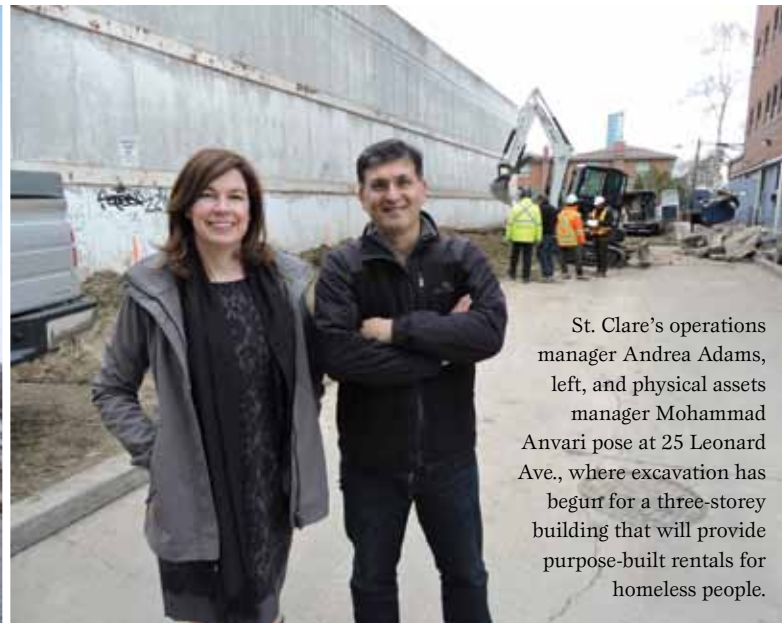




The current rental apartments at 25 Leonard Ave. are located in downtown Toronto's Kensington Market.



Photos: RESCON

St. Clare's operations manager Andrea Adams, left, and physical assets manager Mohammad Anvari pose at 25 Leonard Ave., where excavation has begun for a three-storey building that will provide purpose-built rentals for homeless people.

BUILDING FOR THE HOMELESS

Lessons learned in building Toronto's newest shelter.

By Andrea Adams

Working with a municipality through red tape is a tough process for any developer, and it is no different when that developer is a non-profit charity dedicated to addressing the municipality's homelessness crisis.

We learned this at St. Clare's, when we offered to commit our own land, time, and financial resources to build new homes to remove people from our city's shelters and streets. St. Clare's is an experienced charitable landlord that currently owns and operates five buildings in Toronto's downtown, and rents out 75 per cent of our 415 apartments to people who come directly from the city's shelters. We pair our housing with support provided by 18 of Toronto's social service agencies. This year, we will transform an unused parking lot into 22 homes. It will enhance existing repurposed medical office building, which was converted to affordable housing in 2001, and improve the economy of scale for the site.

Despite the desperate need for housing solutions for Toronto's high needs chronically homeless population, the planning barriers to this simple and small-scale project required St. Clare's to pursue rezoning and an Official Planning Amendment. The variety of out-of-proportion reports and requirements escalated the soft costs and timeline to a scale that is prohibitive to other non-profits who would like to implement similar solutions. That's not to say it can't be done, but you must be passionate about city building, and have up front skills and resources not often available to in the non-profit sector,

and develop extensive relationships with community partners.

This story is about the partnerships that helped us overcome the challenges along the way and what could help improve this process.

The earliest partner to offer their support was the neighbourhood of Kensington Market. Representatives of this community recognized the importance of appropriate homes for hard-to-house populations and advocated for our project. This was a key early step as it created a critical base of support to build housing infrastructure for the hard-to-house. When our proposal was initially dismissed as bad planning,

have been able to solve sticky problems like garbage disposal which threatened to derail the project with unnecessary overdesign. "The city as a whole absolutely should speed up the approval process when it comes to building affordable housing," Cressy told the *Globe and Mail* in December. "We have a long way to go."

Fortunately, our project was demonstrably sensible enough to receive \$500,000 in capital funding from the City of Toronto's Open Door Affordable Housing program. This contribution was not included in our original proforma, but rescued the project from the escalating soft costs resulting from the planning process. The funding is

Municipalities need to work with non-profits for housing challenges that are beyond the scope of private developers.

our neighbours accompanied us to meetings with our city councillor and the planning department, and were vocal and persistent. This is a lesson to all developers that engagement with the surrounding community is invaluable.

The support of our neighbours helped our city councillor to also offer his support early in the process. This was a key relationship, particularly when it came to planning impasses: having our councillor at the table to help problem-solve was invaluable. Without this assistance, we would not

registered on title as a loan and comes with plenty of restrictions, but they are all easily accommodated by St. Clare's commitment to perpetually affordable housing.

It took two years, but we succeeded in building support and negotiating the planning language required to get the go-ahead for this project. We worked diligently with the planning department every step of the way, and eventually council approved the official plan amendment to allow 25 Leonard to be intensified, with the understanding and requirement that the social good provided

by the project more than compensates for the lot line and intensification exemptions required. Soil remediation began late last fall and construction is expected to begin in May, with occupancy within a year.

Then, there were our private sector partners, which included: head of the RESCON fundraising committee Phil Rubinoff, who spearheaded a \$1-million fundraising campaign; and our 20-plus donors from construction and infrastructure—including the Heavy Construction Association of Toronto, union LiUNA Local 183, the Carpenters Union and the Ontario Formwork Association. Without the confidence and support of the our private sector donors, the project would not have been possible. In turn, we are committed to making the best possible use of every donated dollar to ensure that this is a successful demonstration of private / non-profit partnership.

If we could change only one thing about the process, it would be creating a planning ombudsman to facilitate the process for projects submitted by any developer that helps the city address chronic homelessness. The ombudsman

would receive these applications, and within a designated timeframe—perhaps a week, even a month—would say, “How do we make this happen,” instead of “Here are all of the barriers you face; go hire someone who understands all of them. See you in 18 months.”

Certainly, an ombudsman position would enable the city to benefit from the housing experience and resources of non-profits who cannot otherwise negotiate planning barriers. Municipalities need to work with non-profits for housing challenges that are beyond the scope of private developers, but the ombudsman position could also be structured to allow developers of all stripes to include considerations for homelessness in their projects, and encourage creative ideas and solutions.

For its leadership role in housing development, the St. Clare’s model has been acknowledged by affordable housing consultant Michele McMaster, who said: “Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has investigated the St. Clare’s operating model, and found it to be replicable and scalable. We are delighted to have had feedback that

St. Clare’s is inspiring developers and landlords in other communities.”

Our model has been replicated in Vancouver and Belleville, Ont. We want developers of all sizes and perspectives to learn about and improve upon the work we have done. Our success is important because it builds confidence across all sectors that solutions are possible. We know we will be successful when municipal planning departments are able to encourage both the non-profit and the private sector to address our housing crisis to the benefit of all of us.

There are solutions to chronic homelessness. They aren’t complicated and they don’t need to be expensive, but it takes partnerships—between non-profit groups, governments at all levels, and the private sector—to ensure we continue to build the cities that we can all be proud of. ♣



Andrea Adams is the operations manager for St. Clare’s Multifamily Housing Society.

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