

HANSARD

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**COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Thursday, February 25, 2021

Video Conference

Housing, Housing Affordability & Economic Development

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**NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

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[Steve Craig replaced Hon. Pat Dunn]
[Dave Ritcey replaced Tory Rushton]

In Attendance:

Heather Hoddinott
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Infrastructure and Housing

Martin Laycock, Acting Chief Operating Officer, Housing and Municipal Sustainability
Stephan Richard, Director, Community Relations & Public Affairs
Ed Lake, Executive Director of Housing Authorities

Dalhousie University School of Planning

Dr. Ren Thomas, Assistant Professor

South Shore Action Housing Coalition

Helen Lanthier



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2021

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Keith Irving

VICE-CHAIR

Rafah DiCostanzo

THE CHAIR (Rafah DiCostanzo): Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development. I have a few housekeeping items that I'd like to go over.

First, I'm Rafah DiCostanzo, the MLA for Clayton Park West and I'm the Chair today. I'm also introducing our witnesses today on Housing, Housing Affordability & Economic Development. Our witnesses are from Dalhousie University, the South Shore Action Housing Coalition, and the Department of Infrastructure and Housing.

We have three witnesses here and they brought some other people with them, as well. When they have their opening remarks, they can introduce the others.

This meeting will be held by video conference. Members, witnesses and the committee clerk should have their video on at all times. Turn off your microphones when you're not speaking, please. Wait for me to call your names - that is for Hansard so they know who is speaking. All other staff have their audio and video turned off. Just the members, witnesses, and the legislative staff and counsel should have their video on.

If you have your cellphones or other things, please put them on silent or vibrate. If you cannot leave your seat unless it's necessary, that would be wonderful.

If I need to check with the clerk, I could call for a recess and then speak to her via telephone. If you have any technical issues - and I've just started with one, so if I freeze, just literally wait 30 seconds and it will put me back in. I've upgraded my computer and hoping that this doesn't happen, but it just happened and I've got an extender - and another one. I'm hoping to figure this out. This technology thing should not happen again.

Now we can start by introducing our members, and we'll start with Mr. Leo Glavine please.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. So we have all the introductions done, and we can start with the guests introducing themselves and any opening remarks. We'll start with the Department of Infrastructure and Housing - Mr. Laycock.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: Good morning everyone. My name is Martin Laycock. I am the Acting COO for Housing and Municipal Sustainability. If I'm permitted, I'd like to make a few opening remarks.

Good morning Madam Chair, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting us here today to speak to you on this important topic. I'd like to begin by introducing my colleagues from the Department of Infrastructure and Housing, beginning with Ed Lake, Executive Director of Housing Authorities; and Stephan Richard, Director of Stakeholder and Intergovernmental Relations.

It has been a challenging time for anyone looking for affordable housing during the past few months as rental costs have crept up, due to the fact that supply is not keeping up with demand. The global pandemic has really made a tough situation worse, but I can tell you that our team has been working very long hours over the past few months to respond to the needs in our communities.

In the fall we announced the additional investments and delivered the new Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit under the National Housing Strategy. This will help nearly 900 renters this year alone. In addition, we recently announced \$7.5 million to support the creation of 156 new affordable housing units. In addition, \$2 million to help even more low-income Nova Scotians keep their homes safe and make adaptations.

We also launched a new Affordable Housing Commission, which is co-chaired by Dr. Ren Thomas, who is here today. The commission is composed of 17 of Nova Scotia's top housing experts, as well as community leaders from Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities. We have representatives from the private sector, non-profit organizations, as well as municipalities from across the province. The purpose of the

commission is to examine the current situation and identify actionable, sustainable, long-term solutions to increase the supply of and access to affordable housing.

While we could not appoint everyone to the commission, we are committed to hearing from all stakeholders and any Nova Scotian who wants to share their ideas with us. We have created an online engagement hub, which can be accessed at nsaffordablehousingcommission.ca.

I'm sure these are just some of the recent examples of the actions taken by the department to help those in housing need. We know there is much more that needs to be done and I can assure you that our team is relentless in our desire to improve the lives of vulnerable Nova Scotians.

We understand that housing is not only a social imperative, but also an economic priority. Housing is a critical component of the broader provincial economic infrastructure. To give you an example, without the right supply of housing, our businesses can't attract employees and some of them may not be able to retain them.

We also know that the current housing situation is partly related to the significant population and economic growth that Nova Scotia experienced in the last five years. We have seen record low vacancies in Halifax and it is becoming increasingly challenging for first-time home buyers to access home ownership in the environment where we're seeing low inventory of homes for resale.

Our new construction sector is also under pressure as many builders are trying to keep up with demand. The result is that families who would otherwise free up their usual units in buying a home are unable to leave, which fuels demand for more rental supply.

By all accounts, Nova Scotia has fared very well during the pandemic and people from all over the world have taken notice. Many believe Nova Scotians will continue to experience strong economic growth, fueled by immigration in the years to come, so we really need to make sure our housing supply is in line with that demand.

As we've seen in other jurisdictions, we won't build ourselves out of the situation. In some cases, we'll have to take a look at converting existing buildings and, very importantly, we will need to protect our existing stock. It is clear that affordable housing programs and policies must be connected to other provincial programs and systems. We can no longer think about "the housing sector" as a discreet and disconnected component of our system. To positively impact vulnerable Nova Scotians, we need access to affordable housing. We must begin to look at affordable housing as an issue that affects all sectors, and engage our partners in those sectors to identify short-term and long-term solutions.

We know there's no silver bullet. So many factors impact the housing market and everyone has a role to play. It requires an all-hands-on-deck approach and strong collaboration between all levels of government, business, and our community housing

sector. With a group of experts and leaders we have assembled as part of our Affordable Housing Commission, as well as the input we're gathering from stakeholders, we are optimistic about the future of our province.

This concludes my introductory remarks. I look forward to answering any questions.

THE CHAIR: We have next, from Dalhousie University School of Planning, Dr. Ren Thomas.

DR. REN THOMAS: Good morning, everyone. I am an assistant professor at the School of Planning at Dalhousie University. My research focuses on affordable housing and transportation planning with the goal of helping governments, community-based organizations, and individuals plan better communities.

As a member of the Canadian Institute of Planners, I believe that we have the responsibility to plan more sustainable and equitable communities. This can only be achieved through the collaboration of the public, private and non-profit sectors. My own research in non-profit and rental housing has shown that there does exist a range of options to build new affordable housing units and to preserve existing units.

Municipalities and provincial governments across the country, with the help of federal funding in some cases, have developed programs to build secondary suites to house smaller- and lower-income households. They have incentives for non-profit and for-profit developers to develop mixed tenure and mixed income housing projects. They have by-laws in place to protect rental housing from being converted to condominiums. Some municipalities have their own development corporation to build and manage affordable housing. Some have land banks and housing reserve funds.

Strong policy wording in municipal plans and strategies is often combined with funding programs usually coordinated with provincial governments. In most cases, the collaboration of a range of partner organizations is necessary to build and maintain affordable housing.

Our colleagues in Quebec, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia are quite skilled in building regional coalitions between agencies and departments to build affordable housing.

[10:15 a.m.]

That's why my research focuses on what we can learn from these others and what we can adapt to Nova Scotia. We need to share data and information, learn from each other, and collaborate on projects more than we're doing now. We also need to protect the affordable units that we have already built.

Nova Scotia is a province with lower than average incomes and higher than average unemployment, so we will need affordable housing. We also have a great population of seniors and increasingly, as Mr. Laycock said, we are attracting new people to the province. We're attracting new immigrants. We're attracting international students who choose to stay after their education is complete. These groups often have low incomes. Many have small household sizes which contributes to increased demand for smaller and more affordable housing units.

In fact, there is a direct correlation between that student population and our vacancy rate. We saw this January with the release of the CMHC rental market report that our vacancy rate actually increased to 1.9 per cent this year in 2020. The reason cited in the report was that decrease in the post-secondary student population due to COVID-19.

We do not have a great variety of housing choice in Nova Scotia, but we can learn from other provinces across the country how to increase choice and supply for individuals and households. We can learn how to strengthen our non-profit sector - again from these other places that have done that - and how to benefit from federal funding initiatives associated with the National Housing Strategy.

That concludes my comments. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr. Thomas. Wonderful.

Next, we have South Shore Housing Action Coalition and Ms. Helen Lanthier.

HELEN LANTHIER: Hello everyone. My name is Helen Lanthier. I'm a member of the South Shore Housing Action Coalition. Thank you for the invitation to be here with you today. We're really happy that that was extended to us.

The South Shore Housing Action Coalition is a coalition of community organizations, interested individuals, and eight councillors representing six municipalities on the South Shore who are working together to improve access to adequate and affordable housing options. Because of where we live and work our perspective is, of course, distinctly rural.

In this presentation, we use the definition of "rural" provided by Statistics Canada. It means all areas outside of large population centres, including small population centres. From that definition, more than 65 per cent of Nova Scotians live in rural communities. Yet there's a growing concern in rural communities that access to resources for affordable housing and housing related services for those most at risk for homelessness or housing vulnerability are becoming more and more centralized in Halifax.

The housing challenges in rural Nova Scotia are many. I will just, for now, identify three - there are more in the brief that we submitted that you can take a look at. The first is that there are significant gaps, as both Mr. Laycock and Dr. Thomas said, in the affordable

housing continuum and in service provision for those who are homeless or vulnerably housed. The pandemic has further exposed the inequities faced by marginalized populations.

A huge issue for rural Nova Scotia is a lack or scarcity of reliable and consistent data. Without that data, it puts us at a distinctive disadvantage when we are wanting to develop housing and applying for funding.

Finally, we want to say that rural Nova Scotia perceives - and we can't speak for all of rural Nova Scotia, but certainly in the southwestern part of this beautiful province - that rural Nova Scotia does not feel that it is adequately represented at housing decision-making tables. I was heartened to hear what Mr. Laycock said about that.

We believe that rural communities are at the heart of our province and provide a strong foundation for its economic sustainability and prosperity. To address economic development, though, we must recognize the critical role that accessible, affordable housing plays in supporting not only individuals, but the sustainability and vibrancy of all of our small towns.

We would like to bring you four main messages this morning, as you can see in the brief that we submitted. Number one, rural Nova Scotia is really experiencing an affordable housing crisis and there is evidence to prove it. I thought I had 2.5 minutes, so I can't elaborate on that but if you can take a look at your brief, it will give you some statistics about that.

Number two, rural homelessness presents differently than urban homelessness. It's often hidden, but because it is hidden and thus not easily measured, doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Number three, access to a range of affordable housing options and housing-related services is clearly not equitable across this province. Our main message about that, and I hope to be able to discuss it with you a little bit, is that this inequity has to be addressed.

Finally, number four is what I said before: rural communities cannot be represented fully by those who do not live in rural areas.

These are the asks that we have for you today. We ask that you focus on the exploration of innovative rural development strategies, which recognize the role of affordable housing options, and focus resources on small population centres or regional hubs. This will allow for economic growth in all regions of the province.

We ask you to support efforts to improve the quality of data available and to support research into rural needs and rural solutions, and we challenge you to commit to an increase in authentic rural representation in housing decision-making and policy development - if

not entirely proportional, just remembering that 65.7 per cent of the population in the province lives in rural areas.

That is my time. I think I probably went over it a little bit, but thank you very much. We are committed to working in partnership and we look forward to hearing back from you with any follow-up about our requests.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Lanthier.

As the Chair, I think I find it easier for me to control who's speaking by doing it 20 minutes, so we will start with 20-minute intervals. First the PC caucus, then the NDP, then the Liberal, and we will be starting at 10:22 a.m. If somebody can tell me from the PC Party who would like to start. Please put your hand up and wait for me to call your name before you speak.

Mr. Craig, go ahead.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you to all the witnesses here today. This is a fascinating topic, and the last time I sat in on this committee, Deputy Minister Bernie Miller was here to answer some questions, so unfortunately we don't have a minister or deputy minister here today.

My first question will be to Dr. Thomas - very good to see you. I noted in 2019 that you and your colleague Adriane Salah published *The Preservation of Social Housing in Halifax: Limitations Facing Non-Profit and Co-operative Housing Providers*. I found that to be a very comprehensive and enjoyable piece to read, and I wish that it was more widely circulated and known by many people. That was very good work and I thank you for that.

You're right that the affordable housing has only recently become an issue in Halifax Regional Municipality. I can attest to that because I was one of the members on council elected along with Mayor Savage and Wayne Mason in 2012. We were three of the four new guys on a reduced council, and very much had the social acumen and interest so that we were pushing for that. Mayor Savage would often say that the feds have the money, the province has the jurisdiction, and it is the municipality that has the problem.

In your paper, you stated that, ". . . the current tools, programs, and policies present a rather patchwork system complicated by decades of changing government priorities, including the lack of stable government funding, and the relative isolation of the social housing sector from decision-making and knowledge transmission processes."

One of the key limitations you identified was weak relationships with government. Would you please expand on that for us?

REN THOMAS: Absolutely. In this study we did, we interviewed people from the non-profits as well as people from co-operatives. What we found was with co-operatives,

because they're part of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, they have an overarching organization that was able to help them with that connection to federal government and to provincial government. If there was a new funding opportunity, if there was something that they were able to capitalize on - for example, energy retrofits - they would find out about that through the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada. On the other hand, the non-profits didn't have that connection and they were unable to find out about funding opportunities through government or other incentives that might exist.

The other thing that we heard about over and over again from our interviews was that, for example, if a non-profit reached out to the provincial government, or to the municipal government in some cases, they often wouldn't get any response at all. That was really contributing to their frustration in this era where we have a new National Housing Strategy, but somehow no one has been able to access that funding. That's at the root of it, I think.

The other thing that came up was that when some of the non-profits started out, they were considered to be valuable contributors to the housing continuum to building and maintaining those low-end units. Now, they were considered - and I quote from one of my respondents - leeches on the system, that they're just being expected to take money and who knows what happens to it and they're not considered valuable contributors to the supply of housing.

Those things combined indicated to me that there really isn't a very good relationship between both federal and provincial governments and the non-profits in this province.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you for that response. The findings and the way you explained that has been my experience in the last 19 months as an MLA, going around and talking with key stakeholders. Not only in the non-profit and the co-operatives, but even in the development community, the municipalities themselves.

There appears to be - and please members of the new department, don't take this as a negative comment. It is a factual observation on my part. It seems to me as though the government has not taken the approach that they will go out and actively nurture or grow the capacity within Nova Scotia.

That is quite evidenced by the recent rapid housing initiative responses that we've had from this province. There was no capacity for people or organizations to actually respond. What you saw was the \$500 million - the \$8.7 million in HRM was able to be there because there were projects that were already under way, and the resources of the municipality came to bear. That was good.

What do you think ought to be done in the government to improve the government relationships and provide leadership in this housing sector?

REN THOMAS: Certainly, there have been a lot of attempts, of course, since the National Housing Strategy. Things have started to shift and I believe the government has been quite responsive in taking up some of the funding available through the National Housing Strategy.

I would say that something that would be quite helpful would be some sort of committee or working group, which municipalities and developers - people who are interested in building that new housing - could come to if they had questions about the funding opportunities, if they needed technical advice on those kinds of things.

We know municipalities, if they're able to, are providing some of that assistance already, but of course we have in our municipal governments, capacity issues as well in terms of the number of staff that are available.

I would say potentially it is a committee that involves municipal representatives and provincial representatives in terms of providing that guidance to organizations that actually want to build this housing and/or maintain this housing over the time.

STEVE CRAIG: I've used my two questions, but I will come back.

THE CHAIR: Do we have anybody else from the PC Party who would like to continue? Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: This is directed to Mr. Laycock. Given that vacancy rates across the province are low and people in communities of all sizes are struggling to find affordable housing, as mentioned by Dr. Thomas and Helen as well, why are there no individuals from rural areas on the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission?

[10:30 a.m.]

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I guess on the actual Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission, there are representatives from HRM and CBRM. Within our subcommittees, there's a representative from Inverness, and there's a representative from the Town of Amherst.

What I'd also point out too with the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission is that we are reaching out to municipalities, both through a survey and also through focus groups. Our intent is to engage as many municipal folks as possible from across the province to get their feedback and to ensure that the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission has the information necessary to come up with recommendations that are meaningful not just for HRM but for the province as a whole. I think we're taking excellent steps in that direction.

DAVID RITCEY: We talked about partnerships and relationships. I have a question as to why there's no representation from NSFPM or AHANS on the commission.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: There was representation from AHANS originally on the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission. They chose to walk away for their reasons. There are a number of people who wanted to be a part of this commission. There are 17 experts on this commission that focus on the practical realities of the day-to-day business and also around what the impacts are on housing within the Province of Nova Scotia.

As much as I'm sure it would have been valuable to have insight from NSFM, the fact is that there are a number of experts who actually deal with this on a day-to-day basis, have the impacts, we have the municipal representation. We invited NSFM and AHANS to the subcommittees, and they made their decision on that.

We feel that we're reaching out to municipalities through the various focus groups, the surveys, and whatnot, and we're anxious to get their feedback and insight into this important commission.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey, do you have some more questions?

DAVID RITCEY: No. I'll be back.

THE CHAIR: Your time is until 10:42 a.m., so you lose the rest of it, I'm assuming. Would you like to take it, Mr. Craig? It's 20 minutes. You started at 10:22 a.m. and you will go until 10:42 a.m.

STEVE CRAIG: Just a process question here. You're giving each caucus's representatives a block right up front?

THE CHAIR: Yes, we've done that in different committee meetings, and it seems to work better than hands, and I don't want to miss somebody's hand. So it's 20 minutes for the PC caucus, 20 minutes for the NDP, and followed by 20 minutes for the Liberal caucus. Then whatever time we have left after that we go with five minutes or 10 minutes again with PC, NDP, followed by Liberal.

That's how it's done in most committees. I chose to do that to make it easier for not missing somebody when there's so many people on the video conference.

STEVE CRAIG: Thanks for the explanation. I wasn't aware of that, and on the committees I've served that hasn't been the case. My apologies.

This would be directed to Mr. Laycock and his colleagues. Since 2013, has the Nova Scotia government either adopted or developed a documented Nova Scotia housing strategy? I don't mean the National Housing Strategy and how that's implemented. I want to know if we have a home-grown Nova Scotia housing strategy that has either been adopted or implemented, developed, and is being worked? That's the question.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I'm aware of the strategy that was back in 2013, but to my knowledge there is not one currently in place. I think that is something that again, we're turning to the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission. I think there's a lot of discussion about the needs and how to move forward with affordable housing. That certainly could be a recommendation or a path forward that could come from the important work that they're doing.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you for that answer. The commission has been mentioned a couple of times both by Mr. Laycock and Dr. Thomas. I want to focus on that. That was announced by the then-minister three months ago today.

The Affordable Housing Commission was announced three months ago. It's looking at the current state of affordable housing in Nova Scotia. It's got a mandate to identify sustainable, actionable, long-term solutions to increase the supply of and access to affordable housing. Both the minister and deputy minister are no longer overseeing, if you will, this particular initiative.

Dr. Thomas, you are still, I assume, the co-chair. I assume that the deputy minister is no longer the co-chair. I'd like to know how this is going to affect the work of you and your commission.

REN THOMAS: Great question. Yes, we have at this point been assured that the work of the commission will continue. Of course, I will have a different co-chair. That's all the information that I have right now, considering this all happened two days ago.

STEVE CRAIG: Maybe Mr. Ritcey has a couple of questions that he would like to ask.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: As recently as October, the former Premier was insisting that rent control does not work. The former minister for housing said that rent control would discourage new private market development. Then a month later, in November, the Province went ahead and brought in rent control. Did the economics of rent control change significantly during that time or has the province brought in measures that may only [inaudible] in existing problems?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: Thank you for the question. Just some background for those who don't know - rent controls were put in through the Emergency Measures Act, I believe, in November. It's 2 per cent up until February 2022 or until the state of emergency is lifted. That was a decision made at a political level and would be beyond the facts of what was made. It's going to be difficult for me to comment on the position of the government on that matter.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Again to Mr. Laycock and his colleagues in the department. I don't know how long they've been around, but I'd be curious to know collectively, how many ministers and deputy ministers have they gone through in the last 10 years?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I might ask Mr. Richard to comment. He has been around far longer than I have.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Thank you for the question. I do not know off the top of my head how many. It has been a number of CEOs and deputy ministers, but I couldn't give you an exact answer. I would certainly be happy to follow up.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you. I would appreciate that. Over to Mr. Ritcey, Madam Chair.

DAVE RITCEY: This again would go back to Mr. Laycock, going back to rent control. What metrics is the government using to determine whether or not rent control in Nova Scotia is working as intended?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: As I'm sure you're aware, the issue of rent control falls under Service Nova Scotia, not with the Department of Infrastructure and Housing so that question would be better placed for that department. I wouldn't be able to accurately comment on what they are doing there.

STEVE CRAIG: Mr. Laycock has mentioned other departments. I'd ask Deputy Minister Miller how they interact with the department for housing - or whatever version it has been over the years. We are looking at immigration. We know that the housing stock has gone down as far as quality goes and as far as numbers go.

My question is: How often are you interacting with your colleagues across government to identify that not only do we need people to come to Nova Scotia to contribute positively and constructively to our society, but for them to do that, they need a place to live? How much attention is being placed in your department with other departments on ensuring that those who come to Nova Scotia find themselves good quality housing?

THE CHAIR: Before I ask Mr. Laycock, we have less than a minute left. I don't know if to cut it off here unless the NDP would like that question answered. We're actually going into NDP time.

Would you like me to do that, Ms. Chender? The time is for the NDP, so it's up to you if you want Mr. Laycock to answer it or if you want to ask your own question.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think we'll probably circle back, I'm sure, to these topics. Maybe we'll go ahead. I want to just say to the witnesses that I recognize the awkwardness

of this particular format where our witnesses often get cut off mid-sentence. We will endeavour to not make that happen.

I want to shift gears for a second. I know that my colleague and I both have numerous questions for Dr. Thomas and the department.

I want to go back to Ms. Lanthier. You've raised a really important issue which is that often when we talk about this issue - particularly in political circles, we talk about it as an urban issue. It's not just an urban issue. We know that and we've seen tragic results of that, particularly in the Valley recently.

One of the ways that this has come to our caucus is that we hear from employers. We hear from employers in rural areas who talk about the ways in which the lack of affordable housing impacts the rural economy. One example of that which I know was in the media is the owner of the LaHave Bakery talked about how they had to buy a building in order to be able to hire staff - they couldn't hire staff because staff had no where to live. The staff they needed, I guess, weren't already in the community. This, from where we sit, feels like something that's being overlooked, that I think your presentation really accurately displayed.

I think you did speak to what you've seen as a lack of government action on affordable housing. I wonder what you think about something like a right of first refusal? This goes to what some of the presentations refer to as sort of preserve an existing stock. We know in Montreal, when affordable housing goes on the market, there is legislation that the government has the right of first refusal. They can purchase that first before it goes to the open market, thereby preserving affordable housing.

Is that something that you feel like would make a difference in the communities that you're touching and working with?

HELEN LANTHIER: The right of first refusal, from what I understand in Montréal - we have not talked about that at our SSHAC table, so I really don't feel I can comment on it.

What I do know is that there is a whole toolkit of policies that municipalities can use to provide incentives for building or renovating affordable housing and for maintaining it as affordable over a number of years.

[10:45 a.m.]

The right of first refusal - it sounds to me that that's a common kind of common-sense thing to do, but I don't know what the literature says about it, I don't know what the research says about it, so I don't want to make a comment that's not informed.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I appreciate that. I guess another question that I'm interested in is short-term rentals. This is something that we've also heard a lot about, and again, it's often a conversation that gets focused in an urban way. There are these urban pockets particularly in the HRM that have been really overrun with short-term rentals. My community is one of those, and my colleague in Halifax Needham has also seen that in her community.

My experience over the last couple of years is I'm hearing about communities in Digby Neck, where the member for Clare-Digby would have some familiarity with, in Ingonish, around the South Shore, and they're all identifying that also as a serious pressure, again particularly when it comes to having housing for folks who are working.

We've been pushing for a long time for an effective short-term housing registry. Right now, although under the new Tourist Accommodations Act certain classes of Airbnbs do have to register, we've recently found out that that registry information is secret. We were told that it's private information and when we try to obtain it, we are not allowed access to that information under the grounds that that's private information.

Not only is there no enforcement or clear registry, but we can't even find out what properties are registered. Do you think that some action on Airbnb or an effective registry is important in the context of affordable housing in rural Nova Scotia?

HELEN LANTHIER: I do, and SSHAC does as well. I live just outside of Lunenburg, and the number of short-term rental accommodations has skyrocketed from our perception. We don't have data so we cannot actually prove that, but it appears to be a real issue in impacting the availability of affordable rental housing. We think that yes, the government should take some action around some kind of - I know for some people the word "regulation" is a political word, but some kind of regulation that will allow for a balance among short-term rental accommodations and affordable housing rents.

The other thing that happens that I would like to mention on the South Shore - and I'm told that it happens in other places as well - is that we're finding a population of people who are essentially homeless for four months of the year. What's happening with them is that they are signing leases or they're making agreements - a lot of our rental accommodations are in single-family homes with one landlord who's the owner, and the landlords are asking for leases that go over the winter months. Then because of the low vacancy rates and a lack of affordable housing - and certainly affordable housing options - the tenant is asked to leave, and they do because they have to, and they built up little tent communities on the beaches.

At Rissers Beach, for example - some of you may know that beautiful beach, and there's a large campground - there's a little tent city that goes up for four months of the year. I will tell you that the Town of Bridgewater, through its Energize Bridgewater project - I don't know if you know about that - is putting together a coordinated access system from federal funds. Bridgewater's actually funding it right now, but it's a Reaching Home

initiative, and it's to do a coordinated access system for housing. They are going to be doing a registry of homelessness between now and the end of April, and they are going to try to find those people who are essentially evicted out of their houses or their units for those four months of the year. I believe - and I think that SSHAC would say that as well, that [No audio] and that it's putting people at risk. It's setting up systems where - as I said - outside of Lunenburg, a lot of people have left Lunenburg because they can't afford the rents anymore.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just one more quick question and then I'm going to turn it over to my colleague. I just want to pull out something that you said in both of your responses and check it. I really appreciate the fact that in both of your responses you said, we don't have the data or we need the information but this is what we think. I want to clarify, I feel like we've been working for that data.

Would it be helpful for you if you did have that data - not for a volunteer organization or from a researcher, but from government itself - about how many short-term rentals were in a given community and what that pattern looks like?

HELEN LANTHIER: It would be incredibly helpful, thank you. If that could happen, that would make it easier because that data trickle-down effect goes through everything that we do.

Previously, somebody - I think it was Dr. Thomas - was talking about the reduced capacity of small communities just to get together a team of people when the RHI funding came out in the Fall. There was no way that we were prepared to do that. We didn't have the population. We didn't have the data. We have all kinds of ideas. We are innovative in our thinking in small communities because we have to be, and we were not able to access that funding at that time.

There has been a recent announcement about another \$7 billion so we're hoping that we will be able to do that, but again, our data is very limited. The data is important when you're putting together a funding package.

The other comment that I'd like to make about that is that often the funding packages are urban-centric, so sometimes they require transportation to a housing development. There are so many communities in this province that don't have transportation for people who don't have cars and so it limits our capacity. The lack of internet or spotty internet impacts our ability.

There are so many barriers small rural communities have that urban centres don't have, we would really appreciate there being some movement on that to make the whole system more equitable. We really feel that it's almost like it's a two-tier system. There are people in Halifax and then there are people in rural communities and the access to equitable housing options and service provision around housing too for the people who are really vulnerable - people with mental health and addictions, youth who are leaving trafficking

situations. So many of our vulnerable people are being harmed by no access to services right across Nova Scotia, but I can say on the South Shore, for sure.

THE CHAIR: We're moving on to Ms. Roberts. You have nine minutes.

LISA ROBERTS: I am sure I have more questions than that, but it will sort of depend on the answers.

Thank you, Ms. Lanthier. I really appreciate all of your answers. I'll just say quickly that we've also heard some similar frustrations from housing providers here in Halifax vis-à-vis the rest of the country where I know that local non-profit housing organizations that haven't had some of the access to supports have found it very difficult to access National Housing Strategy funds that were designed more so for Toronto and Vancouver. I think some of the issues are similar.

I'd like to go back to Dr. Thomas. So many of the things that Ms. Lanthier speaks to make me kind of question the overall narrative of the housing challenges being a problem of supply not keeping up with demand. It strikes me that the nature of that supply is quite important. How is the supply regulated? Who owns that supply? How are we adding to that supply?

Certainly, in the case of short-term rentals, we could have supply added, but if we're not ensuring that that supply is actually contributing to long-term, 12-months-of-the-year homes for people, that effort can not ultimately be contributing to getting us out of this housing crisis in both rural and urban Nova Scotia.

I wonder if you could speak to that in general. What is the importance of viewing housing as an asset that is regulated and which does have a significant amount of non-market, public, non-profit, and co-op representation within the mix of housing units?

REN THOMAS: That's a great question. I think that we need to seriously consider, in our province, what the role of rental and affordable housing, whatever form that might take in terms of being community organizations - or running it or public sector in terms of governments - building and managing it. I think we need to think about what type of role that area of housing wants to be.

We have a system, generally, in Canada that researchers would call a dualist rental market. What we have right now is a very tiny percentage of non-profit or community-based or public housing - about 5 per cent, honestly, across Canada - and 95 per cent market rental housing. That is generally for-profit rental market housing.

That is considered a dualist system. The two systems are basically separate. The two populations are basically separate where you have people who are within that very low income population, really, who are the only ones able to access, usually, that very low income housing in the community and the non-profit sector.

That is very different in other parts of the country or other parts of the world. If we look at Quebec, for example, where they have put way more funding into co-operative housing. They have technical resource groups. They have that resource available for community groups who want to start a co-op. Quebec is the only province that continued significant funding of co-operatives after 1984. They have hundreds and hundreds of co-operative units.

If we look at other countries, as well - the Netherlands where I lived for two years, Sweden or Denmark - lots of other countries have much more of what's called an integrated rental market where you have both non-profit and profit developers actually basically competing for the same tenants. The same tenants might live in a co-operative or in a non-profit unit or they might live in a for-profit unit.

I think we need to decide in Nova Scotia what type of rental market we want to have. Do we want to have a rental housing market where only the very low income people, or people who might have many of the challenges that Ms. Lanthier described, accessing that housing - people with disabilities, seniors on fixed incomes, or people with mental health and addictions issues - where only those people who really, truly need that housing are able to access it? Or do we want to have a more robust and integrated rental housing market where anyone can rent? I say that as someone who has been a renter for 30 years. There are lots of people who are not falling into those very vulnerable demographics who choose to rent. Everyone should also be able to access that rental housing market.

That is something we need to decide as a province, I think: what type of rental housing market do we want to have. I don't think we need to worry about the supply of single family housing or a type of housing for the middle- to higher-income groups because those are typically what for-profit developers are focusing on.

The focus really does need to be on the affordable supply. That's where, as you pointed out, we have seen a lot more uptick of National Housing Strategy funds from provinces where the non-profit sector is highly motivated. There are hundreds and hundreds of non-profits - B.C. and Ontario come to mind, but also with Quebec.

If we want to have a more robust rental housing sector, then we need to make that decision and actually strengthen the capacity within organizations to do that.

[11:00 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr. Thomas. Ms. Roberts, you have less than two minutes. What I could do is, if the witness is still continuing, we can keep her speaking, and then I will deduct that from your second round.

LISA ROBERTS: Could I maybe instead add the two minutes to my second round and allow us to move to the Liberal caucus now?

THE CHAIR: Sure, with pleasure. We can do that.

LISA ROBERTS: I still get the two minutes. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: They're added, I promise you. Mr. Jessome, please go ahead.

HON. BEN JESSOME: On a couple of different occasions, there have been some commentary related to the connectivity, collaboration of different levels of government. I'm wondering if our folks at the department could speak to, not limited to the function of the commission but just add a little context to how the relationship between, in particular the province and municipality, functions in the context of the commission, but not limited to that.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: First of all, we were the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, so we worked very hard in that short time to integrate Housing and Municipal Affairs to work together, to identify issues, to identify how to move forward with that.

We have to work together with our municipal partners because planning is a big issue, right? Planning falls with our municipal partners and it impacts our ability to be able to move forward with some of our projects. A great example is backyard or secondary suites. We have funding for that, but we need to work with our municipal partners to ensure that their planning strategies allow for that. HRM just made that change so that now we're able to work together and try to find ways to be able to support that, be able to get those secondary suites up and moving forward.

We actively work with our municipal partners to identify projects, to identify ways forward. I just think that - again, I know I'm going back to the commission again, I just think that it highlights the need of working with them, and I think we also too want to find out specifically what it is we can do better for them, because it's going to take all levels of government.

We also work closely with our federal counterparts at CMHC. We have monthly meetings with them to discuss projects, discuss what's going on, in particular around the National Housing Strategy. We work with them very closely on that on how to move forward on those projects and ensure that we're reaching the targets that are outlined in that program.

BEN JESSOME: Mr. Laycock, thank you for that response. Along the same line of questioning, I pose a similar question to both Dr. Thomas and Ms. Lanthier with a couple of caveats.

Dr. Thomas, could you comment on that same question? Also, you said in either your opening remarks, or in a response to Mr. Craig, that you've done some work to identify different tools that municipalities have to add to the cause. Can you add some

context to what those types of initiatives are that you've got information on, please and thank you?

Then Ms. Lanthier, perhaps the context of the municipality being, effectively or not, the inroad in rural Nova Scotia for collaboration with different levels of government.

REN THOMAS: I think that the successful cases that I mentioned in my reports, which you can find online, there's a lot of detail about the different programs and by-laws and policies that are possible and that municipalities have used. Since Mr. Laycock mentioned secondary suites, just to take the example of secondary suites - in Edmonton and in Calgary, they had specific programs in place at the municipal level. They had incentives in place for homeowners who wanted to create secondary suites as long as they maintain affordability for a certain time period. The rents had to be below the median rent for that area.

That's a type of program that obviously would require coordination with the provincial government. That's the type of thing that you do see in the more innovative cities, I would say. Quebecois cities are another good example. In our sample, we looked at Sherbrooke and Montreal where they have some really good programs in place and there is a municipal housing office of the provincial government in most municipalities to help coordinate those programs. That's how they've been able to create a lot of their affordable housing programs, for example, through AccèsLogis Quebec, which is a program that has been for some time now.

To Ms. Lanthier's earlier points, it enables even smaller communities like Sherbrooke, which has a population of 200,000 - they were able to build a few hundred new affordable units every year through programs like AccèsLogis Quebec, which requires so much coordination with provincial government.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lanthier.

HELEN LANTHIER: May I clarify your question? Your question was about the relationship and the collaboration among the municipalities and the provincial government?

BEN JESSOME: I guess what I was trying to get at is, you made some comments about the appetite and the desire for a rural presence through decision-making efforts and through collaborative efforts. The variety of municipalities that exist throughout the province would have their own outreach and connectivity to those micro areas of the province. I'm wondering what the existing function is today and is that an appropriate or a desirable situation for you to engage in the conversation?

HELEN LANTHIER: I believe it's aspirational. I believe there are efforts among municipalities, particularly on the South Shore, to work together with community

organizations. They have not taken a leading role in the provision of housing - certainly not as far as I'm aware.

Since the inception of SSHAC in 2010, we have done a lot of work with our local municipalities. There are six municipalities on the South Shore from Chester to Queens. We have done a lot of work building awareness on the need for affordable housing. Ten years ago, it was not as obvious as it is right now. The municipalities now certainly have more awareness and when they're re-doing their planning strategies, they are taking affordable housing into consideration, which is a great progress.

The councillors - there are eight of them, three from Mahone Bay and five others who come check on a regular basis - are forming a working group to talk about what they can do to support each other, what their municipalities can do, bringing ideas to their municipalities what they can do collaboratively to improve the housing situation on the South Shore.

It's small municipalities and there are a lot of them in really this one section. From Chester to Queens, there are six of them. Their capacity is not the same as the capacity of HRM. The capacity and the resources are not there, although we are exploring with them about what they might do. For example, I go back to the Rapid Housing Initiative funding. We had some conversations with some municipalities about being a partner on a particular project. That was an initial conversation and it was certainly thought about, but there's a fear - a hesitancy - because of the capacity that it requires to be a full partner in a housing development of any kind.

We talked about them possibly being the holders of the funding and that they could administer that funding. It never went anywhere because we didn't actually have the capacity to put together an application at that point. We're hoping to be doing so soon, though. Does that answer your question?

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for those responses to you both. I've got one more question. The department may want to respond to some of that information that we just heard, as well, so feel free to do that.

My question is on a different subject. Can you talk a little bit about the subscription of the First-Time Home Buyers Rebate program and the effectiveness of that program?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: That's through our Down Payment Assistance Program. It's something offered through Housing Nova Scotia. What it does is, it provides at 5 per cent to a maximum of \$14,000 for HRM and we have different maths for rural areas.

The point of that program is to be able to assist first-time home buyers to have that down payment so that they can get into the housing market. They can get assistance, they can meet the criteria to be able to get into that home and perhaps move out of that rental property to free it up and then get into their first home.

We're very pleased to be able to offer that as a program. It's a very popular program, too. I think we have assisted close to over 200 just this year with the Down Payment Assistance Program. We do about 200 every year to assist those folks. We're very pleased about that program.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you. I might have something towards the end to add, but I think Mr. Wilson would like to jump in here, now, as well.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

HON. GORDON WILSON: To my colleagues who brought this topic forward, I appreciate that. I know the NDP has been very passionate about this. I think we've listened to some of the things that have been brought forward there, certainly. I think the reflection that we've seen in the recent shuffling of what our government looks like hopefully will bring some answers there, also.

The perspective of rural Nova Scotia, Ms. Lanthier - I really cannot say how important it is to have that voice out here in rural Nova Scotia. I appreciate what you're saying there. Also, I'm glad to see my colleague, Mr. Jessome, and Dr. Thomas; the opportunities to talk about municipal and how big a role they play.

I'm going to throw it into a different role here quickly. That's on the developer side here. More specifically - again, I don't mean to break it out - but this is a topic that is not a one size fits all. Not only is it not one size fits all geographically, but it's what creates the problem. What we're hearing here today is very beneficial.

My problem is, if somebody asks me - and this an emerging thing that started happening about three years ago is when it really started to grow. Up until that point, if somebody asked me what my biggest wish for Christmas was, I would say health care. That's moved into a different world now. Now it's housing and people. I need both of those.

What we've seen is a market that has been challenged. We had one lobster facility alone that grew from 60 people in 2014 to now where they employ 250. For rural Nova Scotia, put that in perspective. That's just one; we've had several. They've moved into a housing department that they have in that facility.

I have numerous contractors right now who would love to go into the business of affordable housing. Basically, they can't keep up with the regular housing market. This is pre-COVID-19, also. COVID-19 has even added to it.

In the developer's world right now. Mr. Laycock, I do know that I've heard just recently that there is an initiative that you have with Dalhousie on the application project for housing opportunities and assistance programs and I have worked through your department, Mr. Laycock, with some developers. What are we doing and what could we

do better to help our developers in rural Nova Scotia find ways - and again, a lot of it is complicated and a lot of it is the workforce. They don't have the journeymen out there to do the work, so it's one problem that's driving the other one and challenging it, but what do you think you can recommend that we can do better, and what are we doing now? That would be for Mr. Laycock maybe to start.

[11:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Mr. Laycock.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: Could I get clarity? The question is how to attract workers to the area? Is that the question?

GORDON WILSON: No, the question is, how can we better support our developers that we have in rural Nova Scotia to move projects forward?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I think one of the things is be able to find access to funding for them. Right now we provide funding for affordable housing units of \$50,000 a door, so that helps reduce some of their overhead costs. I think what we can do on our side is to be able to facilitate the application process and work with them more closely to be able to move forward with the projects.

Let me give you an example. We're working with a private sector developer in Yarmouth to help develop 54 units in total; 27 of those will be affordable units. We're working with them. We are attracting the people who want to be a part of the process by making the projects affordable for them. Whether it's a forgivable loan, whether it's some type of grant, what have you, we're able to find ways to incentivize to maybe move beyond that for-profit project to that one that will include affordable housing units in there by incentivizing, by reducing some of their capital costs to be able to enable them to move that project forward.

That's what we try to do to help them, and we think we're getting some active involvement - again, I go back to the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission. We have the active involvement of many, many builders on there and their feedback, and I'm sure we'll get some great recommendations from them on how we can improve our processes to make it more palatable or obtainable for them to be able to assist us with affordable housing projects.

GORDON WILSON: For Dr. Thomas, in that same sort of world, only just to follow up on Minister Jessome's comments around municipal. Just recently I know that there has been a lot of activity, just for example in the Clare area, where the municipality has been working very closely with the business sector, with the industry, and the resource sector in particular, to find ways that they can also, collaboratively as a joint effort, bring forth housing initiatives, and I think they're almost ready to bring some.

Do we see other examples of that sort of a structure in Nova Scotia that you're aware of?

REN THOMAS: Not that I'm aware of, although I've heard from some municipalities that they have now a focus on affordable housing, they have maybe a committee in place and that kind of thing. I haven't heard of anything else like that.

To address your earlier question, what I've heard from developers is that as you said, they are quite busy with supplying market housing - they're building market housing to a great end in fact. But accessing those funds that are available for affordable housing, for example through the National Housing Strategy, is not something that they've been able to tap into.

I've heard that from multiple developers here that the application process for these funds is quite complicated. There may be other issues - there might be capacity issues for example with the Rapid Housing Initiative. We know it had to be basically modular housing for one of the streams, which is very difficult to do here in Nova Scotia, because we don't have that expertise or that supply of the kind of containers that we would need.

I think that there needs to be probably some coordination with CMHC there on maybe getting the developers the resources that they need to do that kind of work - to access those funds to be able to do that type of work.

THE CHAIR: You have one minute left, Mr. Wilson.

GORDON WILSON: Thank you. Again, there is nothing that we apply for in government that's very simple. That's unfortunate, but I think that's the nature of the beast. Accountability is in information and we ask for a lot sometimes.

The project, Mr. Laycock, that Dalhousie University did with the streamlining of the funding application - can you give me a bit more information on that, quickly?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: Absolutely. This is a really exciting project. It is in the infancy stages. We worked through the Capstone Program at Dalhousie to get some engineering students to help us create a database of all the funding programs that are out there, available to community sector groups - so non-profits and co-ops. We're in phase two of it.

What would happen is, you would punch in your information - this is what I need, this is what I have, this is what it is - and it would come up with a response based on the available grants that are out there of what you could apply for, what you could move forward with too.

We're also hoping to bring aboard a person who would help facilitate people to walk through those grants because, to your point, they're complicated. The last thing that

a lot of community groups have is that time to go through the programs. I know that there's a group here that also has hired a person to help move forward with that process too.

We're at the beginning stages of that particular database, but we're really excited about it. I think it's going to be very promising. In fact, I think I have a meeting about it next week to get an update on where we're at with it. We've been doing that in consultation with community groups too, so they understand what it is they need, what they would want, what we can provide.

Hopefully, we'll be able to get a product that will allow them to access the various funding streams that are out there so they can become more efficient, they can do it in a more effective way.

THE CHAIR: We went over by one minute and I will deduct that from the Liberal caucus on the second round.

We're starting our second round and it will be 10 minutes. We'll be starting with the PC Party for 10 minutes, starting at 11:22 a.m. so you have until 11:32 a.m. Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: I won't harp on this, but I noted that when we talked about the time, you said anything that we didn't use, we would forfeit it. Yet Ms. Roberts requested you grant her time at the end. I'll just point that out. You may have overlooked that.

Occupancy and building permits - this will be directed to Mr. Laycock. The municipalities have development permits and building permits, those types of things. I'm just wondering if your department actually tracks the number of building permits.

More important though - this is a conversation I've had with Mayor Savage - is occupancy permits, to know how many of those units build up. Do we have a growing number of building permits out there and are not coming to market in a timely fashion - whatever and however you might define that?

I'm wondering if you might comment on what types of things you measure relative to building permits and occupancy permits within the province.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I know that Property Valuation Services tracks building permits. Municipalities submit those - or at least they're supposed to submit those to Property Valuation Services. Occupancy, I couldn't comment on.

We work with our Municipal Affairs Department to be able to access some of that information, but our focus really is on getting the affordable units out there. We focus on funding - just like we funded \$7.6 million worth of new projects for about 152 new affordable housing units. That's what our focus is on right now - getting the units out there, getting the commitments out there so we can get the affordable units built.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you for that. How do you know that they're being occupied? Getting the money out there in response to an application is one thing, but to actually know when they come to market is something else. Similar to the occupancy question, how is it that you track that?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: We would use CMHC similar to many folks. We rely on CMHC data that comes out from that, so it indicated that there was in Halifax generally a 1.9 per cent vacancy rate; 2.1 per cent across the province. We also do work closely with our community partners to help them, to monitor them and assist them.

For example, there has been a lot of talk about capacity. We have spent over \$1.5 million over the last two years to help build capacity for various community housing groups. We also do a lot of transformation and infrastructure reforms to help our co-ops and non-profit groups. We spent a little over \$5 million to help those folks there.

We are actively involved within the communities so it's not, here's a cheque and we walk away. We do follow up, we do monitor it and know what we're working towards with the affordable housing units we fund.

STEVE CRAIG: I want to go back to the question I had asked and not had answered because of time. I want to expand on that just a wee bit. As it was brought up by MLA Wilson, he talked about developers and becoming aware in the last three years of this impending housing issue. I've been aware of it for lots of years - a decade.

I'm assuming that either the Department of Business, Department of Municipal Affairs - the Department of Community Services used to have housing before perhaps two years ago. What is the level of conversation between the departments to understand that housing was on the cusp of a crisis, and what actions and input have you had from other departments to address that?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I apologize. Can you repeat the last part of that question? I apologize. My audio cuts in and out. I apologize.

THE CHAIR: No problem at all. I have my issues as well with mine. Mr. Craig, if you don't mind.

STEVE CRAIG: My question, the pertinent part of it is, what and how do the various departments within the provincial government work together to identify the need for housing? I asked it of Mr. Miller the last time I was here. What is it and how rigorous is it that departments talk with each other to identify that we are having an emphasis on growing our population, an emphasis on immigration and migration, and that we are going to need housing?

Just how active and what formal processes are in place to talk between all the other departments? This is an economic standing committee in some respects, so just how robust is that identification of the need and, more importantly, the response?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I might turn to my colleague Stephan Richard as director of interdepartmental relationships to answer that.

STEPHAN RICHARD: What I would say is, we definitely look at all data - whether it's CMHC, whether it's provincial, Department of Finance and Treasury Board. More importantly, I think we hear it and we've been hearing it from our stakeholders, whether it's Ms. Lanthier, who I've worked with at the beginning of the South Shore Housing Action Coalition. We actually funded a housing needs study on the South Shore to understand the specific need. We funded many studies around the province.

We have conversations - I have conversations with many developers, whether it's private, non-profit, municipalities across the province to identify opportunities, but also hear about challenges. When we developed the three-year housing Action Plan under the National Housing Strategy, we consulted with municipalities, we consulted with many stakeholders. What you see in that plan, which is available on our website, is a result of those consultations.

Absolutely, we know about the data, but there's more to data. That understanding of what's happening in the rural communities, for example - there's no data that really accurately captures this, so we need to be engaged with our partners which we do on a regular basis.

[11:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Richard. Mr. Craig, you have two minutes left. I'll let the witness finish their sentence from now on just so that we don't interrupt. I believe that would be better.

Go ahead. You have two minutes and I'll let you have a minute extra.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you for your response, Mr. Richard. However, it didn't address the internal government interaction and coordination - that's what I'm primarily focused on.

The government has a long-term goals strategy. How engaged is your department in that?

STEPHAN RICHARD: What I would say on that point is, we interact. I'll give you an example. We've been talking about the Affordable Housing Commission. We have representation from the Department of Community Services, Service Nova Scotia, and the Department of Justice. We talk regularly with different departments.

We're bringing experts from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board to better understand kind of what the outlook is in terms of the housing market and the growth. Internally within government, we are in regular contact with various departments at that level. I hope that answers your question.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you for the responses.

THE CHAIR: We move on now to the NDP at 11:31 a.m. You have until 11:43 a.m. because of the other two minutes.

LISA ROBERTS: I'll say at the outset that this question will be for Dr. Thomas, but I have a bit of a preamble.

In 2013, the NDP released a housing strategy. That strategy had been developed through consultation. It included plans that needed to be operationalized for investment in non-market housing - including co-op, non-profit housing, and mixed market development such as at the Bloomfield site. It would have actually built publicly-owned housing.

Now instead, the Liberal government decided to walk away from the Bloomfield project. That public land was in transfer back to the municipality and now it's been sold. There have been other cases in which the Province has chosen to dispose of land and assets, rather than develop them for public purposes.

I guess, Dr. Thomas, given what we see now - the acute housing crisis that as your own remarks suggested, would have been even worse this year were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic which decimated the short-term rental market and resulted in fewer international students coming here. What is your view of disposing of public assets rather than doing the difficult work of actually developing non-market housing?

REN THOMAS: I think that it's always valuable for municipalities and provincial governments to retain land like that for the purpose of affordable housing. We've seen great success in both Saskatoon and in Montreal with land banking. Saskatoon has had a very vital land bank since the 1920s. It continually expands on that and only released that land to non-profit housing providers to develop affordable housing.

Using publicly-owned land for this purpose is definitely something that a lot of municipalities and provincial governments have done. However, we've definitely seen examples just like the one you mentioned. For example, in Vancouver, the Expo '86 lands were sold to private developers and extensively used for the high-end market or high-end ownership housing.

We've seen lots of examples of what you were talking about with the Bloomfield site. I think that one of the things that Calgary did in the last two years was to use seven different school sites that they didn't need anymore. They were surplus sites and they are

using them now to develop affordable housing. It has definitely been a strategy that municipal governments have used.

It has also been a strategy that transportation agencies have used in transit corridors where they want to preserve affordable housing. Having a property development arm in a public organization is pretty critical in order to be able to capitalize on that.

LISA ROBERTS: I really appreciate that answer. I guess I'm also struck by the same thing that some of my colleagues have commented on, which is the continual change of leadership at the head of Housing Nova Scotia, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - now the Department of Infrastructure and Housing.

Effectively what I'm hearing is that we can do this. This is doable in other jurisdictions and it requires real public commitment and public investment, and a desire and an intention to hold a public asset or at least a community-controlled asset in the long term.

Effectively, there is a market failure when it comes to providing affordable housing for many Nova Scotians. We know that in 2015, 20 per cent of Nova Scotians needed housing that was below the market rent and at that point, 4 per cent of the housing units were not in the non-market sector.

Dr. Thomas, I don't know if you can comment on the loss of the learning opportunity. Had we gone forward in 2013, by now in 2021, would we have developed some of the capacity to do these sorts of developments? It seems to me that we keep actually not doing the difficult learning because there is a desire to find an easier way, or to invest in rent supplements, instead of actually investing in developing assets.

REN THOMAS: I think that what you're hitting upon is a real controversy that exists at all levels of government, including Canada Mortgage and Housing where I worked for several years in the early 2000s. It is conflict between housing as an economic investment for individuals, versus as a human right - that people actually do have the right to housing, to be housed safely. As Ms. Lanthier pointed out, for health reasons and all kinds of other reasons, it just makes sense to have people properly housed.

I think that what you're touching on is this kind of conflict. This conflict does come up in areas like the short-term rentals where you see small communities like Lunenburg; Charlottetown; Whistler, B.C.; Georgina, Ontario; Prince Edward County, Ontario - a lot of smaller communities that really rely on tourist revenue. They also need to think about where those tourists are going to stay when they come to their communities.

This overlap between economic gain related to housing is constantly in conflict with people's right to housing and people's ability to be safely housed. Again, we have to decide as government or as a province which of these goals is more important to us.

Mr. Laycock, at the very beginning, indicated that providing affordable housing is also an economic strategy because we need to provide housing for those people who are working in the service sector, working in the tourism and retail sectors - those who are now deemed as essential workers, basically, with COVID-19, who are unable to afford these high market prices for housing. It could be considered an economic strategy, therefore, to actually invest in housing that is affordable, that is accessible.

We've seen this in all kinds of cities. I lived in Vancouver for seven years. I lived in Amsterdam for two years. We've seen this in all kinds of cities around the world where if you can't house that service sector population - retail, hotel, tourism sector - your city will suffer. You will start to see a lot of impacts from that, not the least including that people have to go further and further out and live further out to be able to - maybe as far as the Valley to be able to commute to their jobs, which are minimum wage jobs.

There definitely is a resistance to learning from other places though in Nova Scotia - in my work here. Because my work here does focus on how we transfer ideas from other places to this place, and there has been a lot of resistance.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Roberts, you have three more minutes.

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you. I have so many other questions I would like to ask, but maybe I'll go back to Mr. Laycock. In the interest of showing an example where we might learn from other jurisdictions, I know that in some other jurisdictions - in significant numbers of them - inclusionary zoning has been used as one way of facilitating the development of affordable housing by the private market sector. Not instead of direct investment in non-profits and public housing, but in addition to.

Yet, even though municipalities have asked for that right - certainly Halifax has, and that request goes back quite a number of years - the Province has not at this point responded to that request for inclusionary zoning. As I understand it, that would deflate land prices in order to reflect the cost of adding more affordable units within private developments.

Can you comment on why that has not been pursued or why that request has not been responded to?

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I would perhaps disagree that it hasn't been responded to. We actually engaged municipal partners in July last year and asked them their opinions around inclusionary zoning, and it wasn't just Halifax - it was Nova Scotia municipalities as a whole. Obviously we had to do that virtually because of COVID restrictions and whatnot. The feedback was mixed in some parts. There were certainly some great comments that we received to be able to move forward with that.

We've been able to look at those comments and the team is working - well, I guess former team now. It's the planning team that I used to work with, but now with the

Department of Municipal Affairs. They've been actively taking that feedback, doing analysis on inclusionary zoning, and working diligently to come up with the best recommendation to move forward. Perhaps that legislation could be considered.

To your point, we're still looking at other areas, making sure we have the best data and provide the best information so we can make the best recommendation moving forward. We have engaged municipalities across the province on inclusionary zoning.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Laycock, you did it perfectly. You have just a few seconds, Ms. Roberts. Would you like to say a few words?

LISA ROBERTS: I guess I would just say that I understand that inclusionary zoning is a tool that is primarily useful in large urban context. So while other municipalities may not be interested in using it, that doesn't seem to me to be a reason not to add it as a tool to the toolbox for Halifax, which has requested it, with that request coming from council. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We move on now to the Liberal caucus. I believe Mr. Glavine would like to ask questions.

HON. LEO GLAVINE: I was just wondering how long we would have left in terms of time, because I may have a colleague wanting to ask a question as well.

THE CHAIR: I'm giving you nine minutes because we went over one minute before. Starting now, nine minutes, that would give you to 11:52 a.m.

LEO GLAVINE: My question is for Mr. Laycock. We have something certainly challenging in the province happening around the need for affordable housing, the need for more housing across the province. I know just six or seven years ago, when we came to government, we had five counties that were holding or growing their population a little bit. We now have our 18 counties in the province that are gaining different degrees of population increase.

I was wondering if Mr. Laycock could give us that bigger picture of what he sees happening in the province which is putting an enormous pressure on housing, and why we look today at some of the elements of housing in somewhat of a negative context perhaps. There was also a trend in development here in the province, which we have not seen the like of since the Second World War. Perhaps, Mr. Laycock, in looking at the bigger picture, can identify some of those forces that are changing the demand on housing.

[11:45 a.m.]

MARTIN LAYCOCK: It's challenging. There are many facets that would impact housing, but I think obviously immigration, low interest rates are some things. But the fact

is, there's an economic increase over the last few years. We've seen that. That comes with significant growth, significant demand on housing.

Also, quite frankly, let's be honest for a second. In the past year, Nova Scotia is one of the safest places - if not the safest - to be in the world right now. That would attract a number of people who would want to come here and want to live here and recognize some of the benefits of that.

We recognize too that it isn't all just about Halifax. Since 2015, we've funded affordable housing units in Port Hawkesbury, New Glasgow, and Yarmouth. In 2016-17, there were 26 in Mahone Bay, another four in Yarmouth. I can go on - in Truro, in Greenwood. We fund across the province. It isn't just an HRM-centric program. Hopefully, we'll have another 40 units to talk about soon in Port Hawkesbury, Bridgewater, and Jeddore. I think there are economic pressures. The good news story of having a healthy and strong economy does lead to the pressure, but I think we're tackling that head on with our funding of affordable housing units.

We also have the National Housing Strategy, which we haven't really talked about. That's 10 years, \$513 million invested into affordable housing programs in the Province of Nova Scotia. That's a big deal. We have a lot of great programs that we funded towards that. It helps us create capacity in the community housing sector. It helps us increase rent supplements. Since 2019, we've added 1,000 new rent supplements to our portfolio. That's 1,000 more people we've helped.

I think that given the constraints, given the issues that are arising, I think the staff in the department have met the challenge and are actively engaging the assets that have been provided through the National Housing Strategy and through the programs of Housing Nova Scotia as a whole.

LEO GLAVINE: That gives an overview that touches on a couple of the other questions that I was going to ask.

I know we're in a time constraint here because perhaps the second round was a little bit longer than normal. Our witnesses may need to make some summary comments, so I'm fine with that one question. If there is time, according to Madam Chair, for another question, perhaps a colleague could jump in.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Glavine, you read my mind - this is exactly what I was going to say. We can start closing remarks with Mr. Laycock and then Dr. Thomas, and then Ms. Lanthier. If you can make them short, I would really appreciate it.

MARTIN LAYCOCK: I want to thank you for the opportunity to talk about the important work that Housing does. We're making significant investments in affordable housing across the province to help the most vulnerable people. I appreciate the support and ideas. I do really encourage everyone to go to nsaffordablehousingcommission.ca and

share your voice. If you have an idea that you want to share - you want to get an idea across - it will get listened to. That is the forum to help shape affordable housing in Nova Scotia for the future.

REN THOMAS: Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. I don't have much in the way of closing comments, except to say that there is, as we know, a lot of good work being done across Canada that we can learn from. I hope that we all continue to learn from those municipalities and provinces and what they've done. Thank you very much for allowing me to be here.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Thomas, thank you so much. Ms. Lanthier.

HELEN LANTHIER: I also want to say thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. I did want to speak on behalf, just for a moment, about the most vulnerable people in rural communities. People who live in isolated areas who can't get into town, women who are in a domestic violence situation who can't access services or can't get away from that situation, and a whole other range of people who mostly for reasons that have nothing to do with them find themselves in a system that is perpetuating systemic poverty.

When we look at housing, it's affordable housing and supportive housing. It's not always about poverty, but it's almost always about poverty, and the message that I want to say is that as a society and as a province, that we take a look at those systems that allow people not to have the basic human right of housing.

There are all kinds of things that I want to say that I didn't get a chance of course to respond to the other speakers. Thank you though. I enjoyed the conversation. I learned a lot.

THE CHAIR: Thank you all, and on behalf of the committee, I want to thank you as well. We've learned a lot. I know this is an issue that is not just within Halifax - it's all the cities in Canada, in California, in all the advanced countries they're suffering the same way. I'm very pleased with the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission and listening to Dr. Thomas who is on that commission. I'm very encouraged. Thank you again all and you may leave. We have some committee business to do. It was lovely meeting you all.

We have some committee business. The first thing is an email poll conducted February 19th-22nd and then the 22nd to the 23rd. Analysis for the record that in email polls conducted over the last week, this committee gave unanimous consent to excuse two approved witnesses from today's meeting: Nancy Green from the South Shore Housing Action Coalition, and Diana Devlin of Welcome Housing and Support Services.

Is there any discussion? Is everybody happy with that? Just raise your hand and I'll move on. Thank you very much.

Our next meeting will be an agenda-setting meeting. Members are asked to submit their list of proposed topics and witnesses for the clerk by Friday, March 5th. Any discussion? I apologize Ms. Chender. I had the piece of paper. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I just wanted to speak to the next meeting, so I'm fine with the agenda.

THE CHAIR: The next meeting will be March 23rd from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., and it will be agenda setting. Also I have a note here: If the House of Assembly is sitting on that date, this meeting will be postponed.

Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'd like to put forward a motion that if the House of Assembly isn't sitting and this meeting does go forward, that subject to Public Health, the meeting be held in person.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: I think this meeting was relatively blessed by lack of technical glitches and people arriving in time to test their microphones and so forth. But we saw as recently as yesterday in the Human Resources Committee that meetings do not always go as smoothly and certainly I think the conversations that we're having here are important, and the House of Assembly is our workplace. Many people are at workplaces using all the Public Health precautions, and I would really welcome the opportunity to be back in person, not challenged by technology as we try to seek information for Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? Mr. Wilson.

GORDON WILSON: I really do appreciate the motion. I think we all would like to be in that world right now, no doubt about it. I certainly think it's something that at some point in time, yes, we need to have a fulsome conversation. Ultimately, we follow our direction from the medical office on this. Our caucus meetings are still virtual. For somebody out here in rural Nova Scotia - I have a question from people in my community every day about my exposures potentially - I really don't feel that I could support something like that at this point in time.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think we're going to run out of time, so I'd like to call the question after I speak. I just want to put on the record that thousands and thousands of Nova Scotians have to go to work every day - thousands of them. All of our children have to be in school unless their parents are not schooling them in a public education system. Every single grocery store is staffed by people who have to be there. Every single hospital and doctor's office is staffed by doctors and nurses who are there every day. A lot of regular

businesses, including many provincial government departments, require their staff to go to work every day.

I understand the Public Health protocols, which is why our motion is subject to Public Health. If the Public Health office tells us it's not safe to be in the Legislature, there is no way we would take any issue with that. But, unless we get that particular piece of advice, what I am asking is that this committee signal its willingness to do what thousands of other Nova Scotians are doing and meet.

THE CHAIR: I know I'm the Chair and not supposed to, but if I may, I am concerned - on a day like today where we had so many witnesses, how do we logistically house all this in a room. There were how many people there today? Sometimes we have a lot of witnesses. The logistics of it is going to be as bad as being in the Legislature. The numbers are going up.

I am concerned for my family and I'm concerned also for the staff as well. This has to be looked at in that lens as well. I apologize. I know I'm the Chair. I just had to say that. I'm going to cut it off after Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: I'm supportive of the motion, subject to Public Health guidelines. We had a swearing-in ceremony just this week where there were a lot of people who were in person to be sworn into Cabinet. We have had standing committees meet in the Legislature during COVID-19 and then with the spike in COVID-19 cases, we couldn't do that. That's not the case now.

I think that certainly we can do just this, as has been mentioned by Ms. Chender, and that is show that we can go safely and do our work in person in the House.

THE CHAIR: Anything else? We can do a vote on this.

GORDON WILSON: Question.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hands. Contrary minded, raise your hands.

The motion is defeated.

I thank you all. Our next meeting will be March 23rd, if the House is not sitting. It has been a very interesting committee and we learned a lot today.

[The committee adjourned at 11:59 a.m.]