

Collaboratively Defining Municipal Roles in Addressing the Housing Crisis: *Learning from Updating the Coquitlam Affordable Housing Strategy*

By Erin Ferguson & Cathy van Poorten

Abstract

Rising housing costs and changing housing needs have made it exceedingly difficult for many Canadian households to secure adequate affordable housing. This is a particularly significant obstacle for residents in the Greater Vancouver area. The City of Coquitlam recognizes that access to safe, affordable housing is fundamental in maintaining healthy liveable communities, but faces considerable challenges in addressing this issue. Funding from senior governments has been greatly reduced and local governments lack the financial and resource capacity to act alone.

Creative partnerships with local governments, senior governments, non-profit housing providers, and the private housing sector are emerging to fill this housing gap. The City of Coquitlam used the principle of partnership

to guide the update of their affordable housing strategy by involving a community-based, multi-stakeholder project advisory group in the process. This case study highlights the lessons learned from Coquitlam's collaborative approach to defining the municipal roles and opportunities in providing affordable housing.

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Background & Context

Coquitlam is in the Greater Vancouver area, the most expensive housing market in Canada. The cost of housing has increased by 71%¹ in the last 6 years while the average household income has risen by only 20%². This trend is pricing many people out of the housing market. Almost one third of Coquitlam residents cannot afford to purchase an apartment style condominium, and according to the Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver, the average price of a single family home is \$640,000. Overall, 24% of owners and 43% of renters spend more than 30% of their household income on housing costs³.

Coquitlam's housing needs are also changing. The population is growing and there is a greater proportion of singles, seniors and recent immigrants, and an increasing number of people with special housing needs. There are also residents who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless. In 2001, 2,800 households were at risk of homelessness, an increase of 8% since 1996¹. The most recent regional 24-hour homeless count counted 95 homeless individuals, a 157% increase since 2005⁴.

Changing housing needs and an increasingly expensive housing market are contributing to a greater number of households unable to secure

affordable housing options. The City recognizes that access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing is fundamental in maintaining a healthy livable community, but faces considerable challenges in addressing this issue. Funding from senior governments has been greatly reduced and local governments lack the financial and resource capacity to act alone.

In 2005, City Council decided to undergo a comprehensive update to the Coquitlam Affordable Housing Strategy adopted in 1994. The purpose of the update was to work with community stakeholders and consultants to:

1. Obtain a clear understanding of current and future housing needs for different resident groups within Coquitlam;
2. Determine municipal actions necessary to respond to the local need for adequate, appropriate, and affordable housing;
3. Building on the foundation of the City's current goals and actions related to affordable housing, define how the City can best be involved in responding to the need for affordable housing, in partnership with other stakeholders⁵.



Photo Credit: City of Coquitlam



COMO LAKE GARDENS

Rendering of the YWCA housing complex for low-income single mothers and their children located on City land.

Facts of the Case

Policy Support

A commitment to providing a diverse range of housing choices is expressed in the City-wide Official Community Plan and the City's Strategic Plan, which also supports citizen and neighbourhood engagement.

The Consultation Process

The consultation process for the update to the Coquitlam Affordable Housing Strategy (CAHS) began in February 2006, and continued up to the adoption of the strategy on April 16, 2007. In addition, the City has committed to providing yearly progress reports to members of the project advisory group. While the collaborative process centred on the participation of the project advisory group, there were three levels of stakeholder involvement: information feedback, consultation, and extended involvement.

Information feedback refers to "the dissemination of information with a request for feedback"⁶. In the CAHS update process, the consultants sent questionnaires to non-market housing providers and realtors working in the Coquitlam housing market. The strategy was also posted on the City's website with an invitation for public comment but this was largely unsuccessful in generating feedback.

Consultation goes a step further in generating dialogue to identify issues of concern. The consultants interviewed a rental apartment building owner and a seniors' care provider, but were unable to secure interviews with individuals in other stakeholder categories. They also led focus groups with low-end of market renters, the Urban Development Institute, and the Disability Issues Advisory Committee. The public had an opportunity to be involved through an open house presenting the draft strategy.

With extended involvement, "participants are

able to contribute to the formation of a plan or proposal and to influence a decision through group discussions or activities"⁶. One of the core components of the CAHS update process was the participation of a community-based project advisory group (PAG). The PAG met at several stages in the process to provide feedback and help shape the overall strategy.

Collaboration: The Project Advisory Group

The City of Coquitlam uses project advisory groups in many of its neighbourhood planning processes but this was the first time a community-based multi-stakeholder group was used to discuss housing issues.

The composition of the project advisory group reflects the existing partnerships and cooperation that is necessary to provide affordable housing. The PAG consisted of 19 members representing senior governments, non-market housing providers, the private housing sector, local community organizations, and residents. Members were selected as key stakeholders both within and outside the community and through the recommendations of affordable housing experts.

The PAG was established at the beginning of the project and they met with City staff and the consultants at key stages throughout the update process: review of background analysis, visioning and setting goals and objectives, development of strategic actions, reviewing the draft strategy, and presenting the strategy to City Council.



Outcomes

The PAG was successful in bringing many stakeholders and different perspectives together to discuss affordable housing. Members provided valuable feedback and insight and were able to learn from each other. However, the wider consultation process with different resident groups and specific stakeholder groups was less successful as the consultants found it difficult to find willing participants. There was also a lack of interest expressed from the broader public through the open house or web posting.

Feedback concerning the collaborative process itself was very positive from both staff and participants. However, some groups felt that the strategy was not as aggressive as it could have been and that affordable housing needs to be addressed at the tri-cities level. The strategy was viewed more favourably by government partners, who felt that Coquitlam was constructively addressing the issue by having and updating an affordable housing strategy when many municipalities are not actively addressing affordable housing.

In the end, the collaborative process resulted in a shared understanding of the roles that the municipality can play across the housing continuum (Figure 1). These roles both support

and extend beyond current City involvement. Recognizing these roles, the CAHS is organized around current and ongoing actions with new initiatives divided into a three-year work plan and longer-term actions that are expected to be carried out after 2010. New initiatives are based on current City engagement, Council support, an expanding community capacity, and senior government planning and funding.

The first time that staff presented the draft strategy to City Council, Council raised a number of concerns and referred the strategy back to staff for revision. After making revisions, staff met with the project advisory group to ensure the strategy remained balanced and comprehensive. The second time that the Strategy was presented to Council, representatives of the project advisory group spoke in support of the Strategy, which indicated multi-stakeholder support. The Strategy was adopted by Council at this meeting.

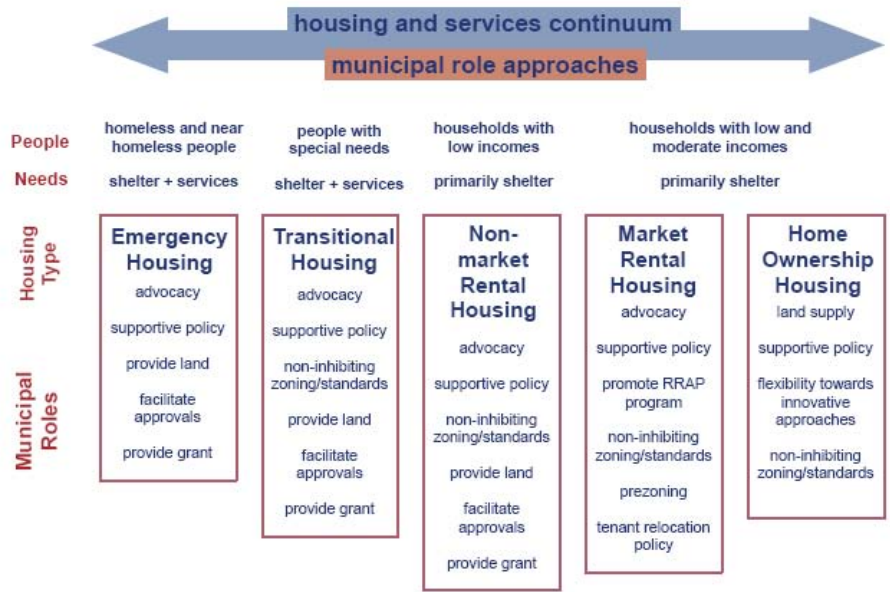


Figure 1: Municipal roles within the housing and services continuum (Source: CitySpaces Consulting).

A view from the inside - *One PAG member's reflections on the collaborative process*

The collaborative process undertaken in updating the Coquitlam Affordable Housing Strategy, is an effective way of developing municipal policy. Especially for a topic like affordable housing where you are not going to get a lot of interest from the general public. Having key stakeholders was a good idea and Coquitlam did a good job in putting together advisory group members. It is important to target specific people and not simply ask for volunteers because a process like this requires good will on all sides - a willingness to move from your own position and discuss ideas in order to reach agreement.

“it was a powerful forum with a good assortment of minds... it will be good to have all of these minds reconvene at an annual gathering”

Having all interests at the table and a chance to see where everyone is coming from was important and is one of the strengths of this process. Not being in the private development industry, the realization that development is not as lucrative as I assumed from housing prices was important to hear.

Another advantage is the absence of ‘show stoppers’ because opposition was dealt with throughout the process. The consultants managed the collaboration very well and were crucial in providing facilitation skills and in keeping the project moving forward.

The disadvantage is that both collaborative and political processes tempered some of the bold initiatives supporting affordable housing. For example, the requirement that large-scale apartment condominium developments provide some modest market units was not included in the final strategy and other initiatives were pushed into the long-term work programme.

Overall, I am torn. I really like the collaborative process, it settles interests and there are some great educational opportunities, but understanding and accepting the political realities was difficult.

** note: this section is paraphrased from an interview with the participant*

Box 1: Municipal roles in affordable housing provision

1. Maintain a **serviced land** supply
2. Use City **land holdings** to help achieve affordable and special housing needs
3. Minimize regulatory barriers (**subdivision, zoning, building**) for residential developers
4. **Advocacy and involvement** in area, regional, and provincial housing initiatives
5. **Information & outreach** communicating housing needs, issues and opportunities for action
6. **Measuring accomplishments**, noting emerging trends, and monitoring issues to inform policy and decision-making
7. Continued **implementation** of the Affordable Housing Strategy
8. **Policy development** towards inclusionary housing, encouraging adaptable and accessible suites, protecting against loss of affordable rental housing and assisting displaced tenants, encouraging new rental housing
9. **Assist non-market rental housing providers** to produce additional rental and special needs affordable housing
10. **Encourage the development industry** to produce more rental housing and upgrade existing rental housing

Lessons Learned

An Enriched Process

The involvement of the Project Advisory Group enriched the affordable housing strategy through shared learning and the cross-pollination of ideas. Members had diverse perspectives on affordable housing issues and collaborating over an extended period developed an understanding of viewpoints and helped to strengthen community relationships in working towards a balanced and comprehensive strategy. The collaborative process led to recognition of the roles that municipalities can take to address affordable housing concerns and helped to build buy-in, trust, and community ownership of the affordable housing strategy. The community ownership and involvement of different stakeholders is important as partnerships are crucial in addressing issues of affordable housing and homelessness.

Group Management

While the diversity of representatives enriched the process, it resulted in a large group. Conflicting schedules, and trying to reach consensus with people with different personalities and opinions, different areas of expertise, and different levels of knowledge lengthened the process. It is critical to manage the expectations of the group in terms of timelines and their role in the process and the product. Laying out these expectations in the terms of reference and using this to guide the process will make the process run more smoothly and efficiently.

Differing Levels of Knowledge

Group members had different levels of knowledge regarding affordable housing. This presented challenges in discussing the issues. Taking the opportunity to talk with members between meetings to see if they had any questions or if there was anything

that they would like help with would be useful in addressing the knowledge gaps. However, just being a member of the project advisory group provided persons with an interest in the issues an opportunity to learn more about it.

Representation Challenges

It is difficult to get representatives of different resident groups such as seniors, youth and recent immigrants on this type of a committee and it is unlikely that any one representative can speak for such diverse communities. Other consultation strategies and methods may offer a more effective and appropriate means of reaching these groups.

Broader Involvement of the PAG

Asking the Project Advisory group to present the strategy to Council for adoption was very effective as Council could then see the buy-in from different stakeholders. There are additional opportunities to involve the advisory group in the broader consultation process. For example, the project advisory group could be involved with hosting public open houses.

Conclusion

The collaborative process that the City of Coquitlam used in updating their affordable housing strategy was largely viewed as a success by participants and staff members though challenges in the process were noted. The community-based project advisory group was the focus of this process and reflects the partnerships and cooperation that is necessary to address issues of affordable housing. The result was a richer process, strengthened relationships, and the support of community members and City Council.

Resources

¹ City of Coquitlam Affordable Housing Strategy found at <http://www.coquitlam.ca/Business/Developing+Coquitlam/Affordable+Housing+Strategy.htm>.

² BC Stats Income and Income and Taxation - Neighbourhood Income and Demographics by Community, 2000 – 2005.

³ Statistics Canada, 2001.

⁴ Metro Vancouver Homeless Count Figures 2006 found at <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/homelessness/pdfs/2008HomelessCountPreliminaryFS-April.pdf>.

⁵ City of Coquitlam Request for Proposal No. 05-09-02: Affordable and non-market housing strategy.

⁶ Eales, R. et al. (2007). Emerging Approaches to integrated appraisal in the UK. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 23(2), 113-123.

City of Coquitlam Housing Choices: Southwest Area Plan Update Backgrounder found at <http://www.coquitlam.ca/Business/Developing+Coquitlam/Southwest+Coquitlam+Area+Plan+Update/Housing+Choices+Study.htm>.



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Secondary suites are permitted in all single detached zones in Coquitlam provided they meet certain criteria.