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Sullivan Counts Shelters as New Homes

Prepared by Jean Swanson, Carnegie Community Action Project, October 25, 2007

The provincial and city governments are always announcing that they're opening new housing units, or building them, or converting them. This is good because it means that they are feeling our pressure to actually build 3200 new units of social housing in the city before the Olympics.

But it's also bad because the announcements are designed more for public relations than for actually providing homes for people. And when people hear all these announcements, if they aren't homeless or don't live in the Downtown Eastside, they might believe that the government is doing enough.

For example, Sam Sullivan recently announced, "in the 11 months since project Civil City was established, we have...commitments for more than 1500 new supportive housing units..."

Let's just forget about the fact that you can't really get housing built in 11 months, so Sullivan really can't take credit for much of this. And let's not forget that even if 1500 units are "committed," that's still 1700 units short of the 3200 units that the City of Vancouver's own policy calls for over the next 4 years.

And then let's take a close look at Sullivan's numbers. I want to thank Monte Paulsen of The Tyee for some of this analysis.

Sullivan claims that 57 new units have been opened in 2007. These units are in an assisted living building for seniors on E. 58th St. Until recently these kinds of units were paid for out of the health budget. Now the province is building assisted living units for seniors, which are needed, but have nothing to do with housing for low income and homeless people in general.

Sullivan says there are 651 new units under construction and 44 conversions (the Pennsylvania Hotel). Of these 651 units, the ones on Richards St. (87 units) and the 92 units at 65 E. Hastings would have been opened and providing homes three years ago if the provincial government hadn't cancelled them in 2001.

Three more buildings (Beulah Gardens, St. Vincents, and Icelandic Residence) in that group of 651 units are not in the Downtown Eastside and are assisted living buildings for seniors. That leaves 246 new units (Woodwards and the Passlin Hotel) for Downtown Eastsiders, not counting the ones cancelled in 2001, or 425 if you do count them. Remember, we need 800 per year.

Sullivan says 649 new units are funded and in development. Of these, 256 are in the Olympic Village. We don't know how many if any of these units will be affordable by people on welfare because Sullivan's council cut back the subsidy

for this project. One educated guess is 25. Sullivan lists the Union Gospel Mission (UGM) project as "133 beds, rooms and units." Paulsen's article says it is really 43 shelter bunks, a relocation of an existing 37 bunk treatment centre, and 36 new units of abstinence based social housing, so let's call this one 36 instead of 133. Yes, it is official BC government policy to count shelter beds as housing "units" in case you were wondering. So that's a total of 321 new units (not shelters) funded and possibly available for Downtown Eastside residents sometime in the future (the UGM proposal hasn't even been approved by the city yet).

My grand total of housing units (not rooms or shelters) possibly available to low-income residents who aren't seniors is 746 (0 completed in 2007, 425 under construction, and 321 funded and in development). If it takes 4 years for all these units to be built, that's a massive 2454 units short of the 3200 units that the City of Vancouver's own policy and the Inner City Inclusivity Housing table say we need by 2010.

In other words, don't be fooled by all those government announcements about how many housing units are being built. We still have to do a lot of work: pressuring the government to build more housing and exposing the real numbers of housing units that are getting built.

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