

Municipal housing corporation will help solve crisis

On behalf of the Bowen Community Housing Association (BCHA), in the fall of 2007, Eberle Planning and Research drafted *Diverse Housing for a Diverse Community*, a strategy for affordable housing on Bowen. The document was based on analysis of the comprehensive, professional Bowen Housing Needs Assessment, completed the spring of the same year, also thanks to the efforts of the BCHA.

The assessment illuminated the urgent and critical local need for an increased variety of affordable housing stock. One of the key recommended actions in the strategy called for the formation of a municipally owned not-for-profit Bowen Island Housing Corporation as a move towards addressing this need.

In September, 2007, The BCHA presented the draft Affordable Housing Strategy to municipal council. Shortly after, in acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation, and as a way of demonstrating its commitment to "adopting a proactive, ongoing affordable housing agenda", council moved to appoint an Affordable Housing Working Group. The volunteer group was given the task of designing tools for council and municipal staff to pursue the production of affordable housing that meets the island's needs.

The committee was mandated to begin the implementation of the Affordable Housing Strategy. Objectives outlined in the group's terms of references included the job of drafting an Affordable Housing Policy, and beginning the work of a municipal housing authority.

The group, largely consisting of members from the Bowen Community Housing Association Affordable Housing Strategy Committee, was given a budget of \$10,000 and the authority to hire a consultant.

With the assistance of consultant Tim Wake, the working group completed a draft affordable housing policy in early summer of this year. Council adopted it shortly thereafter.

Currently the group is turning its focus to the groundwork of setting up an arms-length municipal agency to facilitate and develop affordable rental housing and entry-level ownership housing.

As explained in the Affordable Housing Strategy, the job of a municipal housing agency is to manage, acquire, and build perpetually affordable rental and ownership housing on Bowen Island. The document articulated the need for a dedicated, single-purpose, professional organization, noting the success of agencies in communities such as Whistler and Canmore in adding to housing stock. It argued that a corporation is an effective and efficient mechanism for creating affordable housing.

This is further borne out in Smart Growth BC's *Review of Best Practices in Affordable Housing*, published in 2007.

"It is not guaranteed that a Municipal Housing Corporation will quickly produce affordable housing in the diverse forms needed, but it is arguably certain that affordable housing will not be reliably produced without one," Wake, who is the author of the Smart Growth report, told council recently.

The work of the municipal housing organization will include leveraging housing units through the development process (as facilitated by the Affordable Housing Policy) or with community partners. It will manage a waiting list of qualified prospective tenants or buyers, hold title to units and land as appropriate, manage the units as perpetually affordable housing and develop and enforce legal agreements.

In setting the groundwork for a municipal housing organization, the Affordable Housing Working Group is working with lawyers and municipal staff towards drawing up various legal agreements. It has drafted criteria and policies outlining qualifications of individuals and families and covenants to be registered on title of lands to be zoned for affordable housing. It has also developed a communications plan to ensure the public is informed about its progress and opportunities.

At a regular meeting in September, Council endorsed the Affordable Housing Working Group's Phase II plan, budget and timeline. It points to the start-up date of early January for a fully-operational, accountable and transparent housing agency.

Council also approved the waitlist guidelines for ownership units. The municipality will launch this waitlist over the next few weeks. While there is still much to be accomplished before the ground is broken and affordable housing units are built, the affordable housing consultant has recommended that it is not too early to register those eligible for the eventual purchase of housing.

This is the fourth in a series of articles presented by the municipally appointed Affordable Housing Working Group. The next article will focus on the Bowen Island Affordable Housing Ownership Unit Guidelines for Qualifications and Waitlist Process. To view these articles online, please visit the website of the Bowen Island Municipality, at www.bimbc.ca. The topic of Affordable Housing is listed under the "Current Events" heading on the left side of the homepage. These articles can also be viewed online at www.bowenhousing.org.

