

Preserving the diversity of our community

Corporation will work to make affordable housing choices a reality

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To Elizabeth Ballantyne, chair of the Affordable Housing Working Group (AHWG), housing diversity is a value that needs to be embraced and advanced if we cherish the wide variety of people who are living on the island and the new Bowen Island Housing Corporation will help to make this a reality.

Ballantyne says that the need for diverse housing is a fundamental value that is explicit in our Official Community Plan (OCP). There it says that "Bowen Island is known and loved as a small, friendly, caring community characterized by a population diverse in income, age and lifestyles." For a diverse population, varied and affordable housing options are needed and Ballantyne said, "If this statement of value and identity is true, we need to demonstrate this in our actions. Providing shelter is a primary need and if we value a community like this, we have to work toward enabling everyone to live here."

"Looking back 30 or 40 years, affordable housing was possible because the cost of land was not a barrier," Ballantyne said adding that in the early 2000s, Sara Baker brought attention to the fact that many artists couldn't afford to live here any longer and moved away. "There was a migration of artists and Sara [Baker] wrote a number of articles in 2004 and 2005. Out of that came a broader discussion that led to the affordable housing for diverse community symposium in June 2006 that was followed by the formation of the Bowen Community Housing Association," Ballantyne said. "In an effort to address the primary barriers, four actions were suggested. The first was to legalize secondary suites.

continued **PAGE 10**

Corporation will be hub of knowledge and expertise

continued PAGE 1

The first was to legalize secondary suites. The second was to get language into our OCP that enables affordable housing. The third was a needs assessment. The fourth was to secure some of the community lands for affordable housing choices." Ballantyne said that significant steps have been taken on all four suggested actions. "A small number of people came together and produced an affordable housing needs assessment. It was recommended to develop an affordable housing strategy based on that," Ballantyne said.

The need for a municipal housing corporation was identified and Ballantyne said that the AHWG took the organizational framework to council in 2009. "The readiness wasn't there at the time," she said. "Council endorsed the concept but sent us back to work with staff." Ballantyne acknowledges that it has been a long time but the group has not been idle. It has put together a list of amendments that were included in the OCP. At the February 27 council meeting, the AHWG presented its final report to council and made eight recommendations that were all accepted.

"The lack of affordable housing is not our only barrier," Ballantyne said. "The other barrier is the lack of diversity. We have 95 per cent single family housing." Ballantyne thinks Bowen Island needs small creative interventions that are in harmony with a full range of values and can provide the types of housing that are missing. She said, "We also have an aging population living in large single family homes. They might want to downsize but there is no place to downsize." Ballantyne says that we also need affordable rental housing.

"We can have all the policies in place,"

Ballantyne says. "But nothing is going to happen without someone taking on the responsibility, that's where the housing corporation comes in. It is meant to be a performance-based organization led by skilled directors." Looking at rezoning applications to identify means of incorporating affordable housing will be one of the tasks of the corporation, according to Ballantyne, and it will be a hub of knowledge and expertise with a capacity to draw on volunteer resources. "Every year, the corporation will come up with a work plan," she said. "It will proactively look for opportunities. The initial work plan includes looking at the community lands to see what's possible there."

"We do have the affordable housing policy that dedicates 15 per cent to non-market housing," Ballantyne says. In 2009, the AHWG developed criteria for non-market housing and started a wait-list. "Belterra Cohousing is the only rezoning that's gone forward," Ballantyne said. "And we learned that a lot of collaboration needs to happen to ensure that the policy corresponds to the needs."

Ballantyne stressed that the corporation wants to collaborate with different people and groups and support community partners. "There are people here who are under the radar, there are people who are homeless," Ballantyne said. "And we need to acknowledge that there are people on Bowen Island who are passionately committed to helping people with different needs." From this collaboration, Ballantyne expects to gain more clarity on what is needed. She said, "We keep hearing about the trouble employers have when they recruit staff because there are no places to live. We need to know what kind of wages they can pay and what type of housing their staff can afford. That discussion needs to happen."