



Wood Buffalo Housing Releases its Regional Housing Needs Assessment Report

FORT MCMURRAY, AB, May 23, 2019 – Last fall Wood Buffalo Housing (WBH) embarked on a region-wide housing needs assessment in an effort to identify key issues and concerns in both Fort McMurray and the rural hamlets throughout the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and to address housing needs for the next 5-20 years based on current trends and census information.

“We are pleased to announce that we have received the final report from the consultants and are looking forward to sharing it with our community stakeholders and representatives in the Provincial government,” says Henry Hunter, President and CEO of WBH.

One of the key goals and anticipated outcomes of this report for WBH is to have support for an increase in funding for housing from the Province.

“We already know that funding allocations for our region are significantly disproportionate in relation to other communities of similar population and demographic like Medicine Hat, Grand Prairie, Red Deer and Lethbridge,” says Hunter. “We understand this is likely due to the fact that our funding agreement was sufficient to meet the demand prior to 2015. Unfortunately, the economic realities of our region have changed dramatically since then and so has our need for increased subsidized housing.”

According to the report, despite the fact that median incomes remain particularly high in the region, there is a subset of the population that struggle to find affordable housing. Those residents earning less than \$70,000 annually are at risk of housing vulnerability and households earning less than \$40,000 are likely experiencing significant housing pressure. Even with rental subsidy programs and high vacancy rates, market rents remain too high for most of these residents to access effectively.

“One of the hardest things we’ve had to do on a daily basis at Wood Buffalo Housing is tell a person who is struggling financially that they have to sit on a waitlist for an undetermined amount of time before we can house them, simply because they cannot afford the rent without a subsidy and our provincial deficit-funding is depleted,” says Hunter.

“We’ve had a lot of people question why we can’t just reduce our rates to the subsidized level to fill our vacancy, but WBH doesn’t receive any provincial or municipal funding for approximately 90% of our total units; those fall under our affordable housing program.”

WBH is designated as a not-for-profit in their affordable housing program and so monies collected from rent need to be sufficient to cover all expenses of the organization. With the population of the RMWB continuing to decline and the vacancy rate hovering around the 16% range, the organization has experienced a deficit every year since 2014.

According to the needs assessment, the region's rural communities face a different set of conditions than those seen in the urban service area of Fort McMurray. While there is an oversupply of housing in the urban area, many of our rural communities still need new housing development and adequacy and affordability are major issues.

For example, according to the report, Fort Chipewyan requires support for 30 households paying more than 30% of their income towards housing and has 70 units that require significant repair or renovation. Fort McKay needs a minimum of 22 new units to address households on the housing waitlist and individuals experiencing chronic homelessness. A 2006 study completed on Conklin identified the need for 46 additional units of housing in the community, a number that remains consistent with current housing needs according to stakeholder engagements held during the preparation of this needs assessment, and the community is currently planning for 36 units of additional housing primarily for singles and lone-parent families.

Since 2017 WBH has been working with local Métis groups to find long-term sustainable solutions that will benefit their communities.

“From our discussions with these partners we know that simply providing housing development in our rural communities will not be sufficient unless there are also deficit-funded housing options available,” says Hunter. “We have been looking at ways WBH can help in providing land and development in these areas, but first we need to ensure that once the structures are built the people of the community can afford to live in them and maintain them.”

Next steps for WBH and its stakeholders include bringing this assessment to the attention of the Province and working with them to increase deficit-funding asks for our region, as well as solutions for our rural communities. The final report is a public document and can be downloaded on WBH's website at <https://wbhousing.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-05-03-Housing-Needs-Assessment-Regional-Municipality-of-Wood-Buffalo8488.pdf>.

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Media contact info:

Wood Buffalo Housing:

Christina MacKay

Manager, Marketing &

Communications Phone:

780-792-4429

E-mail: christina@wbhousing.ca
