

# Mayor seeks strategy for workforce housing

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Striving to address the lack of affordable housing in Calgary, the mayor is putting together a workforce housing strategy to start building 1,000 multi-family units on vacant school sites across the city.

Mayor Dave Bronconnier recently travelled to California to tour a workforce housing project that helps essential workers -- police officers, firefighters, teachers and nurses -- buy their own home.

Although housing prices have softened recently, Bronconnier said there are still many Calgarians who can't afford their own home.

"There are a lot of people who are out of the market, a lot of people who are starting early paths in their career," Bronconnier said in an interview. "In the long-term, this is a much more cost-effective way to provide housing and housing choice for people."

The proposal, which he hopes to take to council by June, would start by creating 1,000 units on surplus school sites the city has acquired and could expand to as many as 3,750 over the next decade.

It would be modelled after similar programs in the U. S. and Britain.

For example, the mayor toured a site in California where a developer built three-and four-bedroom homes for moderate income homebuyers, which gives preference to employees who work for the municipality, school district or health region.

Bronconnier said he'll propose the construction of multi-family developments that would help anyone who's starting out in their career.

"People would pay based on their income," he said, noting they would own their unit and be entitled to a percentage of any increase in value when the unit is sold.

Calgarians who could benefit from the proposal said it's a good idea.

"In my personal situation, I know how just the idea of owning a home is worlds away to me," said Jamie Ross, who works for a local non-profit agency and makes about \$42,000 annually. "I just can't afford it with my bills and my current rent and my car payment and everything else that adds up in a month."

"At the end of the day, I am almost living paycheque-topaycheque so it's impossible to think of saving up for a home or being able to afford an actual mortgage payment."

Ross, 29, said she believes the strategy would benefit thousands of Calgarians.

"I work in an industry where I see people who can't afford homes," she said. "There's a certain stigma . . . that it's just people making very low income, but \$40,000 isn't considered low income.

"But it's certainly not enough to afford a home."

According to the city, Calgarians whose gross annual household income is less than \$44,000 and whose housing costs exceed 30 per cent of gross household income face serious housing affordability challenges. A total of 19 per cent of all Calgary households -- or 72,195 households -- fall into that category.

Bronconnier said his proposal would also create a stimulus in the construction industry and open up the rental market, where there are more than 3,000 people on the waiting list for affordable rental units.

"This ties into the 10-year plan to end homelessness by saying, 'Let's have people move up the property ladder from subsidized units into their own homes,' " he said.

Diana Segboer, executive director of Inn From the Cold, said the mayor's proposal could improve the rental market.

"It would free up a lot of the housing that is being taken by Calgary Housing and some of the affordable housing that is out there now," she said. "It would free that up for the families that aren't there yet.

"Anything that puts other options out there is a good move."

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