

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 310-18(2): PUBLIC HOUSING SHORTAGE

October 13, 2016

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, following on from my Member's Statement, I'd like to talk a little bit more about housing availability, public housing availability, with some questions for the Minister responsible for the NWT Housing Corporation. The length of the waiting list for public housing, both within Yellowknife and across the Territory as a whole, has been constant for years, and I'm wondering if the Minister could tell us what she can do to make more public housing units available, especially to the single parents on the waiting list. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of NWT Housing Corporation.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to try to address that as concisely as I can although it's quite a loaded question. There is a huge waiting list for people for housing within the Northwest Territories, it's like 600 families at a minimum at this point, so it is a substantial number of people and it is a high priority for the Government of the Northwest Territories.

What we're doing about it is federally we're meeting with the federal minister. There is actually going to be an FPT meeting at the end of this month. We have been advocating strongly. All three territories have advocated strongly. We've convinced them that when they do their national housing strategy that there has to be a northern component. So our advocacy, our lobbying for the federal government is working in that they are considering that the North is special and they will be actually having a northern component to that strategy. So that's important.

The other thing that we're doing is we have the survey that's going out here at the end of this month. When I've travelled to the communities, as our Premier has talked about with his talking about transparency and being available to residents, the biggest thing I've heard from community members is that the GNWT needs to listen to them. They need to listen to the communities. They all are different, they all have their own opinions, and I have committed to doing that.

There's quite a few policies and programs that I personally would like to take on and change immediately within the Housing Corporation, but I have made a commitment to the public of the Northwest Territories in saying that I will listen to them and I will take their words. So even though it's really difficult, because I do want change myself, I am honouring my commitment and waiting until the survey results come in. At that point, we will be looking at every single policy, every single program, to see if we can structure them better to accommodate people.

In the community specifically of Yellowknife, though, I do want to say that there is market housing available. So sometimes people often think that public housing is the only answer, but it's not. People within Yellowknife market communities actually have more of a luxury than people in the communities in that they can go rent a place; they can qualify for income support if they can't afford it, and also the NWT Housing Corporation has a program called a Transitional Rent Supplement Program that will help people for two years if they need additional support to

pay their rent. So there is actually more options within Yellowknife than there is in the smaller communities. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her efforts to address this issue. I appreciate that it is an enormous one. Affordability is a key problem in Yellowknife. I appreciate that the government will provide help to people on income assistance and through the Transitional Rent Supplement Program, but still affordability for low-income people is an issue.

I want to just ask about the CMHC, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, funding. I know that that organization funds operations and maintenance of public housing stock and that that number has been in decline since 2003. Is the fact that this operations and maintenance money is going down one of the reasons the government can't build more units?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: For quite a few Legislative Assemblies actually there has been a stall on building new units, public housing units. I have not personally spoken to those Ministers so I cannot actually say what their reasoning was for that. My intuition, my gut is telling me, though, that they did put a hold on it because of the declining funding in the operating and maintenance for the CMHC which will dissolve in 2038. So as part of that, I am looking at strategies to address that so that we can actually increase our public housing stock. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate the Minister looking at how to bridge that gap in declining O and M funding with the CMHC; it's obviously a critical piece of work. My last question, or potentially my last question, concerns the local housing authorities. Many of them have significant operational surpluses in excess of \$500,000, including the Yellowknife Housing Authority. Could the Yellowknife Housing Authority rent additional units using their surplus to provide at least short-term relief for families on the waiting list? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this point I would say that that would not be a very good recommendation; my concern would be is that we set people up. If we were to put them in temporary residences and rent places, people then get accustomed. This is their home, they get very comfortable, and then when their surplus for the local housing organization runs out, then they're kicked out in the street. So I don't think that is a very viable solution.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I realize that this would not be sustainable, but it might supply a short-term additional boost in housing. I mean, people do move out of public housing. So those in temporary units could be moved on to more permanent units. It just seems to me that using those surpluses to create housing would be the best use of that money. So can the Minister commit to looking again at using the surplus for creating additional short-term housing? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: The direction that we have given the local housing organizations is that they are to come to us with their suggestions on how they are going to deal with the surpluses. So, again, out of respect for the process that we've already put it on the table and asked them to present to us, then I think at this point it would be inappropriate for me to go back on them and demand what we want to see. So I would be more than eager to see what they are going to present to us. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.