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very year Halifax's nineteen thousand post-secondary students must scramble for a place to live. This year, the housing situation in Halifax has reached crisis proportions.

Two students stand in line at Dalhousie's Garden Cafeteria, the gold on their black orientation T-shirts still bright. One turns and jokes to the other, "You know, if we don't find a place to stay soon, we might have to go home to Truro." The other laughs nervously.

One month into the academic year, it's no joke. It's already October, yet many students are still without accommodation.

Colin Warner, a St. Mary's student from the Caribbean, moved here in September and is still without a permanent place to live. Right now, he is getting by sleeping on the floor of his cousin's room.

"It's close to impossible to find a place to stay," says Colin. "It takes a lot out of your mornings just looking for something."

Student leaders, politicians and university administrators alike are aware of the growing pressure on them to do something about housing in the city.

"The number one problem at Kings this year is housing, not the shortage of student loans," said University of Kings College student council president Mark MacKenzie. "I'm running into more students who are going home because they can't find places to live than are having problems getting loans."

The problems are the same at each of the seven colleges and universities in Halifax.

Geoff Martin, chair of the Students' Union of Nova Scotia, hopes to make housing an issue in the Nov. 6 provincial election.

He says the provincial government, with its responsibility for university funding, also carries some responsibility for the other problems facing the students—housing is one of them.

"In some senses it's a university-based problem," says Martin. "It ties into the whole cutbacks thing. The university isn't able to get funding for academic projects, let alone residences."

He says the government will not share the cost of building new residences when they're abandoning traditional areas of support.

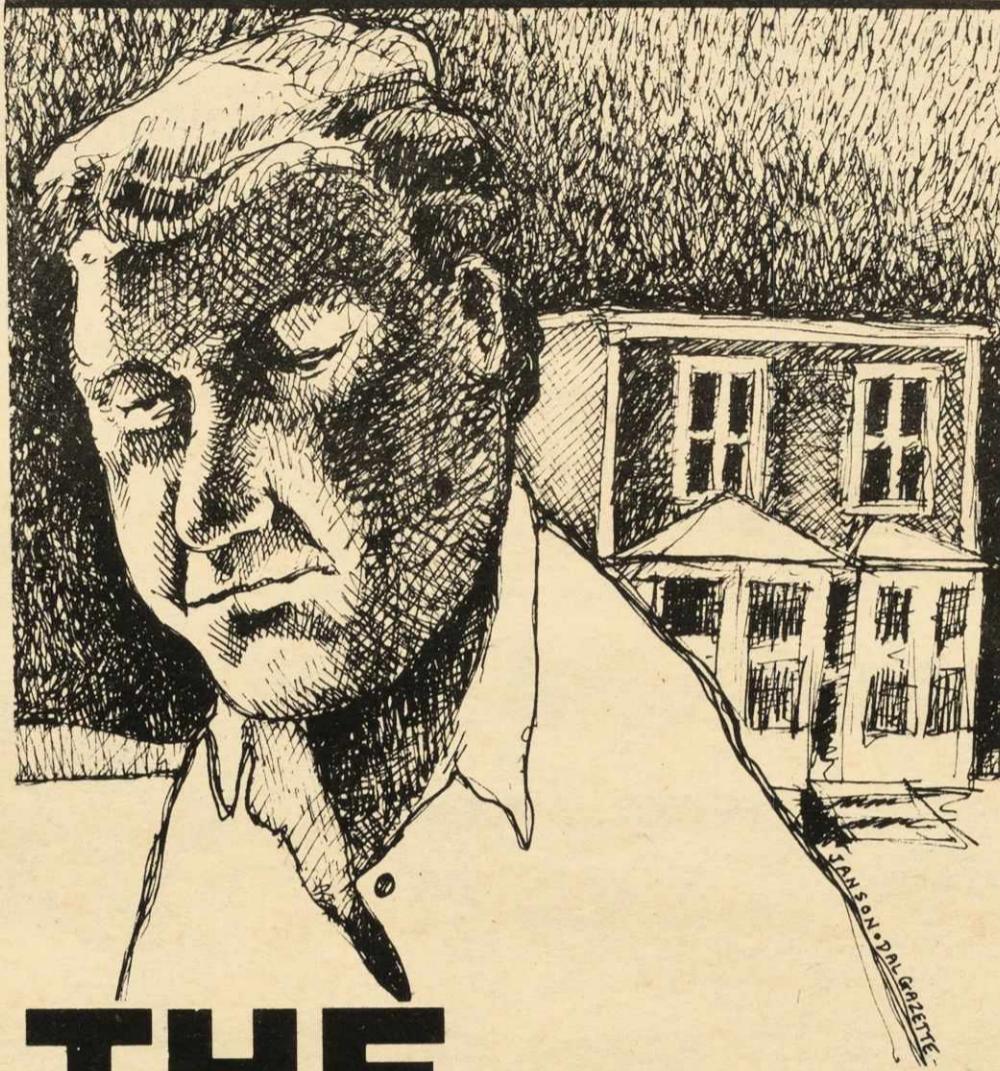
Tim Hill is the NDP candidate for Halifax-Cornwallis. Hill is also a former student union president at both St. Mary's and Dalhousie Universities and says he is ready to tackle the housing issue in his campaign.

"It's a crisis situation," says Hill. "The twenty five per cent increase in enrolment over the past five years due to unemployment has put more and more pressure on Halifax's housing market."

"You only have to step out your door to look for an apartment to realize this is a city in crisis."

Official estimates on the vacancy rates in the south end of Halifax vary, but all cast a gloomy picture.

Pat Sims, executive director of the Investment Property Owners' Assn. of Nova Scotia says that Statistics Canada reports a 0.9 per cent vacancy rate in Halifax. This figure does not take into account the increase in popula-



THE CRUNCH

By SAMANTHA BRENNAN

Students continue search for housing in October in one of the worst housing shortages in years.

tion in the fall and the specific problems of the south end, where the university population is concentrated.

Estimates for this area of Halifax at this time of year range from 0.3 to 0.0 per cent.

Sims says a healthy vacancy rate should be around 3 per cent.

"Halifax has one of the tightest markets in the country," says Sims. He describes the market situation as extremely static and says the only comparable situation in Canada can be found in some parts of Toronto.

But while everybody agrees the situation is awful, no one seems to be able to agree on the cause.

Alex Gigeroff, Dalhousie student union president, says people still carry stereotyped impressions of students as tenants, especially male students.

"There's still that misconception that every undergraduate male plays Led Zeppelin at four in the morning," says Gigeroff.

"To me, that's still the biggest problem with students finding housing."

Gigeroff says a large part of the problem stems from what he calls "the Catch-22 of rent controls."

"No one is building because they can't make enough money," he says. "And on the other hand, without the protection of controls, students would have to pay much more rent."

Pat Sims agrees with Gigeroff's analysis of the problem. Or at least the part about rent controls hurting landlords.

Sims says the number one cause of Halifax's housing crisis comes from "the severe restraint of rent review, rent control and the residential tenancies board."

Nova Scotia's rent review guidelines for 1984 say that a landlord may not increase rent more than 5.99 per cent in any given twelve-month period. Increases of more than this are allowed but the landlord must apply to the rent review commission for this increase.

"Rent review doesn't permit a developer to get a sufficient return on their investment," explains Sims. "They're just not building rental accommodations."

He says investment money is going elsewhere—to offices and for-sale residences, the kind of developing that doesn't help students.

For Sims, the answers are easy—a review of the existing legislation that would make it easier for landlords to raise their rents. He says government should help people that won't be able to pay the higher rents that would result. This would mean a revamping of the present student aid package to reflect higher living costs.

"Present legislation says landlords should assist the poor," says Sims. "Clothes and

food aren't under controls, why accommodation?"

Dalhousie economics professor Michael Bradfield disagrees.

"A landlord who rents to students is probably well able to live within the present guidelines," says Bradfield. Students move often enough to allow more flexibility in rental increases, he says.

"Besides, a landlord who is truly having problems with the rent review guidelines can appeal their case," says Bradfield. "The fact that they aren't tells me they just want to make more money."

He says the heart of the housing shortage comes from "inordinate and monopolistic" interest rates, not rent guidelines.

SUNS chair Geoff Martin says interest rates also hurt the housing market because people can make more money investing their money in banks than by buying rental property.

"Despite the fact that we have one of the highest rental rates in the country, no one is going to sink more money into housing when you can make more money investing in a bank," says Martin.

He also doesn't accept the argument that rent controls are responsible for the problem.

"That assumes the housing market is competitive, and it's not."

Martin says that Halifax faces unique development restraints. The problem comes from geographic limitations that are part of having seven post-secondary institutions in a city trapped by the boundaries of a peninsula. This contradicts Sims' assertion that there is plenty of rental space in Halifax sitting empty because of "red tape and rent controls."

Any housing located outside the Halifax peninsula area takes students too long to get to university, says Martin.

"The best thing that could happen to lessen the housing crisis here is a better public transport system."

That's part of Colin Warner's problem.

"All the places I find available are located in Dartmouth or outside the city," says Colin. He says that because he is used to the hot climate of the Caribbean he finds travelling a long distance in Nova Scotia winters unbearable.

"Students may be able to find housing, but often it's not conducive to studying," says Judy Guthrie, SUNS executive officer. "I know students who have to arrange their whole study schedules around catching the last bus at twelve."

Hill admits that there are no easy answers and that coming up with solutions in his campaign won't be easy.

"The only real solution is some kind of government intervention to encourage new building," says Hill. "We have to encourage the building of reasonably-priced accommodations, not condominiums."

Like Martin, he says increased funding of public transport would lessen the problem.

Meanwhile, Alex Gigeroff is talking about possible answers for next year.

"There is still such a long way to go on the housing issue," admits Gigeroff. "But the kind of things we're talking about now gives an indication things will be better next year."

The Students' Union of Nova Scotia is also talking a lot about housing these days—talking about the possibility of buying into co-op housing, reviving the idea of a joint Halifax residence and a central housing office for post-secondary institutions in the city.

But for students who've already left Halifax to return to their home towns and for students like Colin for whom returning home may be impossible, the recent spree of attention focused on housing may have come too late. □