

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, May 3, 2022

Committee Room

Housing Options for Cape Breton

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)

John White (Vice Chair)

Danielle Barkhouse

Tom Taggart

Nolan Young

Fred Tilley

Lorelei Nicoll

Kendra Coombes

Suzy Hansen

[Lorelei Nicoll was replaced by Hon. Derek Mombourquette.]

In Attendance:

Kim Leadley
Legislative Committee Clerk

Karen Kinley
Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Cape Breton Island Housing Authority
Shawn Luker - Director

Cape Breton University
John Mayich - Director of Student Affairs
Kent MacIntyre - Special Projects Manager

Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Paul LaFleche - Deputy Minister
Stephen MacIsaac - Chief Executive Officer, Housing Authorities
Stephan Richard - Executive Director, Housing Solutions and Development
Tatiana Morren-Fraser - Executive Director, Housing Strategy and Transformation
Stephen Hines - Program Manager for Housing Services in the Eastern Region



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 3, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Melissa Sheehy-Richard

VICE CHAIR

John White

THE CHAIR: I'd like to call the meeting to order. Today is the Standing Committee on Community Services. I'm MLA Melissa Sheehy-Richard and I'll be chairing the meeting today.

Just a couple reminders before we get into things. Please keep your mask on except when you're speaking, and also wait for me to acknowledge you before you speak so that Legislative TV can get the mics on. I understand we'll be sharing Mr. Richard's mic in the corner there for the folks in the back.

As a reminder too, please put your phones and devices on silent, and we'll introduce beginning on my left - MLA White.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I will begin our witnesses with Mr. Mayich, please.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Maybe quickly for the record I'll just introduce Stephen MacIsaac, Chief Executive Officer, Housing Authorities. As well, we have Tatiana Morren-Fraser, Executive Director, Housing Strategy and Transformation, and Stephen Hines, Program Manager for Housing Services in the Eastern Region.

I'd also like to acknowledge Executive Counsel Ms. Kinley, and the clerk as well.

On today's agenda, as I said, we have the officials from Cape Breton Island Housing Authority, Cape Breton University, and the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to discuss housing options for Cape Breton. Welcome to all the witnesses for being here today. At this point, we can do presentations, and we will begin with opening remarks from Deputy Minister LaFleche.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Thank you for inviting us here today to speak with you about housing options for Cape Breton. I was introduced as Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and also Seniors and Long-term Care. I'd just like to reiterate the staff here today. Stephan Richard is Executive Director, Housing Solutions and Development, but really that's housing programs for the non-public housing component, in other words, people not in public housing: seniors who own their own houses, et cetera.

Stephen MacIsaac is the CEO of Housing Nova Scotia. He would be the person responsible for public housing. He is also the supervisor of Shawn Luker who's here, who's a director reporting through Ed Lake to Stephen. Shawn is also a witness for us as well as a witness for you, so I may toss questions to Shawn because he works for us. It's a bit confusing. I think it got confused in the invite.

Tatiana Morren-Fraser is an Executive Director, Transformation and Strategic Initiatives. She's basically the policy director for Housing who works on the programming, again, across both right now, public housing and non-public housing.

Stephen Hines is our program manager who reports to who? (Interruption) Who reports to you. Okay, we won't get into the chain. There are a lot of chains, we'll work on that, okay? The Auditor General may have some words to say about that on June 21st. We got what we got when we inherited it and we've got to fix it. So we have Stephen Hines, our program manager in the eastern region, which includes Cape Breton, and I spoke about Shawn.

Madam Chair, we know there's a housing crisis. It's impacting a lot of people across this province. Rents are increasing, although hopefully not more than the 2 per cent cap right now, and so is the cost of real estate. Of course, there are all sorts of other costs going up which involve essentials, as well as non-essential things that people buy. There's a number of factors driving this and unfortunately there's no one solution. We're working

with private and non-profit partners on a number of fronts in order to address Nova Scotia's diverse housing needs.

Last October, government released a comprehensive housing plan to increase housing supply and also support those experiencing homelessness, in partnership with my colleagues at Community Services. It announced \$35 million in investments for over 1,100 affordable housing units - including an additional 425 rent supplements. All the components of that \$35 million have not yet been announced because some are in negotiation with Ottawa or other areas, but all of it will be spent.

In the recent budget, government added another 550 additional rent supplements and these are available to provide flexible and affordable housing options to over 5,000 rent supplements in total every month that we have. That's about one-third of the total support, if you include that we have somewhere just under 12,000 public housing units - so about one-third of the total support would be rent supplements.

Rent supplements are an important part of our approach because they allow flexibility to people who need it, as well as public housing being an important part of our approach. They allow stability to those who would like stability. We can offer rent supplements anywhere across the province. They are very flexible, and we offer them to the people most in need, based on established criteria. They are available immediately and they help reduce the gap between market rent and what people can afford.

That's obviously only one piece of the puzzle. We are also working with private and non-profit partners to provide more affordable housing. We've worked with private partners to provide affordable units at 60 to 80 per cent of average market rent. In recent weeks, we've announced 20-year agreements for affordable housing units in Halifax, Lantz, Kentville, and Dartmouth and there are more under negotiation with the federal government which have not yet been announced.

We are also working with non-profit partners to provide more deeply affordable housing that's tailored to the needs of the communities they serve. Along with Community Services, we were successful in leveraging a lot of federal funding under the Rapid Housing Initiative, to meet the housing needs of our most vulnerable citizens. This includes an important project by the Cape Breton Housing Association.

Through the Community Housing Capacity Building Program we provided \$150,000 in seed funding to the Urban Neighbourhood Development Association, a non-profit organization that is working in profit with my partners here at CBU on a multi-phase development on the former Tartan Downs land.

As you know, that land was bought by CBU and we've met with them to talk about the possible affordable housing developments there and maybe even a development that Mr. Tilley in his former job would have liked to know about - but we'll leave that for a

later day, right guys? It's in the early stages - first they've got to build their campus. Without Fred Tilley there, I'm not sure it will be done quick enough. Right, Fred? Yes.

The development will have upwards of 430 residential units with 240 of them - that's over half - designated as affordable units. We are actively working to strengthen the non-profit community housing sector. We recognize that it is hard for non-profits to do the kind of basic, up-front planning and solicit the up-front capital required to create affordable housing.

That is a key point. It's not the situation you find in Ontario or B.C. or Alberta where the non-profit sector, because of the different markets - because they've experienced for 40 years what we've just started to experience in the last few years, they have a much stronger non-profit market. We want to develop that market. We believe in the profit sector, but we believe a mix is good in the non-profit sector, as well as the public sector. All of those are part of the solution. We must rent to the non-profit sector here, though, to allow it to compete.

We've offered capacity-building grants to non-profit groups across the province, including the Cape Breton Community Housing Association and New Dawn Enterprises. We're constantly in discussions with New Dawn on affordable housing.

We've created a \$2.5-million Community Housing Growth Fund to help organizations across the province plan for growth, build capacity, research, and come up with innovative new ideas. Funds will support the creation of a new provincial non-profit housing association, which will champion change and transformation in this emerging sector in Nova Scotia.

We also have our 3,308 public housing units in Cape Breton, so approximately 30 per cent of all the public housing in Nova Scotia is in Cape Breton for about 11 per cent of the population. That's not a criticism. It's just a fact, and there are probably very good reasons for it. But I wanted to emphasize that there's a lot of public housing in Cape Breton as a percentage of what we have. I know Shawn Luker will speak to that in detail.

We also provide assistance to low-income Nova Scotians in repairing their homes. We recently had a meeting - I think it was the economic committee? I've been to so many committees, it's blurring in my head. (Interruption) It was Public Accounts? Okay. Stephan Richard and I were there to talk about the home repair programs for seniors - very critical component.

We are always looking for ways to help support Nova Scotians. We're always looking for new ideas. On the weekend, you may have read an article in the popular media about the things that wouldn't be helpful in housing. Nowhere in the article did they mention what would be helpful. They just wanted to make sure we knew what wasn't going to be helpful. That's not a great approach, in my mind.

What we need to do is look at what's helpful. We need to have a multi-pronged approach. We need to hit all areas of the spectrum. There's no answer. No one size fits all. That's why we have a very diverse array of programming across the spectrum. We're approaching it from the public side, the community non-profit side, and the private side. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Now we have a presentation from Mr. Mayich.

JOHN MAYICH: Will you put the slides up, or do you want . . . (Interruption) Sorry, folks. If we don't have the slides, we can cover it.

THE CHAIR: We have the presentation on our screens, so I'll let you take it from here, Mr. Mayich.

JOHN MAYICH: We'll just have a quick discussion on some of the exciting developments that have been happening at Cape Breton University over the past probably five years. For those from Cape Breton offices, you'd understand the impact that the university has had in the community. For others, to just quickly discuss, we had a steady international enrolment growth between 2008 and 2017. Our markets were primarily China and then the Saudi Arabia cohort.

In 2018, we started to see extreme growth from India. We went from about 75 students to a little over 2,500 in a period of three years. COVID-19 has certainly had an impact on our enrolment the past two years. However, we expect a fully-enrolled campus of about 6,000 students this coming September, with a makeup of about 3,500 international students. If you think back to about 10 or 12 years ago, the entire campus was about 3,500 students. That international population has really changed the community.

It's also a very non-traditional demographic of student. They're coming at an older age. The average age of our students is 26. They're coming with families and seeking employment. They want to be connected into the communities. They're not looking for that residential campus experience, as many younger students would be.

It has required very innovative solutions for the university in connecting with the community. We've expanded our classes into the Cineplex location in downtown Sydney. We have a new office location just next door. We've made investments ourselves from the university in purchasing buses. Transit Cape Breton has grown exponentially. I think they had 25 buses and now they're up to 39 over a short period of time - 28 drivers to 50 drivers - so it's had a very positive impact and ripple effect.

There are also very many positive infrastructure projects occurring around the CBRM and across Cape Breton with hospital development, school development, sporting infrastructure, so it's a really exciting time. The NSCC campus, we just took a drive by

yesterday, that's coming along quite nicely. That's going to have a dramatic impact on the community as well.

[10:15 a.m.]

I'm going to hand it over to Kent MacIntyre now, the President of the Urban Neighbourhood Development Association, to talk a bit more about the excitement with Tartan Downs and what that development will look like.

KENT MACINTYRE: Tartan Downs essentially is a former horse racing track. It's 24 acres. It is in the Ashby area of central Sydney. It is surrounded by residential neighbourhood on three sides and a commercial entity on the - you can see on the top right hand of that diagram, there'd be liquor stores, grocery stores, restaurants on that commercial side. It's nicely located with lots of amenities around it, but it will essentially be a smaller neighbourhood within a larger neighbourhood.

We are a registered non-profit that's partnered with Cape Breton University, so it's the Urban Neighbourhood Development Association or for short UNDA. UNDA has secured seed funding from CMHC and from Housing Nova Scotia. That's \$150,000 from Housing Nova Scotia, \$100,000 from CMHC. For the last year and a half, those funds have been securing engineering services, architectural services, urban planning services to the point that we have just about completed the design. We're currently, and should be, finishing the cost analysis for the entire project either later this week or sooner.

It's a phased project over four or possibly five years. There will be 430 residential units, and as Mr. LaFleche has said, there will be 240 which will be affordable units. He is correct that the affordable units will be 60 to 80 per cent of the average median market rent. They'll be quite affordable for that local market.

The UNDA organization will manage the project, and eventually the lands will be transferred to UNDA and it will be managed, they will be staffed, because of the magnitude of the project. There will be a residential superintendent, maintenance people. When we have 430 units, they must be maintained and looked after. It's quite an investment.

The next slide will show you what the architects and the urban planners are essentially creating - a neighbourhood but using the theme of it being a former racetrack. You can see a network of streets. The orange is townhouses and stacked townhouses. The red buildings are apartment buildings, and the blue building is a community inclusion building. It will be a two-storey - we're going to do a public session in the next three to four weeks and get some ideas from the general public of what they would like to see in that building.

There's lots of green spacing, park spacing. You can see on the left-hand side, the green spacing is a little greener than on the right-hand side. That's because that lighter green spacing is elevated green spacing. There will be parking underneath. It's not

underground parking, it's elevated green spacing, which is quite unique. When we've shown some of the details to other groups, they were quite impressed with the idea that it really creates a unique neighbourhood setting, and it's not cookie-cutter, just a bunch of apartment buildings. We really are creating a workable neighbourhood.

The urban planners were very specific in their planning. They had done a fair amount of testing in other markets - that most tenants prefer to have a door on the street when it comes to these types of units, so having a magnitude of townhouses within a development will be quite significant.

Here's a rendering of the first phase. It will be townhouses and two apartment buildings. On the left-hand side, you see the green space with the orange loop of townhouses and the two apartment buildings, that is what that rendering shows you on the next page. That is Phase 1 and that will be 130 units in that space.

As I say, once we finish our cost analysis, we will be able to complete the applications for CMHC and finish off the meetings with Mr. LaFleche and his team. We anticipate starting in either late Fall or early Spring. It would be nice if we could start in the late Fall, but we'll see. By the time we get construction drawings and costing and materials, it may be early Spring but we're really pushing to try and have something started in the late Fall.

THE CHAIR: We have one final presentation in PowerPoint from the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority. Mr. Luker.

SHAWN LUKER: As previously stated, I'm Shawn Luker, Director of the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority. I'm just giving a public housing overview for my first set. We are a provincially-owned public housing agency. We're a not-for-profit and we are the property manager of the public housing portfolio in Cape Breton.

Eligibility for our programs is based on income and for anyone to live with us, their rent is based on income as well. We do a rent-to-income geared model for our public housing there. After applicants apply to us, our wait-list is chronological. We do have a priority access option as well, which would forego the chronological wait-list. It covers three categories. If you are escaping any type of violence or abuse; if you need to gain access to closer locations to hospitals for life-sustaining medical supports; or if you are living in an unsafe or risky housing environment, you could apply for priority access which would forego the chronological wait-list.

In Cape Breton alone, there are 57,515 households - 14,000-plus of those are renters, 42,000-plus are homeowners. Of CBRM households, 13.4 per cent are in core housing need - meaning you are basically paying 30 per cent-plus more. The CHMC's benchmark is 30 per cent for where you need to live, and core housing needs means you are exceeding those benchmarks. Out of the core housing needs, 32 per cent are renters and

6 per cent are homeowners. Our median household income is \$53,862. For homeowners, it's \$66,000, and for renters it's \$28,000.

Public housing units and tenants - we hold 13.6 per cent of the provincial population in Cape Breton, 984 of our buildings are public housing. We're 37 per cent of the provincial total for buildings and for public housing. As Deputy Minister LaFleche said, we have 3,308 units, which is 29 per cent of the provincial total of units. Out of that, we have 5,707 people living with us in public housing: 64 per cent of those are seniors, 31 per cent are families, and then 5 per cent are non-elderly singles. Non-elderly singles are just individuals who don't have dependents, who are under the age of 58. The average Cape Breton annual income is \$18,300 and average rent is \$459 a month.

What we do for renewal in public housing is focus on investment and preservation and renewal of our current portfolio. For instance, last year we had \$3.8 million invested to our renewal of our existing portfolio and that's 78 projects that it supports. In this upcoming year, we have \$7 million in capital investments to complete 56 projects. One of those projects that is significant is coming up on the next slide after here.

We have continued accessibility for the last three years. In 2019 to 2022 we've been investing \$2.15 million into accessibility, which impacted 27 units, made six of those barrier-free and 21 of those near accessible. This upcoming year we're starting a pilot for a green retrofit project, \$8 million over the next four years to upgrade 220-plus units. The majority of those are family units and that would cover almost half our portfolio there for a family.

The target here is to reduce our energy consumption by 50 per cent and operating and maintenance costs should reduce and our greenhouse gas should reduce with this project as well. It should help to create maintenance work jobs in our rural areas as well for upkeep. Our pilot will be assessed on implementation across the rest of the province. Once we start off in Cape Breton, it is going to be applied to the rest of the public housing in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: We will now move into questioning. We will do it in intervals of 20 minutes per caucus. We can begin with the Liberal caucus. Mr. Tilley.

FRED TILLEY: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our committee witnesses for a great presentation - it's very much appreciated. Those thoughts caused a couple of questions that I have.

The first question I have is probably for Deputy Minister LaFleche, around the housing grant for low-income housing to help seniors stay in their homes longer. What we found is that there is an income discrepancy within the province. If you live in the CBRM, the threshold is \$27,500, and if you live in Victoria, it is \$49,000, or somewhere along that.

In the Fall I asked a question around that, and the answer was that it was recognized and there was some work being done on it and it was an active file.

I was wondering if we have an update because right now many seniors are just over that, I think that limit is \$29,000, somewhere around there, \$27,000 or \$29,00, and they are just over that with just getting CPP and EI. If you have two in the family, they are just over. I'm wondering if there's an update on that program.

[10:30 a.m.]

PAUL LAFLECHE: If Kim Langille were here, she would tell you I am the most badly behaved, in terms of microphone decorum that you'll ever see.

I'm going to start speaking to that and then I'll hand it over to Stephan. We have recognized those issues - Minister Lohr recognized them early on when he came in; he was quite surprised that these things existed. The biggest thing he was most concerned about immediately was what are called intra-county issues - where the counties actually had different sides of the street that had a different thing. One side of the street was tens of thousands different from the other side of the street, with identical-looking housing.

We've moved to solve those first. We can solve those in some provincial areas on our own, and Stephan will get into the details. There are some programs that are joint with the federal government which would require federal agreement amendments and those take time. The federal government has been occupied with other things until very recently, but I'm sure they'll get to it. There's no philosophical problem with these changes, but it takes a while. Stephan, why don't you take over there?

STEPHAN RICHARD: Just to provide a little more information right now in terms of household income limits: for a one bedroom in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, it would be \$28,500; for a two bedroom, it would be \$35,500; and for a three bedroom, it would be \$48,000.

As the deputy minister mentioned, our CMHC partners are critical when it comes to establishing household income limits for the purpose of the eligibility of our programs. We're just watching for new household income limits for 2022. This will be reviewed at the time, but I'd like to point out that in 2021, CMHC provided household income limits that were less than the previous year, 2020. So for 2021, for a three bedroom, CMHC provided an income limit of \$41,000 for CBRM.

As a program policy, what we decided to do is - we have the ability to maintain the previous higher income limit. That is one way that we were able to help. Otherwise, that income limit would have been reduced in 2021. We're waiting for the new household income limits for CMHC for 2022.

The other piece of information that I would mention is that the Island - Cape Breton is divided into two hills. What I mentioned was for CBRM, and then for the rest of Cape Breton, rural area income limits would apply. The household income limits for rural areas: for a one bedroom, it would be set at \$47,500; for a two bedroom, it would be \$54,500; and a three bedroom would be \$64,000.

Again, this is something that we're reviewing right now. Over the years, CMHC establish household income limits through a combination of formulas, and then the Province adopts them. That's something that we're looking at for 2022.

FRED TILLEY: Great. Thank you for that answer. That is the big concern that we hear, especially in CBRM. It's technically an urban area, but a lot of the incomes - there's a lot of poverty in CBRM. The exact situation that Deputy Minister LaFleche talked about - if you look out around Groves Point, right where the county line ends and the new picks up, basically it's opposite sides of a bridge where those income levels are different. It's very difficult for people to understand. I'm glad to hear that we're working on that.

Just before I hand it over to my partner here, just a quick question maybe for Mr. Luker. I think the biggest thing I see in my office is housing and I have to commend your team - they have been amazing. As a new MLA with a new CA, to work through the cases that we get on a daily basis, the coordination back and forth has just been awesome. I appreciate that very much.

We have 3,300 units and I know that's a significant percentage of the provincial number, as the deputy minister said. Given the fact that in CBRM, over 30 per cent of families are in poverty, I think that 30 per cent number kind of jibes there for us.

From a staffing level, are we able to turn around vacant units quickly? Is there a large vacancy piece? Is there a way that somehow we could get more staff in there to help turn those over quicker, to get those units flipped faster?

SHAWN LUKER: Our turnaround times are variable. Some are served by our own staff, and then some are served by contractors. Sometimes the turnaround is defined by the amount of damage that would be in our units as well. If the damage is extremely significant, which can happen, it does take a longer time to turn around because we'd have to go to contractor base. The majority of the time, our contractor base that does unit turnarounds for public housing is limited in CBRM, so our timelines do get inconsistent when it goes to that level.

We have staffed up over the last three years. I hired a team of 12 staff to do a turnaround exercise because historically, I saw the same type of inconsistency as well. We addressed that with doing a project on hiring 12 people to do turnarounds. That was successful and did increase our turnaround abilities.

To answer your question on our vacancy rate, our vacancy rate is typically - for the ones that aren't under project - around 2 per cent or under is consistent.

Aside from that though, we have been yearly looking at our turnaround rates, and working with contractors to come up with more accountability on timelines too. That's a work in progress consistently.

THE CHAIR: I believe it will be Mr. Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: We do 20 minutes each. I'm just trying to get a sense.

THE CHAIR: Twenty minutes per caucus. Good try. (Laughter)

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I could go 20 minutes if you really wanted me to. I was asking multiple questions last meeting. I already got in trouble.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here. To the folks from Cape Breton, I think I have a personal story about all of you. Mr. Mayich and I went to school together. We'll keep some of that out of the records of government. I played street hockey in front of Kent MacIntyre's house as a kid.

Listen, Shawn and all the staff, and Steve and all the staff at Island Housing, I'll be seven years in this in July - and hundreds of calls that come through the office. You and your staff have responded quickly and professionally and helped a lot of families. So it's always great to have the opportunity when you're up here. Some of the folks from Halifax are here to hear the compliments coming from the people who are actually on the ground doing this, so you guys are doing a great job.

Deputy minister, good to see you. I always say you're best when you're off-script, so it's great to see you. I appreciate the opportunity. Again, Mr. Richard, thank you so much.

I guess my first question is around the CBU project. CBU, that's very exciting. What's happening at CBU is absolutely amazing. I always say when I was a student there, there were 50 international students, and now there's 3,500. That tells you the impact, and how excited we were at the time to have 80 international students. We had 80 come in. We had a cohort of 30, we couldn't believe it, and now there are 3,500. It's truly transformed the community.

I am really looking forward to the community consultation, because I believe you should have a conversation with Chester Borden about youth programming in that new development as well. He wants to expand. I look forward to that.

For the international students who are in the community now, some come into our office and they're looking at options and stuff. You may have talked a bit about it in the presentation. What are you looking at with the breakdown for students, for the community at large, and the portion of them who would be considered under Cape Breton Island Housing Authority, that threshold? Do you have that breakdown for us right now?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Mayich or Mr. MacIntyre? Mr. Mayich.

JOHN MAYICH: I'll try to address that. The income threshold, is that what you're referring to?

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Yes.

JOHN MAYICH: The students who arrive with us, the first year they have to have a guaranteed income provided, and they have to pay their tuition up front. But come into Year 2, Year 3, Year 4, et cetera, they're on their own, so a lot of them are out trying to earn. They're working, they're trying to sustain themselves with employment. They may have money from family for the tuition, but then the living allowances, et cetera, they'd be responsible for that.

I don't believe that we have students currently residing within the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority, because they're a temporary resident - they're not a full-time continuing resident. With this new project, we do expect it is going to a mixed development. There's going to be affordable housing, there's going to be market units, but we do expect that there will be a large number of students take up the ability to live in a three-bedroom apartment or a two-bedroom apartment.

I'll just mention our residences. We do have on-campus residences. We have 424 beds available. We were at a little over 90 per cent capacity pre-COVID-19. We're anticipating that will go back to that level. But with the difference that we're seeing with that older demographic of student wanting to be closer connected in the community for employment opportunities and the family issues as well - they're bringing spouses, they're bringing children.

Our end hope - and I think for everybody in the province - is that they'll stay. Perhaps it's through the Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP) or they'll find other opportunities. We want them to stay in Nova Scotia. It's nice to see them coming to Halifax. We do have a lot of students who would move to Halifax post-graduation but again, we want them in the municipality, we want them in Cape Breton as well.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you for that. I think the project is really exciting. For folks who are familiar with that, that's the largest neighbourhood in the Sydney area, Ashby. There's a lot of history on that property, but to have a piece of land of that magnitude right in the middle of a neighbourhood is pretty significant. I hope it all

works out because it would be great for the greater Sydney area but great for the community as well. As you said, there's so much developing going on at home right now and there are so many people to work that this would just be another project to add to the success story.

The momentum that CBRM is seeing really since the amalgamation - we're dealing with growth for the first time in 25 years, so it's great to see.

I'll shift over to Mr. Luker. I'll start with the rent supplement. My question is: How many rent supplements do we have in the community that you have access to on the Island and are they all being used at this point?

SHAWN LUKER: I'd like to defer to Mr. Stephan Richard because he is in charge of the rent supplement program.

STEPHAN RICHARD: That's quite alright, housing is a confusing world. At the moment, we do have just north of 604 rent supplements available to households under the Cape Breton Island district, for lack of a better term. Three hundred of those are portable, which means that the benefit is paid monthly, directly to the household and the others would be - 245 would be non-portable.

We also have homeowners who can benefit from a rent supplement program. They have to be in severe housing need, which is 50 per cent of income paid or going towards housing costs. We have 52 homeowners who are benefiting from rent supplements in Cape Breton.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: We all receive calls, as MLAs, in the offices and at home about folks who are looking to apply to get into a unit. You gave some statistics around how many units are in Cape Breton and the percentage as per the province. What kind of wait-lists are you looking at now on the Island?

SHAWN LUKER: Our current wait-list is around the 820 range. When I started four years ago, it was approximately 860. It fluctuates month to month, but 800 is the number I've seen consistently, without much growth.

THE CHAIR: You have until 10:47 a.m.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: My final question, before I leave a few seconds for my colleague, Fred Tilley - there's been a lot of talk around Halifax infrastructure, which is necessary, absolutely. We're seeing the pressures all over the province, particularly here in the capital. It's very significant. But I would also argue that it's significant in the CBRM, which is the second largest municipality in the province. With growth, which is great, we are seeing the pressures.

My question is: As you are looking at all of the infrastructure work and the new builds that are happening in Halifax, is the government and the province looking at new builds in infrastructure? I know we're looking at projects like the one at CBU, but in public housing itself, are you also looking at new infrastructure for the CBRM?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I didn't quite understand. Is that just for public housing or overall?

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Public housing.

[10:45 a.m.]

PAUL LAFLECHE: At this point in time, we haven't made any decisions on new growth in public housing anywhere; we're kind of new to it. We're trying to absorb the recommendations of the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission. Recommendation No. 1 was on setting up a stand-alone Crown corporation.

You may know that I sent a note to staff maybe two or three weeks ago, indicating that there had been some approval in government to go ahead with that. That requires new legislation. Until we do that, which would probably be in the Fall - the minister will have more to say about that with the timing, et cetera, and what it is - we're probably not in a position to comment on whether we would have new public housing anywhere right now.

We haven't had new public housing outside of seniors' housing, ever, since we've inherited the units from the federal government. We have had in seniors' housing - and there may be some non-seniors in seniors' housing because of the demand nature - but generally we haven't had any. It's a big decision which government will have to reflect on and we'll get to that shortly.

FRED TILLEY: I guess with the one minute we have left on this one, my question will be on that wait-list. What's the average? We have approximately anywhere between 800 and 850 in a given month - what would the average wait time be for that list? I know that's going to vary whether it's a three-bedroom or a two-bedroom, but just kind of on an average.

SHAWN LUKER: The average wait time for public housing in Cape Breton is two and a half years.

FRED TILLEY: Just a quick follow-up on that. How would that compare to other regions of the province?

SHAWN LUKER: We're about six months longer on average, compared to the province.

FRED TILLEY: I've got two seconds. I'll pass it over to our colleagues at the NDP.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you and hello. I'm going to pick up on the wait-list. Do we keep track - particularly in Cape Breton - of how many people have applied for housing but were turned down, whether it was because they didn't meet the threshold income levels or for other reasons? My reason for asking this question is because I have a deep concern over people who are now unable to afford to live in their homes and are now seeking public housing.

SHAWN LUKER: Right now we turn down about 18.3 per cent - turn down on offer of housing - compared to 11.8 per cent provincially.

KENDRA COOMBES: Wow, okay. I'm happy that we're keeping track of that. I hope we're keeping track of the income levels because I think it's very important if we're going to be looking at our income level thresholds.

My other question is something I believe you also touched on: priority housing for abuse - particularly if violence was used. How are you defining abuse? Is it defined by physical or are we also defining it now as psychological and mental abuse?

SHAWN LUKER: When we look at priority access for applicants escaping domestic violence or abuse, we usually rely on the social worker or their caseworker that they are working with or if they are dealing with something like a halfway house or a shelter or any sort.

We usually rely on the advocacy of the groups that they're working with to define what abuse they are going through because that's what they usually supply with their application for the board to review. If they do qualify that as abuse and that they would be better suited under our programs, that would be going towards our boards for a decision.

KENDRA COOMBES: To switch it up a little bit, the presentation to the CBRM Council by Dr. Catherine Leviten-Reid talks about the importance of the non-profit sector in addressing the need for affordable housing. Dr. Leviten-Reid says non-profit providers charge lower rents, make investments in community spaces, and engage community members in planning.

I'm guessing my question is going to be to the deputy minister. Why has there been little emphasis on the non-profit or non-market housing in the provincial government's plan?

PAUL LAFLECHE: First of all, I'm not sure I would agree with all the suppositions of the professor, but letting that aside, I think that is not true that there has not been an

emphasis. The emphasis has been growing in that sector and we've been working in collaboration with the federal government in growing that sector. In fact, the announcements in the last two weeks have been specifically for that sector.

We acknowledge that we haven't had this degree of housing price increase or rental pressure probably since I moved here in 1994. Maybe some of you can remember that in your youth, I don't know, but I don't remember it since '94. We didn't develop the type of non-profit sector they would have developed in other major cities that I've lived in within Canada - Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal. They have a very well-developed and mature non-profit sector.

We haven't had that stimulus to develop that sector until very recently, until the last five years. We're at the point where we've got to develop the sector; we've got to help it grow. We've got to make sure it has access to financial capacity. It has to have planning capacity. I think Mr. Richard's programs that he has developed in concert with the federal government attacked that directly. I would disagree that we don't have that in our plan. In fact, one of the foundations - the three-legged stools - of our plan is the non-profit sector, to go out and make it strong. Maybe I'll pass it over to Stephan to describe the individual elements.

STEPHAN RICHARD: If we look at the action plan under the bilateral agreement with the federal government under the National Housing Strategy, there's a clear commitment by government to support and ensure sustainability of the community housing sector.

Just a few weeks ago - I'd like to point out that we announced almost \$1 million in grants to community housing organizations under the Community Housing Capacity Building Program. Five organizations in Cape Breton were recipients of funding. There was the Strait Area Housing Development Society, the Cape Breton Community Housing Association, New Dawn was one recipient, Joe Macisaac Housing Co-Op, and of course Mr. MacIntyre's group, to help develop housing.

It is a critical aspect of our plan and our strategy moving forward as the deputy minister mentioned.

KENDRA COOMBES: I respectfully will disagree, considering that affordable housing is defined by 30 per cent of the rent. There is no public housing in the plan to be built. As well, much of the discussion from the government side in the Legislature had been about making it easier for private developments occurring. I do respectfully disagree on that.

Dr. Leviten-Reid - I think she's above reproach. She is very much respected, I'm sure, in the CBU community for her work. I know I've worked with her. Dr. Leviten-Reid also talks about the importance of affordable housing being located near services, being

part of neighbourhoods, being targeted to the needs of particular groups, and being truly affordable.

My question is: How are these factors being considered in the housing being built, particularly with money from the Province? Considering many of the issues I've heard in Cape Breton, particularly from CBRM to Richmond and Inverness, is that a lot of the housing is not next to what we always refer to as the three Fs: fuel, food, and pharmacy, with a "ph."

My question is: Are these factors being considered when these housing developments are being built by the Province?

STEPHAN RICHARD: Those are all critical elements. Obviously when we make investments to support, whether it's a private developer or community housing development group, we look for amenities, we look to access to transportation, we look to sustainability and viability of the project - really critical. Those are all important factors.

Now we also know that in some communities there's a housing need but they may not have access to transportation, so it's a need and then it's transportation - which comes first. In those cases we would work with the developer but also other community partners, to ensure that the project not only meets the housing needs of the households that will benefit from the housing but that there's also access to the fuel and the services, whether it is school or other amenities in the community.

KENDRA COOMBES: In March, 20 people in my riding of Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier were suddenly evicted from their New Waterford apartments. The building had to be vacated for multiple code violations. What role is the government playing in making sure affordable rentals are safe and properly maintained, especially when the rent supplements are being used, which is government money, as well as any other government money that is being used to help with these rents?

STEPHAN RICHARD: There are various ways we can support but primarily through a program called Rental RRAP and it's very difficult for a French guy to pronounce the full program name - Rental Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program. This is a program that provides forgivable loans to landlords to make sure that that typically naturally occurring affordable housing is maintained and is safe for the longest term.

There's a term of affordability that we require in return for ensuring that those units are safe. In the case of emergency situations, our colleagues at the Department of Community Services would work with tenants who all of a sudden find themselves maybe without shelter. The Canadian Red Cross would be involved. From a program side, this is typically how we bring support, through our rental assistance program.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, the folks at the Department of Community Services and Housing First were phenomenal in that situation and I had the unfortunate but pleasurable experience of working with them.

Before you provide a rent supplement or any other assistance, no one goes in to ensure that housing is actually up to code and doesn't have these types of violations - before you provide that money to the landlords?

STEPHAN RICHARD: Maybe I'll ask Stephen Hines to take this one.

[11:00 a.m.]

STEPHEN HINES: As far as inspections on the Rental RRAP which Stephan referred to, we do inspections on those and yes, we address every major issue, especially around fire safety, accessibility, structural, plumbing, heating, electrical. The big thing for us is to be able to get in and actually do the inspections.

You asked, I believe, about the rent supplement program and if those units are inspected - I would have to defer that to Stephan. I can tell you that it was part of the original social housing agreement but again, the program has grown since then.

The other thing we do is when we do Rental RRAP renovations we provide bid sheets and specs, based on current code. We do inspections when the work has been completed and funding is requested, and we ensure when it is done at the end it is all good. The hard part is that if you don't have a landlord who applies, then you can't provide that assistance and sometimes that happens.

KENDRA COOMBES: In 2016, the CBRM's Affordable Housing and Homelessness Working Group - and I will admit right now that I was a part of that - identified 137 people experiencing homelessness in Cape Breton Regional Municipality. By 2018, the number had more than doubled to 278.

During the first wave of the pandemic, the Province agreed to pay 50 per cent of the cost for handwashing stations and portable toilets and laundry facilities for people experiencing homelessness in CBRM. I'm wondering if Deputy Minister LaFleche can answer this question: Have these supports continued to be funded by the Province?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Deputy Minister Taweel can certainly answer those questions. She is away this week. She wasn't invited. But I can ask ADM Graves, maybe, to give you a call. That is really in their wheelhouse. They track all the numbers of the homeless and they do the wraparound supports. Our job is to work on the building side of it.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche, perhaps you can send that to the clerk and we can distribute it to the committee.

PAUL LAFLECHE: The name?

KENDRA COOMBES: The name, yes.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Okay. Sandy Graves. She'll be very happy that she's been on TV.

KENDRA COOMBES: Sandy and I have had a few conversations, as did a few others in the Department of Community Services. I find it extremely concerning and strange that we have a department for housing and it doesn't deal with homelessness. I find that very concerning, considering that what most people are looking for, who are homeless, are homes. I just find that very deeply concerning that the departments do not coincide with each other.

I have one other question before I hand it over. According to Statistics Canada, in 2016 there were 50,000 families in Nova Scotia in core housing need. The same stats show that there were 5,460 households in Cape Breton in core housing need. Most of these were people who rent, which would be 3,575. Core housing need is defined, as I have said before, as spending 30 per cent or more of your income each month on housing and utilities.

Again, for anyone who wants to answer this: How important has the rent cap been in keeping people housed in Cape Breton? I know from speaking with people that rents are so high, some of them are finding it very unmanageable. I'm just wondering about how important the rent cap has been.

PAUL LAFLECHE: We'll probably tell you in 20 years when some academic has done a study on it. Frankly, we're so early into the rent cap that we could not really answer that question to any degree of certitude.

I'm not sure where the question was really going, but the 2 per cent rent cap ensures that landlords cannot increase the rent more than 2 per cent. We could look at other jurisdictions and see what rent caps have done there, but I cannot answer in Cape Breton what it has done in the short time it has been in effect.

KENDRA COOMBES: Before I hand off to my colleague, I'll just say that you just said in your opening statements, though: Hopefully not with regards to the rent increase - hopefully not more than 2 per cent - of the 2 per cent cap.

With that, I'm going to hand it over to my colleague for Halifax Needham.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen, you have until 11:07.

SUZY HANSEN: I just want to mention that one of the issues we've been seeing across this province is small affordable rental buildings being sold and the new owners doing minor renovations and jacking up the rents.

An option we think the Province should look at - and we talked about this in the House - is having the first right to purchase properties like that when they come up on the market. The government could then work with non-profits and other community groups to manage the housing project. We've seen hotels for sale turned into housing. We know about the project in Dartmouth that's working with the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, creating 65 housing units for those who likely are facing homelessness.

My question is: How are vacant properties in Cape Breton being used to increase affordable housing options?

STEPHAN RICHARD: It would be hard to provide a general answer as to how the vacant buildings in Cape Breton are being used. I can tell you that as a follow-up on the conversation on the community housing sector, this is an area we are really interested in - working closely with our community partners to find those opportunities, to make sure that when a property goes up for sale that a community housing group can be involved and can purchase that property, and therefore maintain affordability for a longer period of time.

We're looking at different options. I know that access to financing is a key barrier for community groups at the moment. They are struggling more than the private sector to access financing, so we're looking at different options on that front.

We're also working very closely with the Community Housing Transformation Centre, which is a national organization. Recently, they've been involved with the Housing Investment Corporation to look at supporting organizations across Canada that need access to financing. We're aware that these opportunities are there.

Many smaller landlords in the province and in Cape Breton are ready to call it quits and put their buildings up for sale so we're looking at ways we can actually help grow our community housing sector and make sure that there are opportunities to acquire these buildings.

SUZY HANSEN: With my one minute left - we were just talking about the rent cap - maybe this is just an open question. We know that the renoviction ban was removed on March 21st and renovictions have been used to get rid of tenants so that landlords can charge a high rent to the next tenant.

My question to anyone is: Have any of you seen any increase in the number of people who are unhoused since the government ended the renoviction ban?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Again, that's a very short period of time. It would be hard to know. My colleague, Sandy Graves, would be the one we would direct you to ask that of because they take care of the homeless file. They have the supports to deal with homelessness. They have all the programs to deal with the other things, other than just a physical building that the homeless need. They need a lot more than just being put in a home, in many cases. The Department of Community Services is the appropriate department to deal with homelessness. We work very closely with them . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the NDP has ended. We will move to the Progressive Conservative caucus and begin with MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: My question is to Deputy Minister LaFleche. The housing crisis is happening on a global scale, it's not just Nova Scotia. It didn't happen overnight, and we know it can't be solved quickly.

The Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission noted in the 2021 report that there was a significant shortage of adequate, attainable housing to meet the needs of Nova Scotians, which disproportionately affects individuals who live on low incomes. What is being done to address the need for attainable housing in Cape Breton?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I probably should best let Stephan answer that, but first acknowledging that the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission did a great service by pointing out their recommendations - 17 in total. We are working through all of them and implementing them. Some of them have already been implemented.

Some are what - people want to see a box ticked and they want to say it's done. Some of them will never be done because they are ongoing recommendations - you work on them forever. The box-ticking is actually the fact that you are working on it, and you are making progress towards a goal. That's one where we're always going to be working on that, we'll always be watching that.

Non-affordability in the rental market in particular, and in the single-family housing market, is relatively new in Nova Scotia for most of the population. There's always been some that the population considered non-affordable, but for the vast majority of the population, relative to other regions of this country, Canada, it's a relatively new phenomenon. It's something we haven't dealt with. They have dealt with it in other areas and it's something that we've got to quickly deal with now. It has come on very quickly. If we achieve our goals that the government has to double our population by 2050, that will be an incredible pressure if you think of how many units we have to build a year. And we have to make them affordable in an era of rising building costs, rising construction costs, worker non-availability - we have to get more workers into the workforce. All those things will contribute to rising prices, so how do we keep a cap on the affordability of units we build?

This presentation we had earlier on Tartan Downs - those types of projects are exactly where we need to go in Cape Breton. With that maybe I'll turn it over to Stephan and allow him to talk about some of the specific programming that we have with our partners in Ottawa that we think will allow us to keep either the construction of new, single-family homes affordable or the construction of rental units affordable.

STEPHAN RICHARD: First I'd like to just point out that housing, as you probably all know, is very complex and the needs of Nova Scotians are also diverse, which is why we're working on a broad range of solutions. For some people, getting a monthly benefit through a rent supplement is all they need. For others public housing is the best option.

What we're seeing over the last few years is increased demand. Supply is not keeping pace, so we need to accelerate. We're happy to see an increase in this budget to support more development of affordable housing. We're soon going to make some announcements on provincially-owned land that will unlock a lot of parcels across the province, so that developers in the community housing sector can take advantage of that and build housing that is affordable.

In 2022, we've invested or committed nearly \$35 million to create just north of 700 new, affordable housing units and 425 rent supplements. We're planning to invest and create 550 new rent supplements this fiscal year alone. We're seeing a broad range of needs and we have a broad range of solutions as well to help Nova Scotians.

PAUL LAFLECHE: If I can continue down that road - Stephan mentioned the government land for housing initiative. The minister's alluded to the fact that we have a number of properties coming forward initially. I think we have 100,000 properties in government so we've got to comb through them and look at them and see which ones are serviced, which ones are in urban areas in demand. That's an incredible lever that we can do because we can basically say to someone, you can have the land for whatever, at a discount, if you create affordable housing.

The good thing is that since the government announced that they were going that way, the municipalities are coming to us and saying that we'd like to do that. Right now, as you know - I believe you were a municipal councillor, as was Mr. Taggart as was Mr. Mombourquette. We're lining up the municipal councillors. (Laughter)

As you would know, you cannot sell at a discounted value so you cannot create that arrangement where you could negotiate that, so we're looking very much at where we can go and allow municipalities to do that because they also have land and they would like to do that. We're doing whatever we can to lever, not only in terms of cash dollars but in terms of maybe land and other things, that possibility.

My colleague here, CEO MacIsaac, is a person who has been working on that for almost a decade in government now - first at Nova Scotia Lands and now with public

housing. He is a firm believer, he has identified the properties. We pushed some out, we're going to have some more announcements from the minister very shortly. That's one of the great ways we can do it.

[11:15 a.m.]

NOLAN YOUNG: I have one more and then I'll pass it to my colleague MLA White. I'll say that as a former councillor, it's something that I was pushing back multiple years ago and I think we owned a significant amount of properties for a small area, so it's exciting news.

Rural communities have different challenges when it comes to accessing attainable housing and assisting the homeless. The Affordable Housing Commission attributes this challenge to lower incomes, diverse and changing populations, and the conversion of permanent rental housing to short-term rental accommodations, like Airbnb. What work is under way to address homelessness in Cape Breton?

STEPHAN RICHARD: While we already mentioned that homelessness is under the purview of our colleagues at the Department of Community Services, I'd just like to mention that we, on the housing side, do provide some financial assistance for shelters, through a program called Shelter Enhancement Program. When shelters for women, children and youth, for example, are experiencing family violence, second-stage housing organizations, for example, are eligible to receive some funding.

Over the last five years, we've invested in some Cape Breton organizations to receive assistance under the Shelter Enhancement Program. For the rest, when we're talking about homelessness in general, as Deputy Minister LaFleche mentioned, we work very closely with the Department of Community Services. We're mostly responsible for the bricks and mortar, and they are mainly responsible for support services.

THE CHAIR: I'll move on to MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: I believe my questions are for Mr. Luker because they are really focused on Cape Breton Island housing. With a two and a half year waiting list for people to get a property, why does it take so long for properties to turn over for people who, say, the family condition size has changed or their health condition has changed, to move them into a different unit so that it makes a bigger unit available for a family? Why does it take so long?

SHAWN LUKER: Could I get some clarification on specifically what takes so long? Your question is addressing the wait-list to get into housing to be housed with us, but you might be discussing a transfer option? I just want to clarify what I am addressing.

JOHN WHITE: It is a transfer option, but I'm looking at it in light of if it takes two and a half years for a family to get a housing unit, then why is it taking so long to move people who no longer need a two or three-bedroom home and are looking for a smaller unit?

SHAWN LUKER: Thanks for the question and the clarification on that. When people are outside of their family composition - say their children grow up and they move away and they decide to stay with us - typically what takes place is we will ask them on a needs basis. So when there is a need for their house specifically that's when we usually initiate that activity. It's not that it's as soon as their children move out that we ask them to move - it's when we have demand for that location when we ask them to move to another location.

Mind you, there is some resistance to those situations, and sometimes they do go to Residential Tenancy Board action to resolve it.

JOHN WHITE: I would assume that with a two and a half year waiting list, that need constantly exists. That would be my thought - if you'd care to elaborate on that.

SHAWN LUKER: Without knowing the specifics of these examples that you want to go through, I wouldn't be able to elaborate much on that.

JOHN WHITE: Over the holiday season, the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority was able to reduce their vacancy rate from 4 per cent to 2.5 per cent. Outside the holiday season, we're looking at Cape Breton Island taking six months longer than anywhere else. Can you tell us why that is? Is there a reason why it takes six months longer in Cape Breton?

SHAWN LUKER: I don't have a good answer as to why. I just know that those are the facts I have handed to me. Six months is just the difference between Cape Breton and the rest of the province, and I don't have any defining reasons as to what would cause that. We have a larger portfolio.

JOHN WHITE: I realize that two and a half years is a long time, and from this side down, we get these calls. We are dealing with these folks who are in dire straits and in dire need. I'll be honest with you, it's kind of bugging me here that I'm hearing two and a half years to begin with, but much less that that's six months longer in Cape Breton. That's not acceptable to me. I don't know if you want to reply.

THE CHAIR: Is it Mr. Hines? We just need you to use Mr. Richard's microphone. Just sit in the vacant chair at the end there, sorry. Mr. Richard can remain seated and we'll just share the vacant chair. Mr. MacIsaac.

STEPHEN MACISAAC: I can try and address a few of those questions, MLA White. Basically, with the policies and procedures we currently have in place with the

housing authority in Cape Breton, as well as the rest of the province, there are some discrepancies by region as well as by housing authorities. That's part of why we've been instructed by government to look at the new Crown corporation and come up with consistent policies and procedures and how they get applied throughout the province to maximize benefits for the tenants as well as the processes we have to deal with.

When we looked at the current systems, they're different by region because there are five different housing authorities with different policies and procedures, and we're currently going through all that. We have three or four top priorities that we're going to be working on immediately, and one of them is on the tenant placement and vacancy processes.

The housing authorities have approximately 10,300 units that they have direct management of, but we also look after eight other programs for Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing programs that have been inherited as our properties, that are managed by the staff in these housing authorities. There are quite a few units when you look at those differences, as well as where they're located. What we're doing now is looking at constant application of new policies and procedures, and they're all being reviewed.

One of the items where we know we have some ability to make some changes is on the application process, tenant placement, reducing the vacancy rates. We've gone through that - we're looking at a new policy coming forward where we make some changes to how applications are received, how they're processed. They're done manually right now, so we need to get to a digital system - we need to upgrade our IT for doing that with that number of applications.

We also have issues where people want to get into our units - and this is important to understand. They may want to get into their units at some point, and we do it by chronological order. They may say, I want to move out of my home in two or three years, so they'll put their name on the list. Our current process means we have to contact them first if they've been on the list for two or three years and they have up to three refusals - they can say no, no, and no, and we have to go through that.

We think that should change. We think we should have more of a prorated system - if you can move instantly, you get a factor, not just chronological order. We're also looking at, instead of having three refusals, moving it to one or two, and at the end of that you get off the list and you have to apply maybe six months later. It's going to make a huge difference in the vacancy and placement process.

As well, we're going to be giving very strict timelines for responses on refusal. Right now it ranges between 24 hours to two weeks, depending on which housing authority you're dealing with, and those are the policies that they have in place. We're going to come up with a more consistent application - not just for Cape Breton but for the province in general.

Another major issue we're facing right now, as far as extending the time frame for tenant placement, is the influx of funding we're receiving from the federal government for upgrades. The funding, whether it's the Green Fund, accessibility - there is more and more work being done by the housing authorities to improve the conditions of these facilities. That means renovations are in place, some significant, which delay the time frame for getting the work done and the tenants back in. We're looking at the whole thing as a lump sum, and we have several new policies we're looking at bringing forward with the new Crown corporation.

JOHN WHITE: I'm happy to hear you guys are checking into it and trying to create a change. That's certainly not acceptable from anybody on this side - I'm sure as well with you guys, I know.

Switching gears a little bit. I believe that in your presentation you said that 64 per cent of the public units are seniors, I believe it was. I wanted to know, in the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority, what role do you take on for responsibility for seniors when it's an emergency situation? What is your role in relation to emergency situations - for example, when the power goes out?

PAUL LAFLECHE: There was an emergency situation recently in mainland northern Nova Scotia - Cape Breton is eastern. It always takes me a while to figure that out - northern Nova Scotia. We didn't know, Steve and I, what role we played, but we suddenly got a phone call from the mayor of the county. He was out at a unit where the power had gone down, and the emergency backup generator wasn't working. In fact, it hadn't worked in a long time. There was one on order that hadn't arrived in a long time.

We sprang into action and asked the mayor if he had a generator of his own. He sure did, so he brought his own down. It was a gas one, not propane, so it eventually ran out of gas and then there was nobody servicing. He went back and filled it up with gas, and we learned a few lessons from that. We're new in the game here, okay? The generator only served the common areas. It didn't serve the actual units. That's the way it is. Some have generators and some don't. The policy is different everywhere. Steve's looking into that now.

What we learned was, thank God we have some great mayors and councillors in Nova Scotia. (Laughter)

Steve, do you want to talk about what we're doing on these emergency things?

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacIsaac, you have one minute.

STEPHEN MACISAAC: Thank you for the question. I'm a numbers guy - engineering. As a result of this incident, we did some analysis. We have 397 generators within the Housing Authorities - all different shapes and sizes. We've decided to look at

centralizing those backup power systems to certain facilities and upgrading the power requirements, and at the same time trying to get tenants who require that into those facilities moving forward.

THE CHAIR: Order. Sorry, Mr. MacIsaac. The time for the PC caucus has ended. We will go into the lightning round. We have about five minutes per caucus. MLA Tilley.

FRED TILLEY: (Laughter) I get to start the lightning round. Perfect.

I think my question is going to be around the idea of the housing committee. We know that a committee has been established for HRM to help with the housing crisis that they're facing here. Knowing that we're in a similar or maybe even a worse position in CBRM, I'm just wondering why a committee or a task force wasn't set up to look after the issues in CBRM as well.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'm not sure which side of that issue the mayor would be on. I know you've seen that the mayor in Halifax and the councillors were not initially very receptive to the committee. It was set up in Halifax because that's where we identified - and various private consulting firms and other industry associates identified - the huge backlog. They sort of fell behind about five years ago when the ramp-up in population in Halifax occurred, which is just occurring now in other areas. I'll get to that.

They fell behind, and their system worked perfectly well until we had this rapid population increase. Some of the issues identified in Halifax were very unique regarding how they treated planning - the Centre Plan, the Regional Plan - and the way they were implementing it, and the number of points along the plan where things could get caught and not go anywhere. So stuck is the best word.

One of the things that was developed was the concept that the minister would have to intervene. This is not new, it also exists in several other provinces, for some of the big cities. Halifax is a big city - it is the only big city in Nova Scotia that makes the cut in the national big city.

We decided we would create a task force which would unstick some of the issues we're having, which were great for Halifax when there was no growth, but as soon as growth hit, they were not responsive at all. The councillors would have a different story and I respect that, so it was a unique thing for Halifax.

In other areas of the province - and I'm not saying the CBRM right now - we have different issues. In other areas of the province, I'd go to and they'd say: our issue is not our planning regime - in fact, ours is 100 times as fast as Halifax. Our issue is that Halifax stole our building inspectors by paying more and we don't have any building inspectors now, or whatever - it's very different issues - or we do not have enough scale in our municipal unit to hire the planning department we need. Those are very different issues than Halifax.

[11:30 a.m.]

The situation in Halifax is quite unique. I'm sure if Mayor McDougall came to Minister Lohr and said that we desperately want what Halifax wants, the minister would reflect very seriously and see if it's possible in Cape Breton. We'd also look and say, does Cape Breton have those same issues as Halifax, in terms of the stuck planning and the consultations that go on for a very long time? I think we'd probably say no. I think you'd see from the gentlemen here that they would probably say no also. They are not facing the problem that developers were facing in Halifax. That's why it's different - not to say we wouldn't have it.

This Spring we introduced a number of charter amendments for HRM. All nine of you were there in the Legislature. They asked for them, they were somewhat controversial in some quarters. They asked for them, though, and we delivered them. I remember Mayor McDougall saying jeez, I'd love to have some of those. She didn't know what they were yet. Now that she knows what they are, we'll have that conversation on whether she'll want them. We always offered them to everybody else for the Fall Legislature. Halifax said yes, we want them, and they have a charter so we could do it easily, only affecting them . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The five minutes for the Liberals have ended and we will move on to the NDP caucus. MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Deputy Minister, with the waiting list of two and a half years and the high number of people looking for housing in Cape Breton, why isn't there a plan to build public housing for these provincial lands that were mentioned instead of giving them to the private developers?

PAUL LAFLECHE: We haven't announced the provincial lands specifically yet. As I said, there are 100,000 properties so the provincial lands are somewhat fantastic in magnitude. The first batch we will announce will be the low-hanging fruit, the ones with services, the ones in the popular areas, the ones where we can be near schools, etc.

At this point we haven't announced we're not building public housing either. None of those things have been announced yet and anything is possible. We're looking at what the best possibilities are. We do know that the quickest way to get things going where there is a lack of housing is to put these lands out to the private sector right now. It could also be community non-profits. There are all sorts of possibilities that could come forward.

Stephan has programs and we will work with the community non-profits. I think in several counties we've already been approached by community non-profits on these lands, so you'll see some of that, too, so it's not just the private sector.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to hear that because that was one of the pieces of the question I was going to ask.

I'm going to go back to the rent cap. If the department doesn't know what the impact has been and doesn't seem interested in finding out the impact of the rent cap, how will you, as the deputy minister, be advising the government when it comes time to decide if the rent cap will be removed or temporarily staying on?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I can't remember the exact date, but we have somewhere around 18 or 20 months to go until the rent cap is up. We didn't say we weren't interested in finding out; we said we don't know yet. It's so soon, it's hard to see the long-term effect of a rent cap. There are studies on the long-term effect on rent caps in other provinces, and they reveal basically an imbalance with a lot of single residential family units built, a lot of condos built, and very few rental apartments built.

We do know from the empirical evidence in other jurisdictions that the wonderful situation in Nova Scotia, where until recently you had a dominance of rental apartments to condos - the empirical evidence is that that would be reversed if we kept a long-term rent cap. That's consistent across cities in North America.

We feel, and people have commented to us, that we have a wonderful situation because of the ratio of apartments to condos in Nova Scotia. We have the dream, so we wouldn't like to lose the dream due to the rent cap. On the other hand, the rent cap does deliver value to a certain segment of the population. All of those factors, pros and cons, would go into a recommendation from my staff here to the government when the time comes to look at the rent cap.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you for that, and I want to say that maybe this particular government can look at the NDP legislation on the rent cap. It actually has a clearer picture of what that will look like for tenants as well as for landlords.

I want to make a point, just because we talk about affordability, and I mentioned this before in this particular room - our rates are looking like they're horrible. Our vacancy rates for public housing are two per cent, and it's similar in market housing, so that says a lot about what people can afford and how expensive it is to live right now.

I want to say, when we talk about affordability, it's great to look at the market, but we need to look at what's happening now when it comes to being able to afford things. No one should ever be paying 50 per cent of their income in order to live. Rent geared to income - which is 30 per cent - should be examined more when it comes to these new builds. When we talk about affordability for those right now, especially what's going on needs to be examined with the 30 per cent.

THE CHAIR: We will move over to the PC caucus. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I'm going to put my question to Deputy LaFleche. What progress has been made to implement the recommendations of the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission?

PAUL LAFLECHE: We did release a report card I think in December was it, or June? (Inaudible) I don't have them all in front of me, but would you like me to go down them one by one? (Interruption) Okay. Just tell me what tab it's in there, buddy, so I can get to it. I just looked at it a minute ago. It's in one of these tabs. Here it is: 4D.

No. 1, which we talked about, is in progress - arm's-length corporation.

No. 2, already done. The minister has addressed that, I think, in the Legislature.

No. 3, I think that was introduced in the Fall, the first part of it, in the Legislature and passed. That's in effect right now, now that the renoviction ban has come off due to the COVID-19 restrictions loosening.

The Municipal Government Act, the HRM Charter - those were announced as under review. We're in the review period right now. You're always going to be reforming the HRM Charter and the MGA, but we're going to do what we can now to get early things done.

No. 4, long-term housing strategy - we're working on that. You've seen the early version of that in terms of what we released in the Fall. Again, the strategy is a living document.

No. 5, I spoke to earlier in response to the question from, I think, Mr. Young, and I was trying to address Mr. Tilley's question there when we were at the end of the time. No. 5, what's happening there is that whatever we offered HRM is available to the other municipalities except there are 48 of them that we've got to cater to, and sometimes one or two of them don't like - for instance, there was one in particular that didn't like inclusionary zoning and objected to everybody else getting it, so you have to deal with that. We have to deal with that in a process because there are so many of them. With the HRM there is one charter. I know that Mayor McDougall would like a charter so that's another option, so we're working on that.

No. 6, again it's something we're working on with the \$35 million announcement. You never stop working on it but we've got a good start to it.

No. 7, a difficult one. We do the provincially-owned land inventory and that can help. But costs for materials and labour are going up; there's a lot of inflation. We're got to constantly be on the lookout for No. 7 or we'll be chasing around in a circle and never get anywhere. Again, we're going to have to keep working on No. 7.

No. 8, we've done a little bit about that and we talked here about some initiatives that the government is doing through other departments here in the construction trade sector. So No. 8 is under way.

No. 9, now that means different things to different people. We do have the new lending programs, but we're always going to have renewal. Renewal is good for the environment. When you take down what some referred to as an older building with six units, sometimes you take those down and you put in a modern building with 10 units, you are now housing 10 people and you can achieve the same affordability with much less GHG released. That's because you have modern, economically-viable units which meet all of the modern standards. They're also usually more accessible because they have to be built to the new accessibility code, et cetera. So it's not always bad to take down old units - sometimes it is, sometimes it's not.

No. 10, we're building the community capacity - we talked about that.

No. 11, public housing transformed - we talked about that.

No. 12, expand housing options. I think we've got a lot of housing options and we're looking forward to our housing meeting at the end of June with the new federal minister. Minister John Lohr will be going. This is where we'll hear all about the great new federal initiatives - and I'm not being sarcastic. There are a lot of great new federal initiatives. We've just got to see how we can access them. Hopefully there will be a broad array.

No. 13, this is one where we've got to work closely with our colleagues. Dwayne Provo, the Associate Deputy Minister of African Nova Scotian Affairs, is working closely with us in this area, as well as Justin Huston, the Deputy Minister of the Office of L'nú Affairs. We have to collaborate with them. They know the communities. They know how it works. We can easily get into the wrong zone if we don't know what we're doing there.

We are working with Dwayne, we are working with Tawaak Housing Association, we're working with Akoma Family Centre, but we want to work through the proper channels there.

No. 14, those legislative amendments went through.

THE CHAIR: Order, deputy minister . . .

PAUL LAFLECHE: I've only got three left.

THE CHAIR: You were so close. Perhaps you can circulate the update on the report to the clerk, please and thank you.

At this point if we have any closing remarks and if we don't, we will move into committee business. Does anyone have any remarks?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I have a closing remark.

THE CHAIR: Short and sweet, Deputy Minister LaFleche?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I just want to say that what we've been unable to maybe stress enough today is how closely we're working with our partners. The Department of Community Services is our core partner. Yesterday I made a presentation to the deputy ministers' committee and we've got six different departments working with us - the Office of Regulatory Affairs and Service Effectiveness, the Department of Community Services, we've got the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, we've got the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services, et cetera - all working with the Department of African Nova Scotian Affairs. We do work with all of our partner departments to create successful solutions and each one of them has legislative pieces that you have seen in the Legislature.

[11:45 a.m.]

I also want to talk about the great relationship with the Halifax Regional Municipality. You hear several councillors talking about this and that and not being happy, but I've got to say that we have a wonderful relationship with the mayor and the team under Jacques Dubé, the CAO, Kelly Denty and the other staff who have worked very closely with us. All of them are experts in what they do. They want things to be untangled. They want to move forward and provide solutions.

We're looking forward to having a similar relationship with the staff in Cape Breton. I've known Marie for many years, and also her sister who works there. We know the Deputy CAO, in fact he is Chair. I think he is president of the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia. We'll be seeing all of them tomorrow night at the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities meeting. It looks like we'll be seeing you too, Mombo, so that's good. (Interruption) Oh, it's Kendra. When I first met Kendra it was in the lobster lineup in Yarmouth for the same meeting. With that, I want to thank everybody, and we'll leave.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister LaFleche. You guys, as he said, are able to leave, and we're going to conduct our committee business.

My apologies, were there any other closing remarks?

We'll call a couple minutes recess while the witnesses get their things together.

[11:47 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:50 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: We will now move to committee business. We do have a piece of correspondence up for discussion received from the Face of Poverty Consultation. Anyone have comments on what we would like to do with that? We can acknowledge it or perhaps move it forward to our next agenda setting topic, if you so wish. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: It's my opinion that it should go - we'll soon be moving to our next six topics, and we can all consider it. If one of us wants to put that forward, it will come forward, if not, there may be other pressing issues, but I think that's the way we proceeded with other requests, so I think that would be fair. That's just my opinion.

THE CHAIR: Is there any other discussion on the correspondence? That concludes committee business for today.

Just a reminder that our next meeting is June 7, 2022, from 10:00 a.m. until noon. The witnesses are the Department of Community Services and East Preston Family Resource Centre regarding early childhood intervention to provide support for families who have children with disabilities.

If there is no other committee business, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:52 a.m.]