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AFFORDABLE HOUSING CHALLENGES

The Experience of the City of Edmonton

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Introduction

The development of affordable housing¹ in Canada can be characterized as a patchwork of responses, cobbled together over the decades as support has fluctuated with prevailing political winds, shifting economic conditions, and changes in public support. For communities across Canada, partnerships have been necessary to leverage the resources of diverse partners working towards a common goal: the adequate provision of affordable rental housing. The City of Edmonton has fully embraced this collaborative approach. In recognizing that housing need is best understood at the local level, while explicitly acknowledging their fiscal limitations, the City has taken on the unique role of lead coordinator and facilitator, working to mobilize networks through a shifting approach over the decades. As political, economic, and social environments have changed, the City of Edmonton has adapted its response accordingly, variously working to set priorities and a guiding vision; advocate, develop, and deliver programmes and housing projects; facilitate partnerships; create and implement policy, regulations, and zoning; provide land or funding; and offer administrative leadership, depending on the era and context.

This chapter describes the City of Edmonton's experience in mobilizing networks in support of affordable rental housing. It reviews the context for affordable housing provision in Edmonton, from the early post-war years until today, describing key partnerships and the role the City has held in them. It then turns to the future of affordable housing in Edmonton, covering the City's plans for moving forward, and conditions the City hopes to generate to promote affordable housing development. Following this, it details the unique circumstances that have helped facilitate collaboration, providing two case studies that characterize the City's approach. This chapter concludes by reflecting on what has worked well over the past several decades.

History of City of Edmonton Involvement in Affordable Housing

Post-War Years: Early Collaboration and Unwilling Partners

Federal housing policy throughout the 1940s and 1950s focused on enabling market housing production, targeting Canada's broad middle class (Suttor, 2016). Social housing for low-income earners was a minor consideration of the National Housing Act (NHA), with two funding and

delivery models operating from 1949 to 1964: public housing units and charitable or municipal limited dividend (LD) units (Suttor, 2016). The former required direct provincial involvement, while the latter did not. Despite these opportunities, the Alberta government remained largely passive during this time, diverting responsibility for affordable housing to municipalities (City of Edmonton [COE], 2018a) who were ill-equipped to handle the financial burden. Direct federal relationships with municipalities were common, and most of the (minimal) affordable housing developed prior to 1964 was done so at the municipal level or through charitable organizations (Suttor, 2016). Some of the first examples of targeted affordable housing production in Edmonton occurred through the Greater Edmonton Foundation, established in 1959 to create lodges for low-income seniors (Greater Edmonton Foundation, 2018). The City provided land, the Province constructed the buildings, and entities were established to operate buildings. These lodges were constructed until 1984, and many remain operational today.

1960s–1970s: Patchwork of Partnerships in Search of Funding Opportunities

Amendments to the NHA in 1964 included provisions to empower provincial housing corporations in addition to increased federal funding (Suttor, 2016a). The *Alberta Housing Act* passed in 1965, and the Alberta Housing Corporation formed shortly thereafter. Additional amendments in 1967 were intended to clarify municipal and provincial roles and set the stage for a new era in affordable housing development, characterized by increased provincial involvement in housing matters (Suttor, 2016b). However, provincial programmes were slow to start. Throughout the 1960s, Edmonton's population grew rapidly, rising from just under 270,000 to well over 400,000 (COE, 2018b). The 1967 Alberta oil boom contributed to extraordinary growth in the City (COE, 2018a). Housing affordability was at the forefront of public concern, and in 1968, the City Council recognized the mounting need for social housing. In response, they authorized administration to expedite the provision of public housing units (COE, 2002). The Edmonton Community Housing Organization (ECHO) was established, representing the City's first foray into the direct provision of social housing as developer and owner of land and buildings. From then until 1974, 1,030 units were created in 14 Community Housing projects under this initiative (COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980). Today, these projects still represent a large proportion of the City's affordable housing stock.

In line with the growing public support (and demand) for affordable housing in the 1970s, the City's involvement in housing grew, along with increased advocacy to other levels of government. An oil and housing boom coincided as the baby boomer generation moved into home ownership. However, the City's strong economic position and substantial federal funding meant that conditions for a housing crisis could largely be responded to at this point (COE, 2018a). This decade is characterized by a whirlwind of developments in housing policy, funding agreements, and policy initiatives at all three levels of government, contributing to a complicated patchwork of housing development. The City's integral role in affordable housing began to take shape through the direct provision of land, subsidies, development sponsorship, and advocacy (COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980). More direct policy statements regarding affordable housing began to appear, marking a shift in the City's approach and setting the stage for future involvement. The *1971 City of Edmonton General Plan* contends,

A primary goal of government is the responsibility of ensuring that every citizen is afforded the opportunity to have a decent place in which to live (...) public housing is necessary to provide safe decent accommodation at reasonable rent levels.

(*COE Planning Department, 1971, p. 7*)

In an early example of the City recognizing their limited funding capacity and in an effort to advocate to other levels of government, this qualifying statement followed,

It should be recognized, however, that it is the responsibility of the senior levels of government to provide the financial backing for this program as it is beyond the City's present financial capacity to implement the program with its own limited resources.

(COE Planning Department, 1971, p. 7)

In 1973, changes were made again to provincial policy. The Alberta Housing Corporation outlined a new framework for social housing development (COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980). Under this agreement, the Province developed, owned, and operated Community Housing projects on land leased from the City for 60 years. Around 1,200 units were developed under this agreement (COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980). Prior to this, cooperation between the municipality and other partners remained limited. However, growing provincial interest in housing and ongoing federal funding provided many opportunities for collaboration, often in response to particular funding opportunities. Rapid developments continued throughout this decade, including the creation of the Edmonton Housing Authority (later called Capital Region Housing Corporation) as property manager of public housing developments in 1970; the establishment of an interdepartmental Housing Task Group on behalf of the City of Edmonton and subsequent release of the first housing-specific policy document, *Housing in Edmonton: Directions for the Future* in 1975; the resulting formation of a new City department, the Real Estate and Housing Department, and its council approved 1979 document, *A Housing Strategy for the City of Edmonton* (COE, 2018; COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980). The 1979 *Housing Strategy* solidified the City's commitment to affordable housing provision and was the first policy to explicitly describe the City's role in housing, as well as outlining expectations of the private sector, non-profit organizations, and other levels of government. This *Housing Strategy* marked the start of an increasingly proactive and direct City role. The document described the municipal role in housing at the time as including, "provision of land for social housing, research and policy formulation regarding social housing programmes, initiation and delegation of innovative housing solutions, limited housing production, support of private sector activities, and promotion and conservation of existing housing stock where possible" (as cited by COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980, p. 79). These considerations are remarkably similar to present-day policy directives, demonstrating the forward-thinking nature of administration in addressing affordable housing concerns.

Federal housing policy trends and funding model adjustments significantly impacted the direction of affordable housing production in Edmonton from the early 1970s to mid-1980s. Suttor describes this era as the "first non-profit decade" (Suttor, 2016, p. 103). The first half was characterized by large social housing production on behalf of provincial housing corporations, with a growing non-profit and co-op housing sector. After 1978, public housing production halted in favour of a complete pivot towards non-profit and co-op housing, with municipal non-profit housing corporations (like HomeEd) filling the void for public housing. Nationally during this time, co-op housing accounted for about one quarter of production, while provincial and municipal agencies accounted for about one third. The remaining (and largest) share was developed by community-based non-profit groups including social agencies and ethnic associations (Suttor, 2016). During these years, affordable housing development took place amidst a complicated interplay of government and non-profit involvement. As of February 1980, 2,769 Community Housing units had been created on 65 sites provided by the City, through various methods of partnership (COE Real Estate and Housing, 1980).

1980s–Early 1990s: Foundations of the Partnership Era amidst Growing Housing Challenges

In contrast to the previous decade, the 1980s were a tumultuous time for housing and economic conditions in Edmonton. Two oil crashes, a real estate crash, massive job loss, and provincial cuts to services left many Edmontonians struggling. By April 1987, Edmonton was home to more people out of work than all of Alberta had been in 1980 (Goyette & Jakeway Roemich, 2004, p. 331). Nationally, rising interest rates and pressures on the rental market kept public concern over housing affordability high, supporting an active government role in housing (Suttor, 2016a). Homelessness emerged as a growing concern in Edmonton, permanently shifting the way in which housing affordability concerns were framed by the public and in policy responses. This trend was echoed at the federal level. There was a move away from a comprehensive policy response supporting mixed-income and mixed-tenure projects, towards a targeted response for “special” populations like those experiencing homelessness (Suttor, 2016a, p. 10). Despite relatively sustained funding levels throughout the 1980s, responsibility for social housing was being incrementally devolved to the provinces, setting the stage for the end of active federal housing policy.

At the initiative of the City, representatives from local community-based groups met to discuss the growing challenge of homelessness in 1986 (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 1991). The Edmonton Coalition on Homelessness (ECOH) was formed as a result, with a mandate to identify the scope of homelessness, identify solutions, and develop an implementation plan (Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999). The coalition grew in membership from 30 founding member agencies to over 100, becoming a catalyst for collaboration and an important mechanism for community representation in housing and homelessness concerns. The formation of ECOH represents an important turning point in the City’s approach to action. Amidst a growing housing crisis, the City recognized it could not tackle the problem alone, turning instead to the expertise of diverse community partners. The following year, ECOH released its major report: *No Place Like Home – Homelessness in Edmonton*. This endorsed 43 recommendations to address homelessness, support services, and housing affordability concerns (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 1991). A major recommendation encouraged the Government of Alberta to formally partner with community groups to identify problems and coordinate adequate resources. As a result, a committee was struck in 1988 with representation from Alberta Municipal Affairs, Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the City of Edmonton, and ECOH. The committee commissioned a study, Edmonton’s first focused assessment of affordable housing need and demand (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 1991).

In response to an identified need in this assessment, the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing (EJPCOH) was established in 1990 as an inter-jurisdictional group, bringing together representatives of the three levels of government with partners in the private and non-profit sectors, including four members appointed through ECOH (Community Plan Committee, Nichols Applied Management Inc., & Soles and Company, 2011; Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999). The City held membership on the EJPCOH and contributed financial and administrative support. The initial mission of the EJPCOH focused on six goals. In addition to addressing and preventing homelessness, these included coordinating and integrating the many relevant stakeholders, policies, programmes, and budget processes related to housing and homelessness, and ensuring input and involvement of the community and private sectors in plan development and implementation (Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999).

1990s–Early 2000s: Creative Collaboration to Fill the Federal Void

Between 1993 and 1995, the productive years of Canadian social housing came crashing to an end. The federal government devolved responsibility for programme management to the provinces, new funding for social housing ceased, and social housing was removed as a key feature of federal policy (Suttor, 2016b). By the late 1990s, Edmonton housing advocates recognized that funding was too unstable and tied to the political whims of the provincial and federal governments to adequately address housing concerns. In 1997, ECOH applied for and was granted funding as part of the CMHC Homegrown Solutions programme to investigate the creation of a housing trust fund (Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999). This resulted in establishment of the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund (EHTF) by ECOH in 1999 to financially resource housing solutions. A steering committee oversaw the fund, including members from the City, Alberta Municipal Affairs, and Capital Region Housing Corporation (Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999). The original intention was to create a dedicated, sustained housing funding stream – out of the political realm – although proposed funding models were not immediately successfully.

During this same time frame, Edmonton Mayor Bill Smith and several provincial partners agreed to review the ongoing issue of homelessness through the creation of the jointly chaired Edmonton Homelessness Task Force. As part of their mandate to involve broad community partners in developing solutions to homelessness, the Task Force prepared and released a report in 1999, *Homelessness in Edmonton: A Call to Action* (Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness, 1999). This was intended to guide future action in housing and homelessness, building on the broad base of work already underway within the City. This report recommended that the EJPCOH lead implementation of its recommendations and the EHTF be responsible for funding concerns.

A serendipitous series of policy events unfolded over the next several years, setting the stage for Edmonton's present-day approach. In 1999, the *Federal National Homelessness Initiative (NHI)* was announced with \$753 million “designed to foster partnerships and investment that contribute to the alleviation of homelessness” (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2002, p. 144). The three-year, \$305 million *Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI)* was a cornerstone of this federal funding project. The SCPI was intended to increase community capacity to plan, set priorities, and implement initiatives (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2002). Most of this funding (80%) went to Canada's ten largest cities, Edmonton included. Communities could choose between two programme delivery models, “community entity” or “shared decision making”.

Communities with a baseline capacity were encouraged to adopt the “community entity” model to make the most of funding commitments (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2002). In many Canadian cities, the requirement that a community entity be formed to administer SCPI was a catalyst for new cooperative relationships. In Edmonton, this requirement merely formalized a series of networks decades in the making, with the added benefit of a new federal funding source.

In response to the NHI funding announcement, the EJPCOH hosted a planning charette on homelessness to kick-start the development of Edmonton's first community plan. Through a broad consultative process, the EJPCOH undertook writing this three-year plan, designating the EJPCOH and EHTF as the “community entity” (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2002) (in 2008, these would amalgamate to form the organization presently known as Homeward Trust). Published in 2000, the *Edmonton Community Plan on Homelessness* (Edmonton

Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2000) was recognized by all three levels of government, and City staff were actively represented on its associated steering committee.

Despite active involvement with and support of the EJPCOH and the EHTF, the City had not explicitly defined its role in this new era of action until 2002 when *Building Together: The City of Edmonton Low Income and Special Needs Housing Strategy 2001–2011* was published and approved by City Council. This document provided the cornerstone around which all detailed strategies and actions would be built over the next decade, laying the foundation for future housing policy and programmes. The strategy aptly summarized the City's role in the fast-paced transition period characterizing the early 2000s;

The City of Edmonton has been actively involved, contributing its experience and knowledge of its local communities. Growing housing and homeless needs, along with governments' commitment to do things differently and better, have highlighted the need for the City to clearly define its role in this area over the next decade.

(COE, 2002, p. 1)

This role is clearly defined as “lead coordinator and facilitator” and characterizes the City's involvement to the present day.

2000s: Stalling Progress Despite Unprecedented Cooperation

In the early 2000s, unprecedented cooperation was taking place in Edmonton towards efforts to alleviate homelessness and address ongoing housing concerns. Partly in response to federal funding background report arrangements, and partly due to an emerging crisis tied to yet another one of Alberta's economic booms, housing and homelessness became increasingly linked in formal policy and political rhetoric. Despite focused efforts on behalf of countless community partners, prevailing social and economic conditions stalled major progress, and they would continue to drastically impact the response well into the late 2000s. In April 2002, the EJPCOH published a review and update of Edmonton's original community plan. This document described the ongoing challenges as follows:

Although significant progress has been made toward addressing the gaps identified in the Community Plan, the recent economic boom has accelerated the homelessness and affordable housing crisis in the City. The economic climate in Edmonton has changed dramatically (...) Net in-migration has reached levels of over 10%, there has been a significant increase in cost of living (utilities, rent, food), vacancy rates have dropped dramatically and real estate prices in all market segments have risen significantly (...) The extreme lack of affordable rental housing is creating pressure on the continuum of facilities providing emergency, transitional and long-term supportive housing. As a result, existing emergency and transitional facilities are housing people for increasingly longer periods due to the lack of housing further along the continuum.

(Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, 2002, p. 7)

The underlying message of this review was that more than ever, local partners (including the City) did not have the capacity to address these issues alone. The plan included several new recommendations for advocacy to other levels of government and emphasized financial resources as a key limiting factor.

During the same period, the Edmonton Task Force on Affordable Housing was established by resolution of City Council with the primary goal of creating a sustainable framework to encourage new affordable rental production. A background report was published in 2003, detailing recommendations for the market and non-profit sectors to “build modest quality units at moderate rent (...) distinct from housing in which subsidies are required to bridge the gap between market housing and the amount that households can afford to pay at 30% of income” (COE, Pomeroy, Focus Consulting Inc., & Lampert, 2003, p. i). The focus on housing that operates without the need for subsidies is indicative of this era, when federal funding for new social housing had essentially ceased. The shortcomings in support from the provincial and federal governments, including a recently announced federal-provincial capital programme – the *Affordable Housing Partnership Initiative* – were explicitly noted. Here it was described as “limited in scope and scale” (COE et al., 2003, p. 32). This background report laid the groundwork for a new direction in the City’s response, endorsing a novel set of proactive land-use planning tools, including an affordable housing density bonus and zoning changes to encourage the development of secondary apartments.

The next several years were characterized by a relentless housing crunch as the City’s population boomed again. The EJPCOH and EHTF continued to support policy directives outlined in the *Call to Action* report and the *Edmonton Community Plan*. Following the 2004 civic election, Mayor Mandel made affordable housing a key priority, proposing a new and improved affordable housing initiative. In part, this was spurred by the recognition that many municipal regulations were cumbersome and limited affordable housing development. The resulting outcome was *Cornerstones Plan – Edmonton’s Plan for Affordable Housing* (Cornerstones: Edmonton’s Plan for Affordable Housing, 2006–2011, 2006). Endorsed by City Council in 2005, Cornerstones outlined a series of 15 bold directions the City would take towards its goal of providing 2,500 units of long-term housing over the proceeding five years. These included the creation of a substantial new funding pool to leverage resources from other levels of government, the establishment of an affordable land bank, and an incentive fund to promote secondary suites (Cornerstones: Edmonton’s Plan for Affordable Housing, 2006–2011, 2006). The City’s role in this response was clearly defined as leader, facilitator, and active advocate (COE, 2012). The plan emphasized collaboration, inviting “all levels of government, the non-profit and private sector and individuals to join the City as partners in working towards this outcome” (Cornerstones: Edmonton’s Plan for Affordable Housing, 2006–2011, 2006, p. 1). To this end, the City cultivated partnerships with other levels of government, the general public, and private and community-based housing providers, exceeding City Council’s initial housing targets (COE, 2012). Between 2006 and 2011, Cornerstones helped create or upgrade 553 secondary suites and over 3,300 safe and affordable homes (COE, 2018d).

The City continued to explore land-use planning as an innovative tool for creating and maintaining affordable housing. The previously discussed Mayor’s Task Force Report on Affordable Housing (2003) spurred the City to initiate a study on the relationship between land-use planning and affordable housing. *Key Connections: Affordable Housing and Land-Use Planning* was the outcome. It concluded that through targeted planning measures, the City’s Planning and Development Department could play an important role in facilitating affordable housing provision. It determined that administration lacked an adequate policy framework for affordable housing and was particularly critical of the existing Municipal Development Plan (1998) in this regard (COE, 1998; City Spaces Consulting, 2006).

Late 2000s: Established Partnerships Respond to the Homelessness Crisis

Concern over rising rates of homelessness in Edmonton peaked in the late 2000s, and the response shifted – this time to addressing urgent crisis conditions. Between 2004 and 2006, there

was a 19% increase in those counted as homeless; the vacancy rate dropped to 1.2%, from over 5% two years prior, and the average price of a single-detached home increased by 52% in 2006 (COE, 2007). Across the housing spectrum, Edmontonians were feeling the housing crunch. A series of major policy initiatives directed at homelessness was soon underway on behalf of the provincial and municipal governments, many of which remain in place today. Despite the clear link between homelessness and housing, the City of Edmonton's homelessness plan explicitly stated it was not intended to address broad affordable housing concerns, but would cooperate with relevant initiatives (Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness, 2009, p. 2). As part of a provincial consultative process during this time, the City prepared and presented a series of specific municipal-provincial partnership opportunities that could generate affordable housing units. Some of these recommendations were very forward thinking, including a proposed real estate transfer fee (up to 1% of real estate value) to generate municipal capital for affordable housing and amendments to provincial legislation that would enable inclusionary zoning (COE, 2007, p. 8).

The mandate of established City housing policies carried on well into the late 2010s, with housing and homelessness remaining distinctively separate policy concerns. The City continued to support implementation of Edmonton's homelessness plan and Cornerstones, and the work of Homeward Trust. Edmonton's plan for affordable housing was updated in 2012 through the endorsement of *Cornerstones II (2012–2016)* (COE, 2018f). This updated policy outlined similar actions with renewed funding commitments, remaining active until the end of 2016. In 2014, federal social housing policy returned to the forefront of concern. Operating agreements set up during the productive years of social housing were set to expire over the next several years, affecting up to 11,367 units of social housing in Edmonton (Social Housing Regeneration Advisory Group [SHRAG], 2015). In response, in April 2014, Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson hosted a roundtable discussion on emerging housing issues in support of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities national advocacy campaign. The conversation focused on expiring federal-provincial operating agreements and regenerating the ageing social housing stock. Edmontonians from the non-profit and private housing sectors were invited to the table alongside representatives from provincial and municipal government (COE, 2018e). The Social Housing Regeneration Advisory Group (SHRAG) was formed to keep the conversation going. Co-chaired by Iveson, members of the group included social housing providers, community agencies, City representatives, private developers, and representatives from First Nations organizations. The group released a summary report in 2015, setting direction for ongoing collaboration. They identified a necessity to step away from the current operating model and find a new way to deliver housing for households in need (SHRAG, 2015, p. 8). Key to this was reconceptualizing social housing "as a contributor to diverse, inclusive communities with the potential to act as a catalyst for community development" (SHRAG, 2015, p. 8).

Bringing It All Together: In Support of Complete Communities in the City of Edmonton

The notion of affordable housing as part of diverse, inclusive communities set a new direction for the City, laying the foundation for present-day policy efforts that conceptualize housing need more broadly than in the past. This echoes other recent updates to City policy including *The Way We Live: Edmonton's People Plan* (2010), and a bold new collective impact movement spearheaded by the City: *EndPoverty Edmonton*. This began as a Task Force appointed by City Council in 2014 with over 200 members, including people impacted by poverty. The Task Force worked to identify priority actions towards the goal of ending poverty in one generation, communicated through a 2015 strategy document (EndPoverty Edmonton, 2015). As part of

this initiative, housing is inextricably linked to poverty. The City's current role in this initiative is one of champion, advocate, partner, and investor.

Another driving force behind the current City action is the recent shift in federal and provincial support for housing. Both governments released housing strategies in 2017, and Edmonton is actively working to take advantage of significant funding opportunities. Towards this end, and as part of the expanding vision on affordable housing, the City is working to address considerations for the context in which affordable housing is situated, seeking to cultivate an environment in which opportunities for affordable housing flourish.

Cultivating Environments in Support of Affordable Housing

The *City of Edmonton Affordable Housing Strategy* is the most recent major policy development. Released in 2015, it establishes a bold new direction to guide City action until 2025. It formalizes the City's role as leader, coordinator, and advocate, uniquely positioned to leverage a tool box of municipal resources including funding, land, regulations, and policies.

The City is working to enable supportive environments in several ways, building off momentum of the *Affordable Housing Strategy*. One such approach is to engage community partners around the importance of affordable housing by means of a compelling and consistent narrative (COE Communications and Engagement, 2018). In August 2018, the City announced a five-year marketing and communications initiative: The *Affordable Housing Public Information Campaign*. The goal for this strategy is "to shift negative attitudes and behaviours related to affordable housing by bridging existing values with the facts and particularly the benefits of affordable housing" (COE Communications and Engagement, 2018). Collaboration is a key feature of this plan, as housing partners must be actively engaged in joint communication efforts, working together to change the community conversation on affordable housing. The campaign aims to build community buy-in for affordable housing in support of Edmonton's long-term, City-wide neighbourhood affordable housing target of 16% (COE, 2018c).

Mobilizing Partnerships in the City of Edmonton: Conditions for Success

Over the past six decades, Edmonton's approach to developing affordable rental housing can be characterized as adaptive, proactive, and collaborative. Every decade brought with it a new set of local and national challenges. Responses have been tailored to make the most of funding opportunities and align with prevailing public and political rhetoric. When federal support for social housing was strong, policy was designed to acquire and effectively distribute available resources. With federal devolution for housing responsibility and growing concerns around homelessness in the 1980s, the need for collaboration became increasingly apparent to maximize scarce resources and rally broad community support behind initiatives. In the present context of renewed provincial and federal support, the City's response is once again underscored by the need to position itself to attract funding dollars.

Throughout every era, the mobilization of diverse partners has been key in expanding access to affordable rental housing in Edmonton. A series of unique factors has contributed to the City's success in this regard.

Strong Policy Framework to Guide Housing Action

Since the late 1970s, the City has maintained a strong housing policy framework to clearly delineate roles and expectations, set priorities, and guide collective action. This has had the dual

benefit of keeping housing at the forefront of political concern for over three decades, despite shifting economic conditions and wavering public concern for affordability issues, as well as providing an overarching framework under which partnerships could be developed in support of specific outcomes.

Direction on housing has not been limited to a single stream of policy documents; it is multifaceted, reflecting the diverse ways in which housing impacts the Edmonton community. This policy framework includes focused housing policy documents, as well as those which pertain more broadly to homelessness, poverty reduction, and municipal development. Some have been authored directly by the City, while others have been community-led with City contribution. The framework is characterized by a strong commitment to community-based priority development, including clear processes for inclusion and participation in policy formation. In part, this reflects an early recognition on behalf of the City that bureaucrats did not have all the answers. However, this process also serves to build community buy-in and increase the likelihood that policy directives will live beyond political cycles. Also evident in the policy framework is a concerted effort on behalf of the City to clearly define its role and responsibilities, and that of its partners, within each response.

The first housing-specific strategy was prepared by the City Planning Department in 1978. Its stated purpose was to ensure continuity in municipal housing programmes. Notably, it was developed in response to recommendations of the Interdepartmental Housing Task Group with considerable public participation. This document included an extensive overview of the role of the City, private sector, and “third sector” in addressing housing challenges. A series of annually released reports followed, providing ongoing and updated direction. This cycle of policy development has been consistently employed in the Edmonton housing context. A problem is recognized; a task group, coalition, or committee is formed to obtain input from diverse partners; a policy is developed, implemented, and revised to ensure ongoing relevance. Often, an entity is tasked with championing the plan. The first *Edmonton Community Plan on Homelessness* is another key example. Prepared by the EJPCOH in 2000, this plan was developed in consultation with partners from the private, non-profit, and public sectors, and people with lived experience of homelessness. It was created in response to an identified need by the Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness. Although the City was not a direct author, it was a key partner in the strategy’s development, which was intended to guide a coordinated response to housing and homelessness throughout the City. As with earlier policy documents, roles and responsibilities were clearly defined.

This consistent framework has served as an important catalyst for collaboration in Edmonton. Through various policy development processes, partners have been brought together and cooperative relationships formed. In a context where end-goals are clearly outlined, partnerships could be selectively and deliberately developed in support of these objectives. The clear delineation of roles and responsibilities has also ensured that resources are maximized and efforts not replicated.

City as Lead Coordinator and Facilitator, Supported by Strong Policy Frameworks

The City has taken on various roles in promoting the development of affordable rental housing over the past several decades. These have included direct developer of housing, provider of land, policy maker, regulator, administrator, and advocate. A role they have consistently maintained is that of lead coordinator and facilitator. Edmonton’s strong housing policy framework has supported this role immensely, providing a road map upon which collaborative relationships could be deliberately built, as the City worked to leverage the capacity of other partners. Many policy objectives were met through the combined efforts of various partners.

The following examples (Boxes 5.1 and 5.2) illustrate distinct approaches the City has taken to mobilizing networks. Each was successful, resulting in the development of affordable rental units, albeit in very different ways. These cases are underscored by the same fundamental approach – the City worked in a supportive role to leverage the capacity of other partners towards stated policy objectives.

Key Housing Champions Build Relationships and Foster Trust

The influence of key people in Edmonton's housing circle over the past several decades cannot be overstated. They have been integral to building lasting relationships in the sector, fostering trust, and pushing for bold housing initiatives. A core group of City staff were closely involved in policy formation and implementation and were active members of established working groups, with close working relationships with many community partners. This allowed for an open line of communication between the City and housing management bodies, advocacy groups, community organizations, and the public, and provided a wealth of institutional knowledge.

BOX 5.1: CITY AS ENABLER OF PUBLIC ROLE IN INCREASING HOUSING SUPPLY

Cornerstones I is considered one of Edmonton's most successful initiatives for increasing affordable rental housing. Through a variety of means including new construction, regeneration of existing spaces, and rental supplements, 3,000 affordable housing units were created between 2006 and 2011 (COE, 2018d). Although partnerships were integral to the strategy's overall success, the Secondary Suites Grant Program endorsed a particularly novel and interesting approach to collaboration between the City, home builders, and the people of Edmonton.

Funding for Secondary Suites Grant Program predates the Cornerstones programme. Following the 2003 affordable housing study, the City recognized they could not adequately address the demand for affordable housing alone, so they willed the public. City staff sat down with home builders to develop an initial framework, first running the programme as a limited pilot project. Edmonton provided funds, but also made significant changes to land-use regulation and municipal processes to allow the programme to operate effectively. A great deal of collaboration occurred within the City to iron out details, and in June 2008, the Secondary Suites Grant Program was formally announced to the public.

The Secondary Suites Grant Program encouraged upgrading and creating new secondary suites in compliance with health and safety standards through a financial incentive for homeowners under specified terms. These terms included an agreement to rent units to approved low-income households for five years. This approach was very popular, contributing to widespread support for secondary suites in Edmonton and exponentially increasing the number of safe, legal suites available. The grant was so successful in raising awareness of the benefits of legal secondary suites, that up to half of new suites were created voluntarily by homeowners without financial incentive (COE, 2012). The programme had the dual benefit of increasing the number of safe, affordable rental units, while also providing mortgage assistance to participating homeowners. Through this initiative, the City took steps to create an enabling environment for affordable housing development, leveraging the capacity of everyday Edmontonians to be part of the solution.

BOX 5.2: CITY AS PROVIDER OF LAND AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

In 2014, a key recommendation of the SHRAG encouraged the City to “partner with social housing providers operating on City-owned land to develop pilot regeneration projects” (SHRAG, 2015, p. 10). This recommendation was the catalyst for a partnership between the City of Edmonton and Capital Region Housing Corporation (CRHC), Edmonton’s largest provider of social and affordable housing. The result of this partnership was the first social housing regeneration project in Edmonton – featuring an innovative new model for affordable housing provision and a regenerated building that tripled the number of affordable housing units from 80 to 240.

The City of Edmonton was the beneficial owner of the Londonderry Housing Complex, built in 1971. It was City-owned, on City land, operated by CRHC. Once it was determined that redevelopment was the most viable option for the site, the City acted to bolster the capacity of CRHC in their role as project lead. They introduced CRHC to the community league, supported facilitation, and provided staff and resources. CRHC employed a new method to public engagement – approaching the surrounding community with no pre-existing notions of design other than the intended number of units. Public engagement began in January 2015 and went very well, with no public opposition to the rezoning application despite a tripling in density. In this partnership, the City leveraged all available resources to support CRHC in its Londonderry regeneration endeavour. Once complete (estimated 2018), this mixed-income project will allow families to stay in place even as their incomes change. This partnership has set the course for future engagement and redevelopment on City-owned sites, marking the start of a new era in innovative social housing development in Edmonton.

The impact of these personalities on the collaborative nature of Edmonton’s housing field is immense.

Edmonton has also been home to a succession of mayors and city councillors who have been incredibly supportive of affordable housing development. Several key initiatives were spearheaded by elected officials, including the Social Housing Regeneration Advisory Committee, the Cornerstones Plan, and the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness. Many successful programmes and initiatives would have never taken off without these bold champions leading the way.

Opportunities for Collaboration through Formalized Channels

The creation of ECOH in 1986 and EJPCOH in 1990 was formative in establishing Edmonton’s partnership era, providing long-term, formalized outlets for collaboration and communication between diverse partners. In the case of ECOH, the City initiated a conversation on homelessness, recognizing they did not have the expertise or capacity to tackle the issue alone. ECOH was the result of that conversation and came to have representation from over 100 agencies. ECOH was closely involved in municipal policy-making, ensuring housing advocates had a seat at decision-making tables. It was also the driving force behind the innovative EHTF, which now operates as the City’s homelessness systems planner – Homeward Trust. To this day,

ECOH (now ECOHH) remains an important advocate, providing a unified voice in policy conversations.

The EJPCOH was also established with a primary goal of bringing together government, private, and community partners, in part to determine priority needs and set policy direction. The City was an active member and supporter, providing funding and administrative assistance. In addition to developing key housing strategies, including Edmonton's first community plan, the EJPCOH was tasked with overseeing City progress in other policy initiatives. This group eventually amalgamated with the EHTF to form Homeward Trust. In addition to providing formalized, ongoing opportunities for collaboration and playing an important role in policy development and implementation, the early formation of ECOH and the EJPCOH was key in establishing a lasting culture of cooperation in Edmonton. Many later initiatives endorsed the formation of working groups, task forces, and committees to encourage partnerships, provide a forum for discussion, and influence policy direction.

Taking Stock: Lessons Learnt from Six Decades of Support for Affordable Housing

The City of Edmonton has not always been successful in its efforts to develop affordable rental housing. Over the past several decades, many initiatives failed to take off as planned, projects were scrapped, and annual targets went unmet. After an initial explosion of social housing development in the 1960s–1980s, decades are characterized by lulls in affordable rental production, until a modest return to development in the mid-2000s. The Londonderry development represents the first increase in targeted social housing units in Edmonton in nearly 30 years.

Despite progress in recent years, the challenge remains to meet the needs of roughly 70,000 renter households in Edmonton living in unaffordable housing (COE, 2015). In a context of economic boom and bust cycles, limited funding terms, and growing housing affordability challenges, there is no silver bullet. As the City works to develop new and innovative solutions to meet housing demand, it is imperative to analyse and learn from failed initiatives. However, it is equally importantly to understand what has worked well for Edmonton and why. In reviewing the City's most successful initiatives to date, partnerships are the common denominator.

The purpose of this chapter was to review the City's involvement in affordable housing development since the 1960s, shedding light on key partnerships in every era and the City's shifting role. It has focused on the positive, drawing attention to the circumstances that supported successful outcomes, ultimately contributing to affordable housing creation. In an effort to provide other jurisdictions with some tangible takeaways, this chapter concludes with lessons learnt from experiences of what worked well.

Lessons learnt:

- Know when to lead and when to follow
- Deliberately create opportunities for collaboration
- Engage the public as a key partner
- Do not underestimate the power of people.

Know When to Lead and When to Follow

Although the City of Edmonton often defers to lead coordinator and facilitator, some of the most successful housing outcomes have been the result of initiatives in which the City took on

a supporting role. As a municipality, they are uniquely positioned to impact policy levers, like zoning and regulations, that other partners cannot. Other contributions, like administrative support or research capacity, are also inherent strengths of a government body. It is important to identify these distinct capacities and leverage them, while doing the same for other partners.

There is no shortage of innovation and resolve in Edmonton, particularly in the non-profit and housing advocacy sectors. In recognizing this, the City has sought to take stock of what each partner brings to the table in every collaborative relationship. At times, this has involved acting as a connector of other organizations who might be a better fit for a project or passing on a funding opportunity to an agency with more specialized knowledge. Ultimately, in prioritizing the end goal over who gets the credit, better housing outcomes can be achieved.

Deliberately Create Opportunities for Collaboration

Sometimes partnerships are formed organically, through proximity, joint advocacy efforts, or existing relationships. Although these types of cooperative relationships are productive, they often develop and operate within distinctive silos. In cultivating and supporting opportunities for collaboration with diverse partners, like formalized working groups, committees, and coalitions such as the EJPCOH, stakeholders who otherwise might not interact are brought together, lines of communication are opened, trust is built, and policy direction better reflects community priorities.

Engage the Public as a Key Partner

Members of the public are often viewed as impediments to affordable housing production, rather than potential partners. As the success of the City's Secondary Suites Grant Program shows, engaging the public can be an effective strategy for increasing affordable housing supply. There are many opportunities for innovative community involvement in housing issues if appropriate conditions are enabled. Whether this be zoning changes, incentives, or education, the broader community should not be overlooked in efforts to mobilize networks.

Do Not Underestimate the Power of People

The individual people involved in Edmonton's housing sector have been integral to the success of many initiatives over the past several decades. It is imperative to recognize these stakeholders – their established relationships, their reputations with partner organizations, and their vast institutional knowledge – and take efforts to ensure these unique assets are not lost as people retire or otherwise leave the sector. As a new generation of housing professionals, advocates and City staff move into key roles; care should be taken to foster opportunities for mentorship, network building, and the transfer of institutional knowledge.

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Note

¹ In this chapter, **affordable housing** broadly refers to any type of rental housing with rents below average market cost, targeted to mid- to low-income earning households. It may include (but is not limited to) social housing, as well as units developed through City initiatives like the Secondary Suites Grant. Affordable home-ownership programmes are not in the scope of this chapter.

Social housing refers specifically to units with rent geared to income, developed as part of a formal initiative such as the federally funded Community Housing programme during the 1960s–1980s. The term is interchangeable with public housing.

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