

Round Table on Housing Hosted by NDP Pontiac

A special report by Carl Hager

GATINEAU: Speakers representing a diversity of political and community groups spoke at a round table on the crisis in housing organized by the Pontiac NDP riding association as a public service initiative. The hybrid event occurred on Saturday January 14th at the University of Quebec in Outaouais campus (Hull), with speakers using their preferred language to communicate. Organized by The NDP Pontiac riding association, both live speakers and speakers appearing by Zoom were featured. Celine Brault, Chelsea community activist and volunteer with the Chelsea Housing Corporation, a non profit community group, Daniel Blaikie, NDP MP from Manitoba, Latonya Ludford, an expert on urbanism and housing, and Raphaël Déry, a lawyer working with cooperative housing. Their experiences and difficulties encountered advocating for affordable and accessible housing were the focus of presentations.

President of the NDP riding association, **Catherine Emond**, said, "We wanted to give members of the Pontiac community an opportunity to discuss the housing crisis from the point of view of their experiences and to hear what kinds of solutions they want to see enacted. The housing crisis in Canada desperately needs solutions which thus far are not reaching the people who need them most".

Appearing by Zoom from his home in Manitoba, **Daniel Blaikie** stated that housing must be seen as a human right, not just another commodity to be bartered over. "The Canadian government must adopt by policy a non-market approach to housing. Right now we are leaving too many people behind. The problem is that the Liberal government is only tinkering on the edges of the problem. In Canada we are losing fifteen affordable units for every new one created". He noted that older co-ops and social housing have seen operating budgets ended. With no commitment for more from the government. "It is important to tell MPs that the market approach to housing is not working for Canadians".

Celine Brault has been working with the Chelsea Housing Corporation for about twelve years with the objective of building a 12 unit residence for seniors in Chelsea. Brault gave a concise description of the many hurdles encountered along the way, including slow government response, increasing costs, constant new regulations including building code updates. The tenacity of the volunteers working on the project has been instrumental in seeing the project come to fruition. Brault said that the Municipality of Chelsea has supported the project by generously donating the land required for the project and some recurring financing. She gave as an example of the frustrating delays and hurdles encountered that once the project was given a partial green light in 2020, the well had to be dug. It was then discovered that the water would have to be treated. The outcome was that a whole new building would have to be created to house the water treatment

equipment, causing another delay and increased costs. Brault was happy to announce that finally, after more than a decade of work, tenders will be going out for the construction of the project.

Raphaël Déry, the DG and lawyer with la Federation intercooperative en Habitation de l'Outaouais, spoke about his experiences with cooperative housing and the need for more. Déry said there are 40 co-ops in the Outaouais, about 1400 units, renting for about \$500 and up. He noted that the vacancy rate in many municipalities exacerbates the rental outlook for people seeking affordable housing. "We see many young people moving in with their parents because they cannot afford to buy or rent their place to live". He noted that in 2009 the Quebec government froze the financing level of affordable housing projects, even as the last decade has shown that costs of building have tripled. "The CAQ claims that there is a shortage of skilled workers available to build affordable housing, yet the government embarks on a major tunnel effort in Quebec City and wants to build new hydro-electric dams".

Latonya Ludford re-iterated that housing must be seen as a human right. The right to housing means security, dignity and peace of mind. Affordable accessible housing is the key to healthy cities. Ludford said that the best place to advance housing is at the municipal level, where a Human Rights approach to housing is most likely to succeed. Municipalities must build in housing requirements that private builders are obligated to contribute to the community.

She noted that on any given day in Canada there are about 30,000 homeless people in Canada. The crisis in housing means that many vulnerable groups such as migrants, single mothers, indigenous peoples, homeless people, young people without adequate remuneration suffer from the lack of housing. Ludford said, "A happy secure home must be a social goal; not a means to wealth accumulation".

The closing of the discussion was a presentation of solutions. **Making housing a human right. Keeping the route to good housing simple. Make the private sector more accountable.** Emond thanked the presenters and appreciated the questions and comments posed by participants. She said that the NDP Pontiac was open to doing more such round tables in an effort to bring informed discussion to the Pontiac public on important social and political issues.