March 20, 2023

Re: 2023 Budget, Planning, Property, & Development

Dear Mayor and Executive Policy Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments after technical difficulties prevented me from presenting at the Executive Policy Committee meeting last week. I'm writing on behalf of the Right to Housing Coalition in relation to the Planning, Property, & Development budget. Right to housing is a group of individuals and representatives of community-based organizations who seek to address the housing needs of Winnipeggers through education and advocacy.

I also want to thank Councillor Orlikow, my ward representative, for moving a motion to fund the 24-7 washroom run by Ma Mawi at its regular hours. Services like these - and the Community Safety Counselors at the Library - as many speaking before EPC noted, are essential for our neighbours who are without homes or who are street-involved.

As essential as it is to fund these services, we must also address the root causes of homelessness, which by definition is the lack of a home. In the 2022 Winnipeg Street Census, the most-cited reason by people for their most recent entry into homelessness was insufficient income to afford housing in the city; the fourth was conflict with a landlord, roommate, or the sale or renovation of their apartment.

Our city needs more stable, safe, adequate housing that people can afford, regardless of income.

The City has a central role to play here, and moreover already has the tools to do it. What is lacking is the funding and, importantly, the capacity to fully, efficiently, and proactively use those tools and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Enhancing capacity to City staff, and/or the development of a full-fledged municipal housing department would contribute enormously to fulfilling such opportunities, and potentially creating more opportunity. Investing in ending the housing crisis and ending homelessness, and maintaining deep affordability also means investing in the people needed to ensure this can happen.

In 2021 and 2022, the City committed towards supporting the creation of 160 Rent-geared-to-income and 198 Affordable units. The city did this by accessing federal funding under the Rapid Housing Initiative but importantly, by hiring new temporary staff to ensure those funds could be utilized by local non-profit and Indigenous housing providers.

Without staff capacity, opportunities like the Rapid Housing Initiative can't be fully realized. The tools we have - waiving permit and other fees, speeding up the approvals process, selling surplus city land to non-profits, etc, can only produce results if there are people in the civil service who can help housing providers navigate the development process. Currently, non-profit housing providers and voluntary

boards undergo housing development off the sides of their desks, often spending significant time getting up to speed on details that dedicated City staff would be best suited to address.

Dedicated, full-time staff - a housing office, would allow the city to be proactive in addressing local housing needs. Edmonton, a city of about 930,000, has 20 FTE dedicated to housing development and policy. We have 3, and two of those staff are temporary employees only recently hired.

I encourage you to amend the 2023 budget and double the number of full-time staff dedicated to housing to 6. This could be the first step toward a dedicated housing office to coordinate new affordable housing and programs to retain the lower-rent housing we are in danger of losing.

According to Census data, between 2011 and 2021, the city lost an incredible 27,863 units renting at $750/month or less. Some of this reduction was the result of conversion (to condominiums or short-term rentals) and demolition due to disrepair or new construction.

To protect and retain our rapidly depleting lower-rent housing stock, we also encourage you to increase your support of the Housing Rehabilitation and Investment Reserve, currently funded at $1M in the Budget. This funding can and is used in Housing Improvement Zones to fund neighbourhood renewal corporations grants to fix up buildings and prevent them failing into unhabitability. The city can design these grants such that landlords who receive repair funds don't seek rent increases, keeping these newly rehabilitated units affordable. These grants also help renew communities by providing well cared for dignified homes to those who need it most. Inflationary costs for housing renewal and rehabilitation is not reflected in this year's allocation.

The 2023 Budget states that it is meant to "maintain our quality of life, care for our most vulnerable residents and support a growing City." When we talk about quality of life, I ask you to remember what Winnipeggers said in the 2021 City Survey. When asked how to improve the quality of life in Winnipeg, the most common answer was to invest in housing and social programs. Safe, stable, affordable homes are the foundation upon which a city's quality of life is built. People have a sanctuary to return to; a place to rejuvenate, grow, heal, and to raise their families. A home is the base from which people can join the community and contribute to a vibrant, prosperous city. Everyone deserves such a home.

To help build our city and ensure all Winnipeggers enjoy our quality of life, we urge you to invest in housing staff at the city, which will reap exponential returns as we work toward addressing Winnipeg's housing need. We also urge you to increase funding for the HRIR to help preserve existing low-rent housing and prevent more people being displaced into homelessness.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
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