

Conflict and Conciliation in the Future of Affordable Housing

By **Margaret Condon**

LIKE IT OR NOT the problem of affordable housing in our urban communities is not short-term. There are underlying trends that mean we are in for a long haul here. Our population in B.C., and particularly in our major urban areas, is forecast to continue to grow. Construction of new purpose-built rental housing on the other hand has declined significantly over the last thirty years, and the recent high construction costs, along with high land costs, have brought it virtually to a standstill today.

In B.C., the scope of our affordable housing problem is not just about our ability to house the vulnerable members of our community, like frail seniors, people with physical disabilities, mental illness, and addictions, women and children fleeing violence, and the homeless. Increasingly, it is a concern about housing our workforce—and that includes not only our new immigrants, which are a major component of our labour force, but also our own children and grandchildren. The housing of all our citizens is a critical component to building viable, sustainable, equitable, economically competitive communities.

The affordable housing problem is based on a lack of new purpose-built rental housing, both supportive housing and independent/workforce housing. A shortage of supportive housing has led to the increasing homelessness seen on many urban streets today. The rationale for sup-

portive housing is that it enables individuals to connect better with mental health services, addiction treatment, and medical services, leading them to be more likely to adhere to treatment and have successful outcomes. It has been estimated that for each supportive housing unit there are total savings related to criminal justice, health, and social services of between \$6,000 and \$12,000 annually.

A shortage of independent rental housing has led to increasing competition for existing affordable units, giving tenants at the lowest end of the income spectrum little or no choice. It can also create overcrowding in existing rental units, with the potential for public health and social problems. As well it contributes to a delay in household formation, as young people are unable to find affordable rental accommodation. Finally it can put job-creating investment at risk when companies consider the adequacy of the housing stock when deciding to locate or expand in the area. When people have to commute from the outskirts of suburban areas, they can find themselves spending more on transportation than on housing. This is resulting in pressure to redesign our suburbs so that we can have attractive places, smaller homes that are built closer together, where there are fewer cars and more public transportation.

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MacPherson, City of Vancouver Drug Policy Program Coordinator, poet and community activist Bud Osborn, Coco Culbertson, Lifeskills Centre, and Aline LaFlamme from Aboriginal Front Door. ■

Performances will run Thursday to Sunday from April 19–29 starting at 8:00 pm at the Russian Hall (600 Campbell Avenue, Vancouver). Admission is by donation (\$5–\$20 is recommended). For more information and reservations visit <www.vancouvermovingtheatre.com> or call (604) 254-6911.



PHOTO JOHN ENDO GREENAWAY

A scene from *We're All in This Together*.

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The affordable housing problem is not impossible to solve—it just requires the necessary political will. And it's not that many of the elected politicians don't understand what's needed. It's just that their constituents, often a vocal minority, espouse a strong “Not In My Back Yard”—NIMBY—response to affordable housing solutions. Such strong local opposition to affordable housing developments often dissuades local politicians from taking meaningful action. NIMBY-ism is based on the belief that proposed changes will have a negative effect on property values, cause traffic and parking problems, increase crime, and diminish the quality of life for residents. NIMBY-ism has been seen recently in battles over the development of mixed residential, infill, secondary suites, shelters, and transitional housing. This is despite the fact that good development with strong design,

and which serves a variety of incomes and uses, has been shown to increase home values, improved community vitality, and provide greater choice.

Despite well-publicized concerns about the need for more affordable housing, NIMBY behaviour persists for a number of reasons. Existing community members can have strong attachments to their neighbourhood “the way it is.” Affordable housing can seem threatening, but the more we can get our citizens to think about the future, the better will be the world for our children. What is the world you want your grandchildren to grow up in? We should all undertake one-to-one education with homeowners, fellow citizens, and neighbours—let them know that densification and the inclusion of affordable housing can be an exciting opportunity for us to reshape and improve our urban areas. ■