

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and provide input on the vital issues of poverty, housing and homelessness facing our population. I am happy to see the federal government taking a proactive role in tackling these issues. We have reviewed the report put out by this Standing Committee and are impressed by the number and breadth of options presented. I am especially pleased to note that this Committee recognizes the importance of Canada's municipalities in finding solutions to our issues around poverty and housing.

As your report describes, cities are the key drivers of Canada's economy, prosperity, innovation and productivity. HRM is fortunate in its position as the economic centre of the Atlantic region. We work with the private sector and other governments to promote economic growth in the region. However, poverty is still a reality in HRM. In 2005, 52,575 people lived below the poverty line, including 15.7% of all children in HRM. Food bank use has grown steadily over the years. Feed Nova Scotia reports an increase of 12.1% in food bank use in Nova Scotia from 1997 to 2007.

In addition, there are, on any given night in HRM, at least 250 people who are homeless. This number does not likely provide a true picture of the total number of homeless, but only represents those who participated in a one-night survey. Not included are those who have no permanent housing for a variety of reasons, those in temporary housing situations, women leaving abusive situations, former patients without support mechanisms - in other words, the vulnerable in our society.

Both the number and proportion of those living in core housing need in HRM is on the increase. There are now over 20,000 households paying over 30% of their income for housing. Most are single parents, seniors, or people living alone. This situation is especially true for renters. As of 2001, more than 40% of all rental households are in core housing need, up from 35% in 1991.

While housing is still relatively affordable in HRM compared with similar cities across Canada, affordability here is nonetheless deteriorating as both house prices and rents have been increasing faster than incomes over the past several years. At the same time, the availability of affordable housing is decreasing and existing social housing is reaching the end of its lifespan and is in need of repair and renewal.

Changing demographics also means that different options are needed for housing. For example the number of seniors in HRM's population is expected to increase dramatically over the next few decades. This has implications for the type and amount of housing and services that need to be delivered to HRM residents.

As your report notes, housing is a key determinant of well-being. However housing policies are too often developed in isolation from social policy and plans for poverty reduction. Integration of these spheres is needed to develop an effective and meaningful strategy.

Although HRM does not have direct responsibility for social assistance payments or delivering non-market affordable housing, the Region has undertaken a number of initiatives related to poverty, homelessness and housing. For example, HRM's recently adopted 25 year Regional Municipal Planning Strategy provides a framework for the future of the Region. A key part of this framework is the creation of an affordable housing strategy, which will include:

- incentives and initiatives to encourage more affordable housing
- affordable housing targets
- encouragement of innovation in affordable housing; and
- investigating the potential to use HRM's real estate assets for affordable housing

The Regional Plan also:

- encourages compact development to reduced infrastructure costs and make more effective use of existing and future public investments;
- aims to ensure an adequate supply of land is available for housing development;
- encourages an efficient transportation network to reduce costs associated with travel to and from work; and
- emphasizes a strong economy to increase incomes and overall community well-being.

Other HRM housing-related initiatives include:

- Providing grants to non-profit organizations involved in poverty reduction, homelessness and affordable housing.
- Giving property tax exemptions to low income residents and non-profit housing organizations. HRM is providing almost \$1.2 million for up to 3000 households in 2008-09.
- Providing over \$4 million in in-kind land donations and below-market value sales for housing initiatives.
- Requesting amendments to the Nova Scotia Municipal Government Act to enable HRM to require affordable housing as part of residential development.

HRM also contributes to research and information available to stakeholders by participating in the Homelessness Report Card initiative, and preparing studies to determine the extent of housing and poverty issues and exploring solutions to them.

As we are all aware, the cutbacks during the 1990's affected the social programs of every government. This led to the downloading of services between levels of government, along with their associated costs. Municipalities in particular faced increased obligations without adequate resources. I should note that HRM had an additional financial burden in that it paid mandatory contributions to Provincial social housing costs, to the tune of \$2 million per year – contributions that are now fortunately being phased out.

Federal, provincial and municipal collaboration has increased significantly since that time, to everyone's benefit. However, some fiscal issues remain. In this case, the scheduled expiry of all federal social housing funding programs in March 2009 will mean the termination of \$2 billion in funding available annually. In addition, ongoing federal

subsidies for existing social housing are expiring. As federal spending is linked to provincial cost-sharing programs, the reductions will be paralleled in provincial funding. The loss of this funding will undermine efforts to deal with homelessness and affordable housing issues, and weaken efforts in many cities to renew and revitalize neighborhoods. I strongly urge the federal government to consider the need for predictable and sustainable funding for social housing.

As noted earlier, HRM does not have the financial resources of other levels of government. We also do not have direct responsibility for housing and social programs, unlike many other municipalities. However, we feel a moral obligation to those in need in our region, and as the level of government closest to citizens we are well placed to have an important role finding solutions and program delivery and design. Municipalities are ready and willing to fund, deliver and manage strategies and programs, but lack the fiscal capacity to respond effectively on their own. We feel there is a role for all levels of government – each are involved in housing through regulation, policies and funding

HRM strongly supports options that call for intergovernmental collaboration and have municipalities as full partners in discussions.

HRM is already aware of the importance of partnership. In recent years we have strengthened our relationship with government and community partners, and as a result have worked together on many joint projects that benefit our citizens. One such example is the Safe Communities initiative. This project began as a partnership between HRM, Halifax Regional Police, the provincial Departments of Community Services and Justice, and the Uniacke Square tenants' association. Its aim was to improve quality of life and safety in the Uniacke Square area by working together on shared priorities at the grassroots level and empowering the local residents to take a proactive role in improving their community. This initiative was a success, so much so that we are looking at expanding the program across the HRM. I also want to mention the \$1.9 million in funding over 4 years from the National Crime Prevention Centre. It is being used to support our new Youth Advocate Program, which aims to prevent youth aged 9 to 14 from engaging in gang-related activities, anti-social and criminal behaviour. This new program is already making a difference in the lives of some of our most at-risk youth and helping to create a safe community.

These initiatives are proof of what can be accomplished when governments work together. The federal/provincial/municipal body proposed as an option in your report is a good start – however, municipalities need more than one voice at the table to ensure the diverse range of issues facing us is effectively represented.

In the context of HRM's needs, we reiterate the position of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in its recommendations for a national action plan on housing and homelessness. These recommendations include five targets:

1. End chronic homelessness in 10 years

Canada is a wealthy country, rich in natural and human resources. There is no need, against this backdrop, for anyone to go homeless. Indeed the societal cost of homelessness exceeds the cost of solutions to end it. For example, one study determined that taking a homeless person off the street by providing adequate support services saves society between \$8,000 and \$12,000 per year.

2. Expand the stock of affordable non-market housing by 15% of the total annual housing starts each year.

Over the next 25 years, HRM expects a demand of 58,750 new housing units or an average of 2350 each year, 15% of which is about 350 units. This is imminently achievable, but only with concerted effort among all stakeholders, including the federal and provincial governments.

3. Reduce the backlog in core housing need by 25% over the 10 years

As mentioned earlier, In HRM there are over 20,000 households in core housing need. While an ideal goal is to eliminate all core housing need, this modest target can also be achieved, but again not without help and clear public policy direction from senior governments. For example, Nova Scotia's Municipal Government Act needs to be amended to enable HRM to require affordable housing within housing developments.

4. Preserve and modernize the existing social housing stock and renew existing subsidies

Existing social housing stock in HRM is at risk - limited repairs and capital improvements have led to deteriorating conditions. Social housing already carries a stigma - housing needing repair only increases that stigma.

5. Extend and revise the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program to improve conditions in existing private housing stock.

This program has provided assistance to home owners and landlords to improve housing conditions to make sure adequate housing is affordable. This is a successful program that needs to be continued.

All these targets are reasonably achievable. However, municipalities cannot reach them alone. Housing policy and poverty reduction are linked and require a concerted effort among all participants. Canada lacks a national housing policy within which municipalities like HRM can undertake their own initiatives. Funding must continue and even be enhanced. HRM is not mandated to provide subsidized housing or social assistance payments to individual households. But we do have a role to play. Allowing municipalities to sit at the same table as federal and provincial governments will help ensure these types of issues are resolved to achieve our mutual goals of reducing poverty and ensuring everyone has decent housing.