

LOCAL

City looks to Ottawa to fill housing cash gap

Hamilton facing \$600 million in capital needs over the next 20 years

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The Hamilton Spectator

The city is banking on the new federal Liberal government to deliver on a promise of boosted social infrastructure spending to help prevent homelessness.

“Really, what we’re asking the federal government to do is keep their word,” said Coun. Sam Merulla.

The city’s anxiety is shared with municipalities across the country facing a social housing crunch as units fall into disrepair and subsidy agreements with operators expire.

The creation of new units has also flatlined, which leaves Hamilton with a looming shortfall. In the next 20 years, the city expects those capital needs to exceed \$600 million, while there are nearly 6,000 applicants on the current social housing wait-list.

Councillors have called on the provincial and federal governments to provide adequate funding for local programs meant to prevent homelessness. Coun. Matthew Green expressed frustration at “one-off funding requests” during a recent emergency and com-

munity services meeting. Signs from Ottawa are pointing toward relief, says housing researcher Steve Pomeroy.

That includes commitments to renewing operating agreements for some 600,000 units, continuing subsidies for tenants and building new housing.

“Now, the orders of magnitude of those are still a bit fuzzy,” said Pomeroy, a research associate at the Carleton University Centre for Urban Research and Education.

Subsidy agreements signed with operators for 35 years in the 1970s, for instance, are now running out, he noted. Commitments to lay on subsidies for decades fell out of favour more than once since then with Ottawa opting for one-time handouts, Pomeroy said.

“They much prefer that kind of program because they can turn the taps off any time

they want.”

The Liberals have promised to boost infrastructure spending by \$60 billion over 10 years with \$20 billion pledged to “social infrastructure.”

Funding agreements for existing social housing, signed from the 1940s to the early 1990s, continue to provide homes for low-income Canadians, a spokesperson for Employment and Social Development Canada said in an email.

“In 2014, the federal government invested \$1.7 billion in support of some 570,000 Canadian households living in these existing social housing units.”

The federal department expects many of these units to be “financially viable and mortgage-free” when the agreements expire, which means housing providers will have re-

al assets and lower expenses. Pomeroy figures most providers, which are non-profits and co-ops, are “keen” to continue fulfilling their affordable-housing mission.

“The question is: ‘Are they squeezed in their ability to do that as a result in the reduction of funding?’ Some will be, some won’t be.”

Tax incentives to encourage investors to take on new rental stock across the board would address the lack of options for low-income tenants, Pomeroy said.

“There are not enough rental units for poor people, but there are not enough rental units generally.”

In Hamilton, there’s a groundswell to make things better, says Steven Rolfe, director of policy and planning for Indwell, a charity that provides affordable housing.

Rolfe noted he’s worked as a mental health nurse for 25 years, and during many of those years he focused on supported housing.

“We have had some successes in Hamilton but it seems to me that we are now coming into a time where systems and people are coming to consensus on eliminating homelessness and agreeing on what works well.”

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