

Affording The Roof

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the affordable housing co-ordinator with the City of Calgary.

Crestwood, which officially opened in the Millican-Ogden area in southeast Calgary one year ago, is an affordable housing complex that has 60 units, including 10 wheelchair-accessible suites, for low-income households and persons with mobility difficulties.

The building was developed by the City of Calgary and operates through the Calgary Housing Company. Funding came from various levels of government, with CREB's Charitable Foundation putting in \$1.5 million toward the capital costs of construction.

"Private/public partnerships are really important and an area we are trying to cultivate," says Gail Sokolan. "This is our first example of having the private sector involved and we're thrilled with the contribution. It means we can improve and increase our re-sources when business comes to the plate to help with affordable housing."

"We're trying to maximize our resources and leverage our money. Any opportunity to partner with a non-profit organization or the private sector is something we will look at."

The CREB charity's involvement was called the Heart to Home campaign, and it showed the commitment of realtors in the city, says foundation president Rita Shannon. "Realtors stepped up to the plate and contributed on a monthly basis," says Shannon, who is also a realtor with Re/Max Real Estate (Mountain View).

The foundation has been in existence since 1987 with the vision to create a shelter-related legacy that meets the needs of Calgary and area residents that are not met through the conventional housing market.

Previously, the money raised went to numerous projects throughout the city, but in 2004, the direction changed to the one large project.

"The charitable foundation is currently undergoing a strategic review," says Shannon. "We will be announcing our future plans and direction in April of this year."

Last year, the foundation also supported three shelter-related agencies.

"We will continue to promote our members' individual and group efforts through the support of the Canadian Real Estate Association's Realtors Care Foundation," says Shannon. "The Canadian Realtors Care Foundation has been established to showcase the volunteer work and community

involvement of realtors from coast to coast."

Meanwhile, the city is working on several other affordable housing projects that have incorporated the nonprofit and/or private sector, says Sokolan. "Louise Station is out of the ground right now at 4th Avenue and 8th Street S. W. It will include 88 units of affordable housing and will have a multi-services' component next door."

The building is in partnership with the LaCaille Group, which has plans for a 22-storey condo next door. Solaire, which will have 132 units, will also include a fire hall and Emergency Medical Services centre underneath.

"We're developing another project that includes both market and non-market housing in Manchester. It's comprised of three towers, one of which is non-market with 88 units that will operate under Calgary Housing Company."

The development will have one tower of rental units and the other "at-market but affordable units to buy," says Sokolan.

It's being developed with partner Kanas Corp., which recently completed a nine-unit condominium building that achieved the highest EnerGuide rating in Canada.

EnerGuide is a federal government program that tests homes under strict criteria for energy efficiency, rating it on various elements that improve the sustainability of the home.

The Calgary Home Builders Foundation, the charity wing of the Canadian Home Builders' Association-Calgary Region, is also involved in an affordable housing project in Inglewood, which it is currently building.

It's a joint partnership with the foundation, Calgary Homeless Foundation and Horizon Housing Society. It will have 104 apartment units and 10 duplex homes by completion, which should be mid-year.

The Calgary Homeless Foundation has recently been lobbying the federal government to invest \$2.5 billion in low-cost housing over two years as part of a national economic stimulus package.

That would create some 30,000 to 50,000 units of affordable housing across Canada, with as many as 1,500 in Calgary by 2011, says Tim Richter, the Foundation's president.

In its last budget in 2007, "a significant amount (of money for affordable housing) went to municipalities, with Calgary receiving \$63 million that has been fully committed," says Sokolan. "Another \$48 million is allotted for 2009. That is a significant chunk of money, but it takes time to plan and get the logistics in place to spend that."

Some 3,200 households are on the wait list for affordable housing units through the Calgary Housing Co., says general manager Dale Stamm of Calgary Housing Company.

"The wait list over the summer increased to a high of approximately 3,300 households as of early November, but since that date it has decreased slightly to 3,300 households in January," says Stamm.

The last survey of the rental housing market in the city was done in the fall of 2008 by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. It showed the apartment vacancy rate rose to 2.1 per cent in October, up 0.6 per cent from the previous year.

"Generally, rent increases moderated as vacancy rates have drifted higher in 2008," says Lai Sing Louie, senior market analyst for CMHC. "Rental growth is projected to be flat in 2009 as vacancies drift a bit higher."

The average rent for a two-bed-room unit was \$1,148 a month in October 2008, up from \$1,089 in October 2007.

However, says Louie, that compared to the average two-bedroom rental rate of \$808 in 2005 and \$960 in 2006.

"The per cent change for same sample rents went from double digit growth rates in the prior two years to a single digit growth this year," he says. "With vacancy rates generally rising, tenants will likely not experience much rent increase in 2009."