

WHAT'S YOUR WISDOM ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

**SEARCHING OUT A
HEALTHY RESPONSE**
HELP YOUR COMMUNITY
GET IT RIGHT.

**DIVERSE NEIGH-
BOURHOODS**
West of 170th street over
the Henday; North of the
river, and south of Stony
Plain Rd.

TALKING IT OUT
Affordable Housing
Questions and concerns

Workshop Report: West Edmonton Talks Affordable Housing

Context for the workshop: Housing affordability is a growing challenge for many of our Edmonton neighbours. Wages have risen more slowly than housing costs. The climb into home ownership is getting more difficult, and many low-income households are paying far more than they can afford in rent, with over 20,000 households paying more than 50% of their monthly income.

Some of our neighbours have a much harder time affording a home; especially those battling mental health challenges, disabilities, caught in an addiction or recovering from trauma. Over the last few years, we have learned how critical stable and affordable housing is for the health of an individual or family; especially in promoting healing and recovery. But helping these neighbours requires more than just more money to pay the rent. They also need supports, and *(like all of us)* a community of people who love and care.

Most everyone agrees that this work is critically important, but where it often gets tricky is when we are asked to make room in our communities and neighbourhoods. Then our ideals are put to the test.

The Workshop

On November 18, 2017, the Interfaith Housing Initiative hosted a workshop in West Edmonton called, What's Your Wisdom on Affordable Housing? Community league members, local neighbours, non-profit housing providers, and a few faith community folks sat down for a healthy conversation. We talked about the challenges; looked at some of the solutions; heard from a housing provider and a young mom who needed help providing a home for her son; and then we had a chance to talk about how and where we might be able to make room in our communities for neighbours needing a safe, stable and supportive home in a welcoming community.

What we heard:

Those who were present for the conversation expressed that they were not worried about new neighbours.

- “Affordable housing can be a bridge for a person to improve their life.”
 - “I am open to having affordable housing in my neighbourhood.
 - “We already have Habitat for Humanity in my area. I like it, and am in favour of the mixed market approach – no ghettos.”
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They promoted a healthy posture/response when new developments seek a home nearby:

- “Tell me more.” Promoted a willingness to listen, and be curious. Sometimes saying no isn't the best option – how can both parties have a win-win?
 - Find out more about why they want to put things in – educate yourself about the project. Find common ground. Could end up bringing good things to the community.”
 - “Find out what has happened in other communities. Canora Place is nominated every year for Yards in Bloom, residents go out and pick up garbage in the area. They bring good things to the neighbourhood! Lots of added value to their community.”
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We talked through logistical challenges; what will sensibly fit here? The group brought forward both questions and solutions.

- “Challenge around neighbourhood design – fine with new neighbors, but problems with access to services traffic, etc. how can it fit within the requirements for the buildings (architectural guidelines). The area is very restrictive in how things look – fences have to be a certain colour, etc.” Maybe a senior’s support centre?
 - “Very open in our neighbourhood. Already have quite a mixed market in the area. Problem – very high property values. Would like to see more affordable housing in the area – would like to bring property values down.” – (Note of clarification was given that the research says, units of affordable housing will not impact property values any different than a comparable market development.)
 - “Question around back-lane housing – can we build back-yard suites and offer them as affordable housing? Lots of innovative possibilities exist. City is more open than it used to be – issue is more the neighbourhood push-back. Can we handle the parking, extra traffic, etc. Lots of people are buying houses in the area and renting them out.”
 - One challenge was noted, that lots of renting in an area leads to a more transient population. This can be a problem for a community. Suggested mixed market can help with that – people can transition from affordable to market housing without having to move. Active community leagues and good resources can help people to stay in a neighbourhood. How can we encourage people to stay in a community? Food for good (a program of Jasper Place Wellness Centre) – creating food stability so that people don’t have to leave to get food. Build relationships and a good foundation to keep people in place.
 - Lewis Estates – not much available land. People would need a certain basic level of income to live here. But, we can offer subsidized housing to bring more people in. Problem – access to services. On the flip side, bringing in more people with a need for services, could lead to more services being offered in the community.
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The group did discuss possibilities in other parts of the city.

- Many faith communities have land – it’s a great opportunity for them to be involved in creative new housing project (example from the Right at Home presentation: Westmount Presbyterian Church developed 16 units of large family housing). Lots of churches are dwindling but have great land packages. They’re often in better areas with more services.
- What about Northlands? Lots of resources in the area. The group discussed the old Remand Centre – lots of potential with that area. Some housing, also lots of resources and services. Questions about the new arena – what will happen to Hope Mission and some of the other

inner-city agencies? Can we build more of these agencies throughout the city so we don't always have to go downtown to access services?

Some Advice on Consultation

- There's a surplus school site in the area; a tense conversation. Importance of consultation with the community – a challenge for the local community to figure out what the right questions are to ask.
 - The group discussed how change and transformation can happen: Some have been able to acknowledge their fear of change – recognizing the undercurrents in communities. People need a place to express their fears – we can often carry attitudes that we aren't even aware of (e.g. racism). Once we acknowledge our fears, we can start to wonder why we have them in the first place. We don't often have a safe place to do that – social media certainly isn't a good forum for that.
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Key Questions and Answers:

Will affordable housing affect neighbouring property values?

- The research says, quality, well-managed units of affordable housing will not impact property values any different than a comparable market development." If someone was to build an apartment complex in your neighbourhood, it may impact your property values positively or negatively; depending on a lot of factors. The research says it doesn't matter whether that complex is affordable or not.

On the 10% guideline in every neighbourhood. "Can we understand the needs of the city on a geographical level? What's the rationale?"

- CRIHI clarified that the city is working on sorting this out right now – they want to find sensible solutions. A decision like this is motivated by the desire to create well-integrated affordable housing options in all areas of the city. Observation by concerned neighbour: We need to figure out what will work in each area (sensible)."

There is more affordable land in industrial areas – how could this be used for housing?

- Challenge: There's no infrastructure. Needs planning to make it work.

How can we do better planning?

- Millwoods was an example – they thought ahead in the planning stages. The stock is fairly old now, but it did work to provide for the development of a mixed-income community (discussed the loss of inclusionary zoning practice due to court challenge in the 70s).

CRIHI expresses profound gratitude to our hosts at West Edmonton Baptist Church, who took such good care of us. As well, we are grateful to those who came and contributed to this workshop, sharing with us their ideas, experience, wisdom and insight. As you can tell, we learned a lot together!