

Student Housing Shortages

by Mike McCevooy
of Canadian

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It is not unusual for a city government to dedicate a week to a charitable organization or outstanding personality.

Terry Fox weeks are the popular rage these days.

Calgary mayor Ross Alger meant serious business when he declared the last week in August "Off-campus Housing Week".

With a university-area vacancy rate of 0.6 per cent and on-campus residences filled up, students at the University of Calgary face a very acute housing shortage.

However, events in Calgary prove to be just the tip of a nationwide iceberg.

In Vancouver, students are sleeping in tents set up to alleviate the housing squeeze there.

In Waterloo, students are entering lotteries, to win a spot in the university residences.

And for students who have gained access to residences at Concordia University, rental fees have blown through the roof. A single room now costs over \$1,000 for the year.

Evidence that severe student housing shortages were looming appeared when Statistics Canada announced last April national vacancy rates were 2.8 per cent; the lowest in two years.

Vacancy rates in Victoria and Vancouver were 0.1 per cent and 0.2 per cent respectively; the lowest anywhere in the country.

In response to these statistics, Paul Cosgrove, minister responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) announced in June he was increasing by 5,000 the number of government built low-income rental units.

But the measure "was only a drop in the bucket," according to the National Union of Student executive officer John Doherty, who says the problem is so massive stronger corrective measures are needed.

Many factors have combined to create the current shortages. In some parts of the country housing starts are not keeping pace with growing populations.

This is particularly true in the lower mainland of British Columbia. In Vancouver, city alderman Harry Rankin told a housing committee meeting the city needed at least 6,000 to 7,000 housing starts per month to avert a crisis. The whole province of B.C. had only 3,000 starts in the month of August, according to a Statistics Canada official.

Suburban housing shortages have forced many people, who had dreamt of two-car garages in the metropolitan outreaches, to seek cheaper housing in the inner city.

More people than ever are choosing to restore old houses in downtown areas. Unfortunately these are the houses which students tend to rent. It seems student ghettos are being taken over by society's middle class.

According to Al Woodcock, housing director at the University of Waterloo, this process of "reurbanization" is playing a significant role in the acute housing shortage for students in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. With on and off campus housing booked up, Woodcock said students will just have to persevere in their quest to find accommodation.

For one student in Winnipeg, a landlords' move to restore the interior of her rented room meant the rent increased \$100. The fee hike left her no other choice but to look elsewhere for a place to live.

Further pressure on student ghettos can be expected according to University of Toronto economics professor Lawrence Smith. He says, in a Globe and Mail story, there will be no speed up in housing starts because construction companies sense the baby boom is over and they will not invest money in a declining market.

Also of concern to students is a 36 per cent decrease from the year previous in the number of private rental units built. Recent high interest has affected builders because the high cost of borrowing money has scared them from investing in expensive housing projects. In addition, builders are more likely to invest in multiple dwelling units which cater to the upper echelons of the income scale. It is far more profitable to build high-rise, high-rent dwellings than low income rental units.

Svend Robinson, (Member of Parliament; Burnaby), feels the nature of our economic system is the reason for the current housing crisis. Robinson said shortages of this nature are inevitable "as long as we have an economic system which is based on the pursuit of profit."

He said companies which have the capital and ability to build cheap, affordable housing are not doing so because they would rather spend the money to build shopping centers and other ventures which are more likely to show big profits.

Robinson said solutions to the housing problem must come from the recognition that housing is a fundamental right.

"Government should be oriented to ensure we have the kind of economy which will mean that no one is lacking in these essentials," he said.

It is clear, however, the federal government has no interest in any scheme proposed by Robinson.

In the late sixties when the economy was more bouyant, the federal government poured \$65 million worth of loans into student housing for post-secondary institutions. But since 1969 that amount of money has slowly declined until three years ago, when the tap was shut off completely.

The reason for this, says Al Revie, chief of program improvement, lending division for the CMHC, was that the loan program "was like everything else," which suffered funding cutbacks due to government restraint. The government set priorities for funding and student housing wasn't one of them, he said.

However, this has not stopped administrators and students at both the University of Victoria and Simon Fraser University from asking for CMHC loans for the construction of campus residences. According to Revie, Simon Fraser has made several presentations but have been turned down. At the University of Victoria the CMHC and the Universities Council of BC have quashed the institution's bid for a 300 unit residence by refusing to grant low interest loans for its construction. Even if it were built though, it would only put a dent in the housing crunch which has left an estimated 1000 students stranded in the provincial capital.

Robinson believes funding for these facilities should be government priority. After all, "the federal government has just decided to spend the money it takes to educate people in Canada" so they should fund student housing. Robinson says the money should come from the Established Programs Finan-

cing Act (EPF), an act whereby the federal and provincial governments share responsibility for funding post-secondary institutions.

Another factor which makes the housing squeeze more severe is that landlords often stereotype students as "Animal House" characters. At Conestoga College in Kitchener, students may find themselves banned from renting condominium units. A landlord is urging the condominium board in Kitchener to deny rental to students because of alleged urination and vomiting on neighborhood lawns. Another agency said they had never had problems with students, however, they still did not allow students to rent from them.

In Toronto, a student, who had come all the way from Newfoundland to attend the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, was asked "what he looked like" when he phoned a landlord to enquire about accommodation. It is this atmosphere which bangs another door shut for students especially in a city like Toronto where the vacancy rate is almost zero.

On-campus housing has been hard to come by this year for Canadian students. Waiting lists for accommodation range anywhere from 4,000 at the University of British Columbia to 150 at the University of Manitoba. At Memorial University in St. John's Newfoundland the women's residences are full with long lineups to get in. The administration is urging women to double up whenever possible.

Residence living is also becoming more costly. Students at Concordia University faced an 8 per cent hike in the fees this year. One reason for this is, in part, due to government funding cutbacks to universities. Many residences are university subsidized, but as funds become tighter administrators attempt to save money by making students pay for a greater share of the residence cost. At the University of Winnipeg for example, the administration is attempting to have students pay the whole cost. The attempt to make residence a break even proposition is being made even in light of past surveys which indicated students could not afford further increases.

Solving the student housing crisis, is going to take more than declaring "Off-campus" housing week, as Mayor Ross Alger did in Calgary. Some, like Svend Robinson, feel the profit motive must be taken out of the housing industry, while others like administrators at Waterloo feel students must persevere. Meanwhile, students organize to pressure university administrators and governments to solve the situation and wonder whether they will have a roof over their heads tonight.

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