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# Northwestern Ontario housing urbanizing, expanding private sector role



Jon Thompson, tbnewswatch.com

Fixing public housing in the Thunder Bay District over the next 30 years will cost upwards of \$200 million. An urbanizing population in both Thunder Bay and Kenora Districts means increased pressure to find public housing alternatives.

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THUNDER BAY -- Two District Services Boards in Northwestern Ontario announced new social housing units on Thursday but aging infrastructure and changing needs loom on the horizon.

The Thunder Bay District Social Services Board will build two eight-plex units in the city, the first constructed by the non-profit Thunder Bay Housing Corporation since 1993.

Under the tip of that iceberg is a \$200-million pricetag to fix 4,000 existing units over the next 30 years. Thunder Bay's public housing stock goes back to the 1950s.

"Have they reached the end of their useful life," pondered the board's CAO, Bill Bradica. "Does it make sense to invest financial dollars in a build of that vintage or would it make more sense to either further retrofit it or look at building new?"

The board will receive a report in the fall that will suggest options to address that cost.

In Thunder Bay, a waiting list of 1,300 people has been reduced to 940 this year. But the report will also include public housing in the board's other 14 communities, many of which are rebounding from the last decade's economic downturn.

The housing market in Nipigon has low vacancy but Bradica attributes that to the ongoing Nipigon Bridge construction. The forestry rebound and promise of a mining boom in Greenstone is beginning to tighten the market there, leaving more social housing vacancies. Savant Lake's eight units haven't been full for years and in Manitouwadge, the demand for social housing is so low the public units are being rented at market rate.

"In general, in many of the smaller communities, there's a much higher vacancies than in the urban area," Bradica said, adding the upcoming report will advise on builds and closures across the district.

"It wouldn't just be the city (of Thunder Bay). There are some communities where we're really going to have to consider, does it make sense to maintain units there if the vacancy rate is significant and consider the age of the particular property."

### **Urbanizing Public Housing**

The Kenora District Services Board is divesting itself of 28 units in the villages of Dinorwic, Minaki and Hudson. It announced a new six-plex to be built in the City of Kenora on Thursday and has 22 more units banked for future builds.

KDSB CAO Henry Wall said at least 60 more need to be built to address the need.

Single occupants are waiting for housing on a decade-long list and seniors can wait as long as two years. Wall is seeing the urbanizing population driving the urbanization of public housing.

"The housing shortage and the housing sector conditions that the First Nations communities north of us have an impact on us as well, in terms of the housing shortage. The housing shortage there is causing an out-migration to Sioux Lookout, Kenora, Red Lake and now, in particular, Dryden," he said.

"It isn't available in Sioux Lookout or Kenora either so people are coming to Dryden."

Vacancy rates waver around zero per cent in both Kenora and Sioux Lookout. Sioux Lookout Mayor Doug Lawrance said many people employed in his community are living in Dryden and commuting 100 kilometres to work.

Meanwhile, the homeless shelters in Red Lake, Sioux Lookout and Kenora are recording between 9,000 and 12,000 nightly stays per year.

"It's incredible," Wall expressed. "We need to look at what's causing it. There has to be an acknowledgement that we can't do things the way we have been doing it. It just isn't working."

## **Private Public Housing**

When the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing ordered the boards to create 10-year Housing and Homelessness Strategies in 2009, one of the objectives was to engage the private sector. While private companies have been involved in the Thunder Bay District for decades, those in the Kenora District have been reluctant to get involved.

Wall believes if the boards can provide financial guarantees for private landlords who would manage housing more efficiently, the stigma around housing the disadvantaged can be changed while more units become available.

"A lot of it is misinformation in terms of why the private sector may not be interested," he said.

"I think we have a responsibility as the service provider to demonstrate that it's not a concern. We can put certain things in place that will help safeguard the private investment part of affordable housing, yet achieve the desired outcome."

In Thunder Bay, private incentives have varied from low interest loans in the 1950s and 1960s to rent supplement programs that have been evolving ever since. There are now 400 units in the district that are privately managed, where tenants pay 30 per cent of their income and the board covers the remainder.

Bradica said outreach is underway to expand one-year contracts with those landlords to 10 years. The board believes making long-term arrangements will allow developers and landlords to better leverage loans and expand the housing base.

Ultimately, he said, Ontario standards demand there be a balance between private and public sector investment.

"We'd like to continue a mix of both," he said.

"The rent supplement program is great. However, what happens in some areas, Toronto for example, rents are very high. Private landlords will say, 'I'll get out of the rent supplement program and offer my units to the general public at large because I can get \$1,500 dollars for the unit.' I think there's always a need to have some of the affordable housing in public-owned hands as well."