

Housing

A list of broad social goals has been established as a starting point for the sustainability plan. To achieve these (and environmental and economic) goals, the City and the community have been working for some time to develop and implement a Social Development Strategy. The Strategy complements the sustainability plan in that it focuses on the actions that meet at least one of the Sustainability Plan's goals. This document summarizes our performance, and highlights the links between goals, actions and root causes.

Description

Housing is an integral part of a socially sustainable community, touching on health, the economy, and the environment. The World Health Organization calls it a key social determinant of health. While this is a complex relationship, poor housing and poor health are often related. Good housing also provides a foundation for healthy communities, offering stability that enables people to work, play, get educated, form relationships, nurture children and to participate as citizens.



Housing is also an economic issue as it is the single largest investment made by most people. There is evidence that house prices and rents affect where migrants settle within a region. Areas with high relative housing costs can find it hard to attract and retain service sector workers and critical workers like police and teachers. Housing also has environmental implications - it is the dominant urban land use and is responsible for at least 20% of carbon dioxide emissions.

Status and Trends

Current and anticipated housing issues in Prince George are homelessness, affordable rental housing, age and condition of the housing stock, diversity and accessibility.

Diversity: Most homes in Prince George are detached houses. A number of factors suggest demand for multifamily housing (e.g. rowhouses or duplexes) into the future:

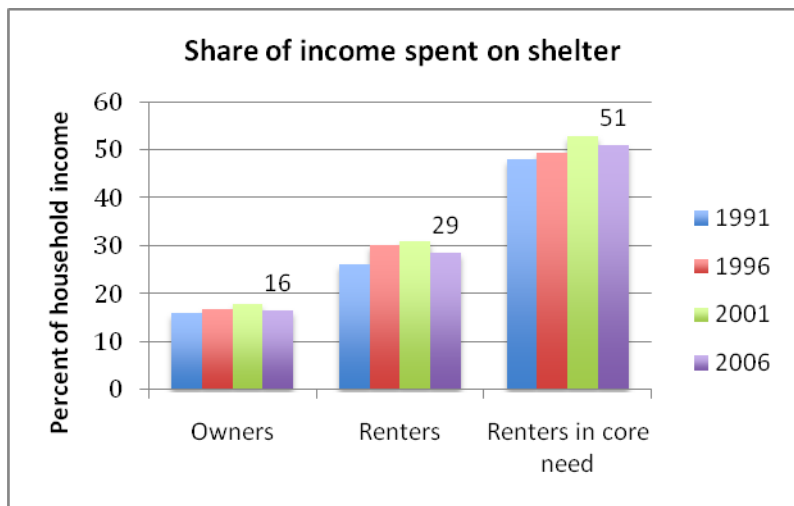
- Aging population: By 2038, the population over 65 will rise from 10% to 25% of residents. Reflecting this transition, the recent *Quality of Life Survey* reported that over half of Prince George residents expected their housing needs to change in the next ten years.
- Knowledge-based workers: This growing segment of the community often look for neighbourhoods that are dense enough to support shops and recreation within walking distance – densities that require some multifamily units.

- **Cost of housing:** As home prices rise, young families find it difficult to afford the traditional single family home on a large lot. Sales prices for single family homes have risen significantly in the last four years, from an average of \$130,000 to \$240,000. While households earning the Prince George median income of \$59,000 can afford to buy the average house, some young families find that single family homeownership is beyond their means.

A more diverse housing stock would include housing suitable for older residents and affordable for young single persons and families. It would also offer more long-term flexibility as the community’s composition ebbs and flows.

Homelessness: Like elsewhere, homelessness has become a sad reality in Prince George. Homeless people are often homeless because they cannot afford the cost of housing, abuse alcohol or drugs, and/or are mentally ill. Research has shown that homeless people tend to be more frequent users of costly emergency services, such as shelters, ambulances, hospitals and correctional services and that investment in providing housing for people who are homeless actually saves the government money in related costs. The City has established a Beyond Homelessness Standing Committee to coordinate local actions to address this problem. There has been some progress made to increase the supply of supportive housing in Prince George with federal and provincial funding, but more remains to be done.

Affordable rental housing: There has been a net loss of 145 rental units between 2001 and 2006. The only source of new rental housing is non-market housing produced with senior levels of government, and secondary suites. Low income renters are most affected by affordability concerns. These households in “core housing need” pay about half their income on shelter, and are able to house themselves only by spending less on other necessities, sharing crowded



Source: CMHC. HOUSING IN CANADA ONLINE.

spaces, and/or living in poor quality housing. In 2006 there were 2,760 Prince George households in core housing need. Most of these were renters (2,045 or 74%), who have incomes of about \$15,000/year. They can afford to pay only \$375 per month much less than the average bachelor apartment rent (\$541 per month). Most core need households are headed by someone under age 65, who is non-Aboriginal and lives alone.

Age and condition of housing supply: Slow growth and little new residential development means that the Prince George’s housing stock is aging (about 70% were built before 1980 vs.

the BC average of 50%). Older housing tends to be in poorer condition, sometimes presenting health and safety issues. In 2006, 38% of the dwellings in Prince George were rated by their owners to be in fair or poor condition and over 2,200 dwellings needed major repairs to address defective plumbing or wiring, structural repairs to walls, etc. People living in poor quality housing are more likely to suffer physical and mental health problems. Older housing stock tends to be located in certain areas of the city and tends to be the most affordable.

Accessibility: An aging housing stock and an aging population presents concern for access to and mobility within the home for people with mobility limitations. There is a perception that few housing units in Prince George offer wheelchair accessibility, an issue because 8% of Prince George residents expect that they will need housing designed for someone with mobility limitations within the next ten years. Accessibility to and from homes is also an issue in a community with few alternatives to automobile transportation: many seniors will be increasingly isolated as they become less mobile.

Performance Measurement

Of the potential measures listed below, which should we use to measure and communicate progress? Would you rather use another one? Why?

The following are suggested as ways of measuring a number of aspects of housing-related performance. Housing is an issue that relates to many community goals, which are noted in brackets after each measure:

- Number of homeless people (affordability/homelessness)
- Number of renters in Core housing need (affordability).
- Number of housing units in need of major repair (health and wellness).
- Diversity of housing types, as measured by Simpson's index using Census categories (diversity).
- Number of units accessible or visitable. This would be a new measure, and would require adoption of guideline/standard and investment of resources to measure it. (accessibility)

Questions for Consideration

The review of the existing housing situation in Prince George highlights the following questions to be considered as we explore alternative visions for the community:

- **Aging population:** Will retirees remain in Prince George rather than moving to traditional retirement centres in the Okanagan and Vancouver Island, given that these centres are no longer affordable for many?
- **Barriers:** What factors are currently restricting the diversity of housing forms?
- **Links:** What kinds of initiatives could address affordability, health, diversity, and environmental and economic goals at the same time?
- **Senior government housing programs:** Will the provincial and federal government provide adequate funding for non-market housing and supportive housing?

More Information

[Prince George Quality of Life Survey Results 2008](#)

[City of Prince George Social Development Inventory Housing 2008](#)

[City of Prince George Social Plan 2002.](#)

[Community Partners Addressing Homelessness. 2008. Homeless Count](#)

[Prince George Council on Seniors. 2007. Seniors in Community Dialogue – final report.](#)