

Open Letter to Council on affordable housing for low-income households

In the last several years we have had a wealth of new developments in Caledon and yet we have provided very little for those who are most vulnerable: thousands of new developments for homeowners and hardly any rentals for families who cannot pay the market rent, much less own a house.

We believe that the Town can do much more to provide decent housing to disadvantaged households who agonize between paying rent and buying basic necessities. Many families swallow their pride and go to charities for food: their housing is too costly and their income too limited to cover both housing and food. While being provided with a ride, James, a food pantry user commented: "Without the food pantry, I'll be dead."

The vacancy rate in Caledon hovers around zero, there are hardly any "to rent" ads in the papers and the average rent for a one-bedroom basement apartment is well over \$1,000. A friend who lives on a disability pension has been looking for a whole year. She desperately wants a place of her own but can't find anything within her budget. Other people with disabilities have publicized their desperate search for an affordable unit. We hear of many who survive by couch-surfing, sheltering in vehicles or even roughing it in the outdoors.

There are many signs of deep distress out there.

Over the years, our faith community has sent truckloads of canned food to the food bank and provided hundreds of food gift cards and other items for the Christmas Fund. However, families and seniors seek help for food and other costs like utilities or rent not only at Christmas time but throughout the whole year.

Unbelievably, about 12% of our families in Caledon live below LICO (poverty line.) At Christmas time, 350 families and hundreds of children depend on the Christmas Fund for food gift-cards, hampers and toys. Through the year, an average of 160 families use the Food Pantry, every month. Some go twice or even three times.

60% of people seeking help live in private housing and most of their income goes towards their housing expenses. Obviously, rents and housing problems are at the root of poverty and the angst of living in precarious housing or even on the edge of homelessness. The Ontario Food Banks Association itself confirms this: "Nearly 90% of food banks' users," it says, "are rental and social housing tenants. They spend the majority of their inadequate monthly incomes on housing."

Will Council make subsidized housing for struggling families and single people a priority in your immediate overall housing strategy?

We have some suggestions for solutions.

Is it not time to address the question of more intensive housing and begin planning low-rise apartment buildings in strategic parts of Bolton and other towns? These could create mixed communities that would also include low income and subsidized renters. Well-planned intensification could provide both a mixture of more market and social housing units with added benefits to local businesses and public transportation.

You can leverage the Town's reach to demand that large corporations like Amazon, Canadian Tire and others, who put pressure on housing supply in Caledon, to contribute towards new housing for their employees. The idea of corporations providing affordable housing for their employees has a long history in Canada. Mining companies have done so for well over a hundred years. The bungalows in the picturesque mining village of Bourtamque in Quebec were built around 1923 for the mine's workers.

Although the mine is no longer in operation, the village that that company built is prized by its current occupants and has become a tourist attraction in the Val d'Or area of Quebec.

The Brian Wilson family has offered property at Humber Station and King Street West for a health clinic and housing for seniors. The province has also, through a Minister's Zoning Order, designated this location for a train station. Why can't this area just west of the big Amazon and Canadian Tire warehouses be serviced in the near future? It offers an opportunity for much needed affordable housing and the convenience of a local health centre.

Put legs under the Inclusionary Zoning Act as hundreds of jurisdictions in the US and worldwide have done, creating thousands of units for low-income families. Make developers contribute to the housing affordability crisis for low-income households. We have the recent example in Toronto of the Daniels Development in partnership with the Woodbine Community Centre and the support of the City of Toronto assigning 34 units for 40 years to single mothers in their new tower in Regent Park. Rents will be at 30% of their income.

You, the Town, give the 'go ahead' to developers to build. Why not assertively leverage this asset and insist that developers, who get very rich building houses, put aside an acceptable percentage of new units for low-income families?

We believe that we all have a sense of moral obligation and justice engraved in our souls: we owe each other the opportunity for the basic necessities of life in sufficient measurements. This has been the bedrock of our multi-faith civilization. All of us, rich, middle class and poor, are like strands of the same web. If any set of strands fray, the whole web weakens. It is those principles, we believe, that must move us to blot out other types of viruses besides COVID-19, namely the scourge of homelessness, poverty, and the continuous anxiety about food and housing experienced by many families, even in our Town and Region.

Holy Family Justice Group Caledon