to address local housing needs within the policy tools available to municipalities. But each town and city is approaching the need for appropriate housing while sustaining growth differently.

The panel was made up of Thompson Mayor Dennis Fenske, Flin Flon Mayor Cal Huntley, Portage La Prairie Mayor Irvine Ferris, Dauphin Mayor Eric Irwin and Selkirk Mayor Larry Johannson. Deputy Mayor Henry Siemens represented the City of Winkler.

The strength of the local economy correlates with stable and secure housing, according to Huntley, Fenske and Ferris. Resource-based communities face particular risks.

With Flin Flon being a mining community, Huntley said the unknown lifespan of mines leaves the housing market in a vulnerable spot.

"Flin Flon certainly is a resource-driven community and we feel the ebbs and flows depending on how business is in regards to housing prices, new builds and those kinds of things," he said.

"The challenge we are feeling right now is there's a local mining company that's indicated a finite life for one of the significant mines in the area. So as soon as that happens you see a reduction in the middle value to lower value homes. We're not lacking homes, we are lacking affordable, quality senior housing and the partnerships that go along with that. And the alliances that you need to build around that are a real challenge when you're in a resource community because some of the traditional funding, bank funding, gets conditional upon what's going on with industry."

In Thompson, Fenske said he is anticipating a drop in housing prices due to industry changes, which the community has become familiar with over the years.

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CCPA-MB Director Molly McCracken moderating at Manitoba mayors panel on housing

“(Mining company) Vale has made an announcement that they are moving from a fully-integrated mining operation to a mine-mill operation. Currently they employ 1,400 hundred employees, and at the end of 2018 there will be 900. So what’s the effect on that? From a housing perspective, we anticipate that housing prices will drop, and they have somewhat. But we’ve been through these cycles before. My family’s been up in Thompson since 1961. At the peak of Vale, there were 4,500 employees for that company.”

Meanwhile, Ferris said Portage La Prairie is looking to diversify its economy, after many placed their faith in a Campbell Company of Canada plant. The soup company halted its operations in the town in the early 1990s.

“It absolutely devastated our community for nearly 10 years,” Ferris said. “Having those large industries are terrific, but you’re always kind of looking over you’re shoulder and we’re always actively working to diversify the economy and bring in more.”

In 2011, 30 per cent of households in Portage were rentals, according to Statistics

Canada. According to income data, families with a household income below \$20,000 (about 15 per cent of the city’s population) can’t even afford to rent a bachelor suite (rent averaged \$371 per month for a bachelor unit in 2014). Ferris said with the tight rental market, and house prices continue to climb, creates housing insecurity for many.

“Maybe it’s not a housing problem. Maybe we have an income problem. If we take a real hard look at it, we have working poor in our community that work for \$13 to \$15 an hour and some of them are working two or three jobs. Sometimes, a husband and wife are doing that. And they’re not going to own a home. They’re raising kids. They’re kind of getting by.”

It seems the City of Winkler is trying to move away from the development of rental properties. Siemens said the city is trying to find ways to create affordable housing opportunities that see young people in the low-income bracket able to own their own home. Siemens said that’s what Winkler can do to create growth, and keep young people — especially those looking to

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move out of their parents home — in the community.

“Right now we’re stable pricewise, but we’re in a difficult place whereas in the last 10 years we’ve noticed that the dream of living at home until you decide to buy a house, that is gone now,” Siemens said.

“We’re at that price point where our salaries are no longer allowing them to step from mom and dad’s into a home-ownership position. So we are working aggressively with our community providers and try to make sure we keep different housing varieties and types available, so that maybe you have an opportunity to move into a condo or something that gets you into an ownership position. We believe very strongly that ownership can create a stronger community. People are less transient. People care more if they see there’s some ownership there.”

While Winkler is trying to keep and attract younger generations, Selkirk is hoping for an influx of baby boomers. Johannson said the city is already set up to cater to the aging population.

“We’ve got a \$130-million regional hospital, we’ve got Selkirk Mental Health Centre that’s been expanded, we’ve got the first QuickCare Clinic. We’ve got all the kinds of things that I’m using to sell to the biggest demographic out there and that’s the baby boomers. I’m asking them, move to Selkirk. We want to cater to young families, we want to cater to middle income, we want to cater to baby boomers.”

Johannson said the health infrastructure isn’t just enough to attract people, but that the city needed to offer good housing as well. He said it’s simple — welcome and create opportunities for developers.

“Developers came to our community and they built. They built condos, they built apartments,” he said. “One of the biggest things we did for those developers is,

instead of just building on a 50-foot lot or a bigger place on a 100-foot lot, we’ve let them build on 33-foot lots. I think it’s very needed in every community.”

For Dauphin, Mayor Irwin said housing means more than just a place to live.

“Some of the divide in communities are with those who can’t grow roots,” he said. “As community leaders we have to be discuss the idea that housing is fundamentally everything else in the community.”

The situation in these Manitoba municipalities mirrors the experience across Canada where homeownership is increasingly out of reach, which places pressure on the crowded rental market and crumbling affordable housing units. Municipalities have a limited number of policy tools available to incentivize needed housing, such as tax exemptions, streamlined approval processes, densification, alternative development standards and providing surplus land for affordable or social housing.

The Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association should be recognized for hosting these Manitoba Mayors to share local challenges and responses. These municipalities are not alone in ensuring decent housing for citizens; the province and federal governments’ policy tools need to work in tandem to enhance local housing provision.

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