

Housing the homeless an issue that needs attention, municipalities tell Victoria
Province's \$325-a-month housing allowance not enough in Vancouver, Coun. Peter Ladner says

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VICTORIA -- Municipal leaders from across the province warned the provincial government Monday that homelessness, and a lack of affordable housing, have become major problems that need urgent action.

But the man who is charged with solving the province's housing crisis, Forestry Minister Rich Coleman, countered with his own challenge.

He told the delegates that while he has the money and desire to build more social housing, municipal politicians have to take leadership, too. That means facing the "blow back" from their own voters, who often don't want emergency shelters in their neighbourhoods, and pushing through zoning and land deals to allow the government to build more social housing.

"You can't be sitting on the sidelines any longer," Coleman told about 100 delegates, who showed up at a forum to kick off the annual meeting of the Union of B.C. Municipalities.

While the audience's response to Coleman was respectful, there were clearly some tensions in the room over the government's housing strategy, a \$267-million initiative that Coleman announced earlier this month.

That was clear when Coleman left before a question-and-answer session, prompting grumbling from a number of speakers who went to the microphone and wondered why he had left. The minister eventually returned, apologized for his busy schedule, and then told municipal leaders if they had problems convincing their communities to build emergency shelters he or his staff would come to the meetings to help sell the idea.

Coleman also said that the province has the funding to create 1,000 emergency shelter beds and is ready to act.

"We're set to go," said Coleman.

But Vancouver Coun. Peter Ladner, who was one of the delegates who criticized Coleman for leaving the question-and-answer session, sees a major hole in the government's new affordable housing plan.

While it is offering rent subsidies to 15,000 families that make less than \$20,000 a year, he said it does not offer similar help for those on welfare. He noted that the Liberal government has long-frozen the housing allowance for welfare recipients at \$325 a month.

In Vancouver, where homelessness has become a major issue, Ladner said an increase in the shelter allowance is essential because only one in five of the city's single-occupancy rooms, often the last resort before people end up on the street, can be rented for \$325 a month. That

amount, he added, is so low it encourages some landlords to turn a blind eye to tenants who are involved in prostitution or drug dealing to pay the rent.

"You simply cannot run these rooms on \$325 a month," he said. "You gave more money to senior citizens, you gave more to help poor families. Why wouldn't you do the same for people on welfare?"

Coleman would not comment on that but said in an interview that the B.C. budget is now being put together and that the amount spent on the shelter allowance is likely being reviewed.

The high cost of building housing in B.C.'s red-hot real estate market was a key theme of the meeting.

Maureen Enser, executive director of the Urban Development Institute, estimated that to build a 325-square-foot dwelling for an individual, a developer would now likely need to charge a rent of \$900 a month. A large part of that is because of the snail's pace of many approval processes, slow zoning and regulatory procedures, and often the demand for underground parking stalls, which can cost about \$35,000 apiece to build.

But she said that if developers and government work together, and perhaps revisit the tax breaks that were given to developers in the 1970s to build affordable housing, costs could be brought down and be reflected in the rents.

"There are ways to reduce these costs to about \$400 to \$450 a month."

She also made it clear that developers, like Coleman, see opportunities in the recent decision of the federal government to devolve social housing run by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to the province. Those properties often have large amounts of prime land that could be built up, with a mix of both social and market housing.

She suggested that could happen if governments look at giving developers 99-year leases, to make it affordable to build the 10,000 social housing units she estimated are needed.

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