

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, March 7, 2013

Committee Room 1

Town of Windsor Affordable Housing Committee

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Mr. Jim Morton (Chairman)
Ms. Becky Kent (Vice-Chairman)
Mr. Sid Prest
Mr. Gary Burrill
Ms. Michele Raymond
Hon. Karen Casey
Ms. Kelly Regan
Mr. Keith Bain
Mr. Eddie Orrell

[Hon. Karen Casey was replaced by Ms. Diana Whalen.]
[Mr. Keith Bain was replaced by Mr. Chuck Porter.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Town of Windsor Affordable Housing Committee

Ms. Sharon Boomer,
Chair

Mr. Bill Butler,
Director of Planning and Development

Ms. Janet Redden,
Recording Secretary

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2013

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

2:00 P.M.

CHAIRMAN
Mr. Jim Morton

MR. CHAIRMAN: Welcome back. I think I'll call the committee back to order. Thank you for taking those few minutes to make the adjustment. We don't need to go through other introductions of committee members, but we are now moving into the second half of our meeting and I'm really pleased to welcome the Affordable Housing Committee from the Town of Windsor. If you'll perhaps introduce yourselves, then we'll take it from there.

[The committee witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think I would just like to mention for the purpose of everybody in the room that - I know you're not going to be using overhead slides, but I think all the committee members have your presentation in front of them.

MS. SHARON BOOMER: Thank you. I'm just going to go briefly through this so that you can ask any questions you want

The Town of Windsor Affordable Housing Committee was established by the town in June 2011 with a mandate to advise counsel and support initiatives for increasing the availability of affordable housing within the town. Our committee applauds the province concerning its initiative to establish an overall provincial housing strategy, which focuses on the issue of affordability. The following comments are provided for your consideration.

We agree that affordable housing needs to be integrated within existing communities rather than segregated as a separate and distinct type of housing. It will foster a greater sense of community. Some of the things we may be speaking about may sound like we're repeating the last presentation, but bear with us. Our committee has observed that negative public reaction - i.e. the NIMBY syndrome - seems to be much stronger concerning assisted housing projects, allowing younger families than those related to seniors. Increased public education measures aimed at combating what can only be termed as social prejudice is really necessary.

We support an increased focus on affordable home ownership. Owning one's own home continues to be regarded as the pinnacle of housing success for much of our population. We believe that the provincial government itself can provide leadership by seeking partnerships concerning the development of some of its own lands. For example, provincially-owned land now exists on College Road in Windsor, which we believe would provide an ideal pilot project.

Some of the development measures which might be considered to increase the affordability of home ownership are narrower streets combined with smaller lots and homes, the creation of granny flats to support multi-generational housing, the creation of small apartment units in a home which could be rented by an owner, and interest-free loans for the initial period of a mortgage, for example, three to five years.

We understand that the support and co-operation of the town to adjust some of its current development standards may be necessary. We would do all in our power to encourage this to happen.

The province has a leadership role to play in requiring that affordability be a consideration in all new housing developments and that municipal bylaws and regulations do not act as a deterrent to housing affordability. This is particularly true if the objective is to promote more mixed use developments.

The current statement of provincial interest concerning housing contained in the MGA encourages but does not require municipalities to adopt policies and regulations supportive of or not detrimental to housing affordability. An effective, province-wide commitment to housing affordability must be accompanied by legislative changes which mandate that specific development standards be followed in all municipalities and that existing impediments be removed. Ontario provides an example of where provincial legislation requires municipal adherence concerning the provision of affordable housing.

We believe that property tax incentives could encourage the development of more affordable housing projects. This could be accomplished either by giving municipalities increased authority to alter the tax rate for affordable housing projects or by regulating the assessed value of affordable housing projects, such that it increases gradually over a number of years rather than immediately upon project completion.

Meeting the demands for affordable housing within any community will rely on accurate and current data. We are very concerned that recent changes to information gathered through Census Canada will make it increasingly difficult for municipalities to maintain the necessary database to define housing needs. The province may have to play a larger role to ensure that such information is collected and made available to all municipal units.

The current approval process related to obtaining provincial funding under current affordable housing programs should be carefully reviewed with a view towards simplifying it as much as possible. We are now aware of situations where the complexity of this and cost of applying for this funding has been a deterrent, particularly to smaller developers.

In Windsor, when we did the original study, the key findings were that 30 per cent of households in Windsor have housing affordability challenges versus 25 per cent nationally and 22 per cent provincially. We're looking at that as the 30 per cent that you shouldn't pay more than that for your housing.

The other thing we looked at in that study was that the average income in Windsor is \$22,000 a year. We are very proud to tell you that we do have one that is ongoing, that we had a lot of work. The old Elms nursing home on King Street in Windsor could have become a really big white elephant, but the developers came to all the people of the town and asked what they thought should be done with it. They are currently, we hope, starting this Spring - they have 42 units for seniors and they're all affordable housing and they have received the funding from the province. So that doesn't get to be a big white elephant on King Street.

Then they have an option to do commercial on the bottom floor and then they have up to 58 units that they can and they have, they can talk to the town about building onto the building. So we have one that's already started.

We have other developers and that's why we talked about helping the small developers. We have other smaller developers who just can't get through the red tape and that tends to be a very big problem. We're here to take any questions that you might have.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. I think we'll start with Ms. Regan and then go to Mr. Porter.

MS. KELLY REGAN: It's interesting you mentioned the granny flats, et cetera. I have a friend who did a little development here in Halifax, over on Cornwallis Street. It looks like row houses but down below there's apartments so people can get into the housing market by renting out the apartment below. I think it has been a huge hit in that area.

I'm curious, just in terms of Windsor, did you find that you were getting - did you see the mirroring of that demographic trend that we heard about earlier, where you don't have the big families but you're seeing more single persons?

MS. BOOMER: We have a lot of homes in Windsor with one person in them - big old homes that could be duplexes or triplexes, and I think a lot of those people want to stay or can't afford to leave. There's some of that, too, but they could be changed. There is funding for that, but it's very difficult to get at. I think it all just has to be streamlined. We've talked about that a lot at committee too. We are coming after the housing members that came today. We were supposed to be here earlier and so a lot of the things that they were saying, we've talked about and we totally agree with.

MS. REGAN: The Windsor Elms project - I'm sorry, you may have said this . . .

MS. BOOMER: They moved the nursing home to Falmouth from Windsor. Premium Properties are the developers and they've built 42 affordable housing units for seniors.

MS. REGAN: So it is all seniors housing, it serves all seniors?

MS. BOOMER: Well, 42 of the units have to be seniors because of the agreement with the province, but up to 58 - they had 58 so they can put an additional 16 at market value and then they had the option of building onto the side of it with the town giving permission in the future. I am somewhat as concerned as you are about the 15-year. I said to these developers - I think Bill remembers this at a meeting - I said, so at the end of 15 years, are all these seniors kicked out - the rent goes sky-high and they all get kicked out? They said, oh no, but I think that's maybe something the province needs to look at. If you're lending somebody \$25,000 per unit, times 42 units, it's a lot of money and I think 15 years is too short a period.

MS. REGAN: I'm just concerned that 15 years goes by and then, bam, it's gone. So it's great to have developers helping us out but the problem is in 15 years, the piper gets paid.

MS. BOOMER: That is a concern.

MS. REGAN: Oh my God, I'm sounding like my father. (Laughter)

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: It's a pleasure to have you with us today in committee. It's always nice to have someone from home here. Just on a couple of notes, the College Road idea, yes, there's property out there. We've looked at that so many times for different things over the years. Even back in the day when I was on council, there was some talk -

what can we do out there? There has been interest. That's the other problem - there has been interest out there in doing some things and there always seems to be a roadblock, unfortunately, out there.

The tax idea - I don't know what the mayor would think of that.

MS. BOOMER: We already brought that up.

MR. PORTER: Although, I think it's a great idea - there's a way around that so it's thinking outside the box here and that's what we have to do to accomplish some of these tasks. That's a good one and the legislative one that you mentioned, as well, absolutely has to be addressed. Time has changed, things change; the legislation needs to be amended, and so on, over time. It's no different than the 15-year policy you were just referencing. Maybe that's not long enough. I think that developers would still be in the game even if it was 25 years. Those that want to be in it, I think they would be there. Premium, of course, we've had a lot of dealings with them.

The benefit that I see in the larger developer versus the smaller that we would like to see locally - they've got the people that can fight the red tape and go through, all the paper shuffling, that process, they have someone who actually does that all the time, versus maybe a smaller developer at home that just doesn't have the time to go through that or oftentimes the frustration that it takes to get through it.

That is a great project up there. We're looking forward to that opening. I don't know how many people have asked me, when can I get in? You are all aware, I'm sure, of the long waiting list that we have for seniors, especially. In some of our other places we do have mixed. There are younger people in some of them. I don't know what their actual percentage is right off, but there are a number of rules around all of that and I'm hopeful that we'll be able to accommodate the seniors plus maybe a few others that are in need as well - even if it's for short periods of time until we can figure something else out. But the need definitely exists.

A couple things on the strategy itself - and I know when you met and so on - I guess thinking about the folks who were here before you this afternoon, no time frame on something to be completed. Do you see it as that difficult? When we think about developing a strategy, is it really that difficult that it takes a year, two years, three years, whatever it might be?

MS. BOOMER: I think it takes time to get it right. I'm just happy that it's being done. That's the way I personally feel - probably to get it right. The public input was wonderful. We submitted something to the province, to the minister, and we had a member come to the Dartmouth one and represent us there. They were good processes, really good processes. So I think they have a handle on what people out there want, plus the discussions

around committees like this but I think it does take a while to get a policy right. I think I'd rather see it done right in the first place than done quickly.

MR. PORTER: One other question I had and just quickly is, any idea on what the wait for affordable housing is in town, in our area, what the numbers are?

MR. BILL BUTLER: No, not specific in terms of time frames. I know there's a number, there's certainly enough of a list that when the Elms property comes on-line sometime in the Spring, they'll have like 35 units. There's enough choice there, if you will, that the developer should have no trouble.

MR. PORTER: When they check with the Annapolis Valley Housing Authority, as well, to look at the numbers that are waiting and we have an interest - a lineup of people as well . . .

MR. BUTLER: Yes.

MR. PORTER: . . . that they probably aren't even aware of yet who are interested in the facility so I think it will be full almost on the day it opens.

MR. BUTLER: That's certainly our hope.

MR. PORTER: I don't think that's going to be much of a challenge.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I won't take a lot of time, I know there are others and I'm quite familiar with these folks, the strategy and what we're doing. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Porter. Ms. Kent.

MS. BECKY KENT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much for coming in. Number 4 on your list is particularly interesting to me because, of course, I was on Halifax council for three years prior to becoming an MLA. Can you just remind me now what your - I certainly know there is some ability for you to affect tax rates for affordable housing. What's in place now and what are you suggesting might be increased?

MR. BUTLER: Right now municipalities have no ability to provide any kind of a tax rate incentive for any developments. We're very limited in that regard. I guess there's a couple of ways we could do that, give municipalities the authority under provincial legislation for an affordable housing project. Our policy is we're going to give you a break on the tax rate if the municipality feels - that's one way to do it.

The second way is through the PVSC under the assessment. The way that works, once you're done you go to 100 per cent assessment so it's taxed at whatever that assessment is. The other way is deal with it on an assessment basis, so that if it is affordable

housing, maybe the assessment hits at 50 per cent and it goes up. Either way, the owner of the property is paying less municipal taxes.

MS. KENT: On the ability to offer a tax benefit, is that something that you have brought forward as a town, at the table with UNSM?

MR. BUTLER: Well, it's consistent with what has, in fact, been brought forward to the town's task force for downtowns. I made a note - that's one of the things that I know municipalities are looking for, with respect to their downtowns. They'd like some ability to perhaps provide a tax incentive to revitalize the downtowns.

If you ever drive through Windsor, it's not dissimilar to a lot of towns in this province; it has a lot of older buildings with two and three storeys. If you look at the second and third storeys in a lot of them, they're vacant. What is it going to take to get people to put some residential units above those buildings? Maybe it's a tax break, maybe it's some changes to the building code. They're doing nobody any good right now and I suspect our town is not unique in that regard.

MS. KENT: Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Kent. I don't have anyone else on my speakers list at this moment - oh, Ms. Whalen.

MS. DIANA WHALEN: The one question I would have, as you said, that some of the red tape is really onerous. I have certainly in years past talked to groups that said they had gotten all their ducks in order, thought they were ready to go on a housing project in their town, and it comes to nothing because they just hit brick walls. Is there one thing that you can point to that seems to be the - because red tape is sort of a general term, is there something that we could look at that could be changed that would just streamline it?

MS. BOOMER: What Premium Properties did that was so smart was they hired an architect. He became the person who dealt with the province. The smaller developers - we have a few of them. We had one in particular and he just couldn't spend the hours. He was spending until one or two o'clock in the morning on paperwork; it's the volume of paperwork. So we send them to Martha Dunnett to talk, before they even get started, so that she can walk them through it. But I think some of the red tape could just be eliminated.

The one on College Road, we have a very interested developer who would like to be involved with that. We have another - oh, the same developer, actually, who wants to build out in the county a bit. He's looking at an Alberta model where they are ownership, smaller houses that are ownership. So they're just sort of all sitting there but most of them are saying the red tape is just too onerous. We don't know what part of it, just that there's a lot of it.

MS. WHALEN: And a small-business person doesn't have the time to devote to that.

MS. BOOMER: The one small-business man, by the time he had spent so much money, we were saying to him, get a consultant, it's money well spent. We don't know if he has done that yet or not.

MS. WHALEN: It must require a review, then, to see how it could be streamlined.

MS. BOOMER: I think.

MS. WHALEN: Thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Whalen. Ms. Raymond - my list has grown again.

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: Only briefly, it's just like the housing money. Thank you very much, I'm sorry that I didn't hear most of your presentation although I read your notes earlier - very interesting because one certainly reads about a lot of other cities which are looking at the redevelopment of older downtowns and that re-densification.

My experience is more with HRM. I was interested in a couple of references. Obviously property taxes are something that there's a significant amount of discussion to be had with municipal councils about that, as I'm sure you know. I was very interested in your reference to the possible need for building codes but also to narrower streets. Now is there a precedent for that anywhere? I mean I'm assuming that you're talking about streets which are not necessarily designed - you're talking about a community which is not necessarily vehicle-based? What's the premise? I know that you'd save more land but what else is going on there?

MR. BUTLER: I think what we were talking about is - and I'm in the planning business and I know that 50-foot rights-of-way, engineers love them but there's maybe another way to do it. I think we were talking about looking at some of those standards, do you need a 50-foot right-of-way or can a 20-foot wide paved area do, with a 40-foot right-of-way? Can we look at our setbacks in terms of how the houses are actually built?

The developer who we did talk to seems very interested in proceeding. I think there's a market for the 3,000 square foot big house but I think there's also perhaps less, maybe you get less return if you are a builder but I think there's a market developing for these smaller ones and I think the development community is starting to see that.

MS. RAYMOND: Well, that's very interesting to me because I know I've had discussions with developers, particularly the example I give is that I grew up in a neighbourhood here in Halifax, just outside, with very narrow streets, winding streets, no

sidewalks, varied setbacks, houses of a variety of ways, they all sort of built up, they all developed hodgepodge over the years. It was a place that really was of no interest to anybody at all 50 years ago as a place to live and is very much sought after, not because they are 3,000 square foot houses but because they are interesting houses, there's room for imagination and the development of community and certainly one finds that people really do age in place.

I'm always interested in how much the physical environment actually affects the social cohesion and how much of that actually works well within the affordable model. You are not necessarily talking about a vehicle-less streets or anything. You're just talking about conceivably narrower streets.

MR. BUTLER: Yes, in Windsor, for a small town we do have an advantage, we do have a transit service that is available but a lot of small towns would not. I think any of you who represent rural areas - I don't think it's going to happen any time soon that people's reliance on a car is going to go away. So yes, just making everything a little more compact but the costs of development are less.

MS. RAYMOND: Land use, yes. One more quick one. You also mentioned some interest out in the county and I'm assuming Windsor has municipal services? Okay, so when you get out into the county you're in a non-serviced area, are you?

MS. BOOMER: Not always, not this particular area. It goes out a ways in both Falmouth and Three Mile Plains and this is a Three Mile Plains area, not far out of town.

MS. RAYMOND: So it's within the serviced area anyway. Very interesting. I was going to ask about sort of the cluster models of development and so on.

MS. BOOMER: Well they were quite interesting, they were 1,000 square foot, on a slab. They were talking about an Alberta model where you didn't have a down payment for five years but there was almost like a trust fund set up at the end of five years. They were giving you five years to save for that and then at five years it could be a second mortgage or you could pay your down-payment at that point. Hopefully that's what you'd do.

MS. RAYMOND: And when you say "they", is that the mortgager, the developer or is it government guarantee?

MS. BOOMER: The developer was willing to have this pot of money to help people get started.

MS. RAYMOND: Very interesting.

MS. BOOMER: And deal with the province also as being affordable units. He talked affordable between \$169,000 and \$189,000, and we talked him down and said that

on \$22,000 income a year that's not affordable. So then he said, \$139,000, and we were talking all different.

MS. RAYMOND: Very interesting. I'm not familiar with the Alberta model, but in that case, the developer - it's a mortgaged property, presumably, the developer has a mortgage on this. Now, is there any role - is there a government guarantee of this mortgage or anything or it's just private?

MS. BOOMER: Originally they weren't even looking. They weren't even considering subsidies of any kind, but he was willing to look at that. We sent him again to Martha Dunnett at the province to see what kind of money was available, what she would consider. He's doing another development in Falmouth at the moment. It's a high-end development and he's very interested in doing one in Three Mile Plains that is affordable for people.

MS. RAYMOND: Interesting. Thank you very much.

MS. BOOMER: We're very interested in the College Road because the province does own it and it sat there for years and years and we'd really like - and we have a developer who would like to talk about putting affordable housing in there.

MS. RAYMOND: Thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Do we have anybody else who would like to ask a question? I think I'm going to take a moment to ask one myself because I think we have time. You mentioned in your presentation that Ontario provides a provincial model of good legislation that maybe encourages municipalities in the right direction, but can you say a little bit more about how that model works? Is that something you're familiar enough with to do?

MS. BOOMER: My sister was physically disabled - and we're Ontarians by birth - and she lived in an apartment building in Guelph, Ontario that I think was 10 stories high and there were six units within and it had to be - every so many floors they had to have a unit that was for somebody who was being assisted by the provincial government and nobody knew who they were, and it's a great model. That's the one that I was speaking to. There were six units within that building and some of them needed medical attention; they also had an office for nurses in the building. It was a prerequisite to that developer getting the permits to build. Every building - I think it's every three floors - they have to provide one, and so he provided even more than that. He provided six units in that building. That was the model. That was back in the 1980s.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Are there any concluding comments that you would like to make?

MS. BOOMER: We'd just like to thank you very much for your time. We're so glad that we got here.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'm glad you got here, too. Thank you very much for your presentation. I would like to offer my apologies as chairman because I know we bumped you around a bit because of pressures of time and unexpected events. I'm really pleased you finally got here and thank you for the presentation and for the work that you're doing in your community.

We will take another brief recess, but I'd like to remind committee members there's some business to conclude before we end.

[2:28 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:33 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, I think we will reconvene. We have some more business to attend to and we have time to do it.

The next item on our agenda is correspondence. You'll recall that some time ago, in fact in September 2012, I received a letter on our behalf from Mr. Keith Bain, a member of the committee, writing to ask us to invite the procurement staff who work on the response to the RFP for addiction services in Cape Breton, or Talbot House, to appear before the committee.

In receiving that letter you'll recall that we had some discussion about that request. A motion was actually put forward by Ms. Kent that the request be deferred until the RFP had been awarded, so that we weren't somehow interfering with that procedure. At that point the motion indicated we would entertain the request.

We've brought this matter back to the committee as we intended to. Mr. Bain is not here today to speak to this but the idea was that we would return to that place at the appropriate time and I think that's where we are today.

I guess as a point of information, Talbot House at the end of that RFP process was awarded a contract to deliver addiction services related to addiction recovery from the facility that the board owns. There was a press release on February 6th - so about a month ago, a little bit more than a month ago now - indicating that work had been completed. I don't know if there's any further discussion that anybody would like to have about this matter.

Are there any comments? Ms. Regan.

MS. REGAN: I would actually like to know what happened with the whole thing because that hasn't really been explained to my satisfaction or, I suspect, to Mr. Bain's satisfaction but I can't answer for him. We don't know how it was that the executive director of Talbot House came to be smeared, basically, by the department.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So, Ms. Regan, you're suggesting that maybe it would be helpful to do some further analysis of that process, by inviting witnesses from the department?

MS. REGAN: Yes, I'd like to know what happened.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any other discussion? Mr. Burrill.

MR. BURRILL: I think I would say that the point Ms. Regan is speaking to is really not the point of the letter that came to us in September. It wasn't about that issue which really has to do with a controversy at Talbot House in a prior time; it was about the actual procurement process at the end of which we know now Talbot House was successful. I think our discussions late last year were really confined to the question that's brought up in Mr. Bain's letter.

I mean, Mr. Bain has kind of expressed himself here, on behalf of the Progressive Conservative caucus. I wonder if it's fair, Mr. Porter, to ask you, in light of the ultimate disposition of this, basically in favour of Talbot House, if your caucus is of the view that this would serve the same end that you had in mind in September, if your view would be the same now? Do you see what I mean?

MR. PORTER: I would say, I guess sort of twofold to that point, there are probably still some questions that we have but, more importantly, Keith is not here today. He should be here to address the letter, as is indicated, given that he is the member for Cape Breton where Talbot House is, it was specific to that issue - not that we all aren't following it and haven't continued to follow it but the members from Cape Breton, I would assume from all Parties, have expressed great interest in this Talbot House issue.

I would recommend today, Mr. Chairman, that the letter be moved to the next meeting of this committee when Mr. Bain is present, to discuss further along with that. I'll take it back to our caucus, Mr. Burrill, and just ask those questions and see whether or not it's something we wish to proceed with and perhaps he can indicate in the next meeting that it's something we'll proceed with as put forward and/or we're happy where things are.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Porter. Mr. Burrill.

MR. BURRILL: I would like to support this recommendation.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'm seeing nods in different parts of the room. Is that an acceptable plan, that we defer this to the next meeting in the hope that Mr. Bain will be here to participate in the discussion?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: All right, thank you. That's how we will proceed with this.

That leaves only information about our next meeting. We continue to have a list of witnesses that we are anticipating we will be meeting with. On April 9th we'll be meeting with the Elizabeth Fry Society. That meeting would be at 9:00 a.m. - at least we'll continue to meet, as we planned, while the House is in session. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, that next meeting would be at 9:00 a.m.

Is there any other business that I have neglected to identify? That being the case, thank you very much, I'll declare the meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 2:39 p.m.]