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# FAST FACTS

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## A Rising Tide of Housing: St John’s, NL

**A**lthough the City of St. John’s, NL, has experienced a recent economic upswing, it has found that a rising tide does not lift all boats. More and more, vulnerable people in St. John’s are finding it difficult to access housing.

St. John’s is very similar to Winnipeg in some ways. Both have had high levels of poverty, and both were for a long time in a period of economic decline. Like Winnipeg, in the 1990s St. John’s lost many of its residents when they moved to other parts of Canada seeking work or opportunity. And, like Winnipeg, St. John’s fortunes have turned around in the last few years, its population is growing, and – the downside of its success – housing its residents has become a challenge.

I recently had the opportunity to travel to St. John’s for the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association’s annual conference. One of the sessions was entitled *A Rising Tide to Lift All Boats: Unprecedented prosperity, an affordable housing crunch and the making of a collaborative response in St. John’s*.

It discussed the work that St. John’s has undertaken to address its housing concerns. The speakers were Shannie Duff (Deputy Mayor, City of St. John’s); Marie Ryan (Co-Chair, St. John’s Community Advisory Committee on Homelessness and former city councillor); and Victoria Belbin (CEO, Canadian Homebuilders Association Newfoundland and Labrador). These three women all identified affordable housing as an important

concern for the economic and social well-being of St. John’s.

As a result of oil and mineral extraction, St. John’s economy is growing rapidly. Many Newfoundlanders have returned home from working away, and many other people have moved to St. John’s. Newfoundland and Labrador is now one of the ‘have’ provinces, but is finding that this prosperity brings its own challenges. Over the last decade, the affordability gap in St. John’s has widened, and there is a shortage of affordable housing, especially for those on the lower end of the income spectrum.

Currently in St. John’s, the vacancy rate is very low, at 1.3 per cent. Many people live in substandard housing – particularly in what Marie Ryan called “slum boarding houses” – and homelessness is a growing concern. Homeownership is increasingly outside the reach of many households, and rents are increasing as the pressure on the rental market grows.

To address its housing challenges, St. John’s has long taken advantage of the housing programs offered by the federal government. There are shelters that provide emergency housing for women and children, youth, and single adults. The City provides rental housing for lower-income households, including 168 rent geared to income units and 268 lower-end of market units (for working people who cannot afford median



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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rents). There is a Community Advisory Board that brings together community organizations to address housing issues, and the City is in the process of transitioning to a community entity model to manage housing and homelessness funds.

The key difference between St. John's and Winnipeg's approaches to addressing housing and homelessness lies in the cities' respective willingness to acknowledge and discuss the issue.

In St. John's, there are strong networks of advocates for affordable housing who push the City and the Province to do more to address housing and homelessness. Two of these outspoken advocates are Shannie Duff, the deputy mayor, and Marie Ryan, a former city councillor.

In fact, since 2004, the City has been actively working on housing issues. It has hosted two housing forums, and established the Affordable Housing Action Committee (now renamed the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Affordable Housing). This committee includes representatives from all levels of government as well as the non-profit and private sectors, has created a housing action plan, and has partnered with government and non-profit organizations to develop 45 new units of affordable housing in St. John's.

St. John's leadership extends beyond the city boundaries. At the 2010 Annual General Meeting of the Municipalities of Newfoundland and Labrador, the City of St. John's put forward a motion to:

- Affirm that housing stability is a foundation for a prosperous and vibrant municipality. Promoting housing stability contributes significantly and tangibly to local economic and social outcomes such as employment, education, health, social integration and community safety.
- Commit to develop a municipal policy and action plan to promote affordable housing in collaboration with the federal and provincial governments, and the community based and private sectors.

- To demonstrate leadership by taking concrete, collaborative local action – and collective action through Municipalities NL, in partnership with the NL Housing & Homelessness Network – to ensure adequate affordable housing for all.

This motion recognizes the challenges that municipalities across Newfoundland and Labrador are facing, and proposes some concrete steps that municipalities can take to address these challenges.

Here in Winnipeg, it is more difficult to be optimistic about our City's approach to housing.

Winnipeg's vacancy rate is low at 1.1 per cent and, as in St. John's, Winnipeg housing costs continue to rise. However, unlike in St. John's, our City Council continues to ignore our housing crisis, choosing to defer responsibility instead of showing leadership and working collaboratively with the provincial and federal governments. The Winnipeg Housing Steering Committee has only met once a year over the last four years. Most councillors choose to ignore core needs such a housing, preferring to focus on 'sexier' projects like waterparks and highways to developments that haven't yet been built.

Shannie Duff acknowledges the reality that municipalities don't have the money required to resolve the housing problem. However, she also recognizes that in Canada, the municipal level of government is closest to the people and therefore is well-placed to address their housing needs. St. John's is showing leadership by actively engaging in dialogue with its partners to seek solutions to the housing challenges that are ultimately a problem for all levels of government.

If only Winnipeg would do the same.

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