



Building Better Homes and Communities

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Affordability and Choice Today

ACT Solutions

Promoting Housing for All

Cochrane, Alberta

Issue

Rapid growth created a housing affordability crunch in Cochrane, Alberta, just west of Calgary. Modest-income families could not afford the escalating house prices in the community, making it difficult for local businesses to recruit workers. In the late 1990s, the Town adopted policies to encourage secondary and garden suites, and higher density housing. Yet there was little development of these housing types. Town officials suspected a variety of reasons for the poor response, including lingering regulatory disincentives plus a dose of NIMBYism.

Plan

In May 2000, the Town set up the Cochrane Affordable Homes Task Force to examine current needs for affordable housing, identify any regulatory or policy barriers to development and propose solutions. It was also asked to examine public attitudes.

Project team

Cochrane Affordable Homes Task Force project coordinator
Cochrane Family & Community Support Services
Cochrane Partnership for Economic Development
Community residents
Cochrane Women's Housing Committee
Austech Development
Cochrane Eagle newspaper
Bow West Realty Ltd.
Town Councillors
Town of Cochrane planning staff
Homeland Planning & Community Development, consultant

Results

The task force went to extraordinary lengths to obtain public input and to make the case for affordable housing. Activities included:

- a housing education symposium;
- a housing needs assessment;
- two workshops for the housing industry;
- eight focus group meetings;



Artist's rendering of a 21-unit project that will rent at 10 per cent below market

Source: Cochrane Society for Housing Options

- a community workshop; and
- a community open house.

Lynn Fanelli, Housing Project Coordinator, Town of Cochrane Family and Community Support Services, said that what concerned affordable housing proponents is that Cochrane was almost wall-to-wall single family residential zoning. She thinks that fact, plus the reality that what little affordable housing there was had become run-down, made local people apprehensive about introducing additional housing for modest-income households. She said the symposiums and workshops, open to both builders and the public, have helped soften opposition.

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Canadian Home Builders' Association
Association canadienne des constructeurs d'habitations



The task force identified four main housing needs:

1. entry-level ownership housing;
2. near-market housing (ownership and rental);
3. social housing (rental) for families and singles; and
4. special needs housing, including emergency and transitional shelters.

To address these needs, the task force made the following recommendations to the Town:

- set up a community land trust to bank land for affordable housing;
- create an inventory of under-used land;
- investigate incentives, such as density bonusing;
- streamline development approval procedures; and
- introduce performance zoning.

In response, the Town revised its Official Plan to ensure future residential developments include a mix of housing. It introduced zoning for multiples and raised the maximum height from three storeys to eight. The Town also recently approved an area for a manufactured housing community.

Lack of suitable land made a community land trust impractical. Instead, Cochrane zoned some newly annexed land for affordable housing. In place of incentives, the Town made its land use bylaw

more flexible to accommodate affordable housing. Cochrane had previously streamlined its development approval procedures but is revisiting this to see where additional improvements can be made.

The task force eventually became the non-profit Cochrane Society for Housing Options and is building a mixed residential and commercial project in downtown Cochrane (shown in the illustration).

Commercial tenants on the main floor will help subsidize renters on the floors above. The choice of a downtown location, removed from single family homes, was deliberate, said Ms. Fanelli, to let the community see what well-built affordable housing looks like and who lives in it.

Related report

Cochrane Affordable Housing Strategy – “Building Our Community for the Future” (Homeland Planning + Community Development, May 2002)

The report may be obtained on loan from CMHC’s Canadian Housing Information Centre (CHIC) at chic@cmhc-schl.gc.ca or by calling 1-800-668-2642 and asking for CHIC.

Contact

Lynn Fanelli
Housing Project Coordinator
Town of Cochrane Family and
Community Support Services
lynn.fanelli@cochrane.ca
(403) 709-0003

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