

Industry bands together to build affordable housing for homeless

Angela Gismondi December 28, 2017



RESCON — A new affordable housing building being constructed at 25 Leonard Ave. in downtown Toronto’s Kensington Market is an expansion of the current rental stock available for the “hard to house.” The project is part of St. Clare’s Multifaith Housing Society and is being constructed thanks to donations from the private sector and the government.

Thanks to support from a local construction consortium, a new affordable housing development in Toronto will help get homeless people off the street and into their own apartments.

“We wanted to give back,” said Phil Rubinoff, former chair of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON), who spearheaded the idea. “St. Clare’s had a site and they needed an equity contribution to go forward. There will be 22 people in these units come next November or December who will no longer be sleeping on the streets.”

Twenty-two new apartments are being built by St. Clare’s Multifaith Housing Society, a non-profit landlord that builds and operates housing with the intent of helping the chronically homeless population. The building will be constructed as an expansion of St. Clare’s existing 77-unit building on Leonard Avenue, just east of Bathurst Street in the Kensington Market

neighbourhood of Toronto. It's the first purpose-built affordable homes project for homeless people in the city in more than 10 years.

"It is a scalable and replicable project which is important because we want to demonstrate that this can be done so that other people can take up the cause and do the same," said Andrea Adams, operations manager at St. Clare's.

"It is remarkable because it has the support of the surrounding community, which is incredibly unusual to actually have 'yes in my backyard.'"

The \$3.5-million project includes \$1 million raised by a consortium of home and condo builders under RESCON, unions and construction associations. Through its Open Door Program, the City of Toronto is assisting the project with a \$500,000 capital grant and waiving municipal fees and development charges. St. Clare's will contribute \$2 million through mortgage financing.

The three-storey building will be constructed on a small strip of land which was formerly used as a parking lot.

Excavation has begun in preparation for spring construction and occupancy is expected in late 2018.

"These are very small apartments, roughly 240 square feet each, but that gives people the privacy and the dignity that they need, that they've asked for and they deserve in order to have a door that locks, their own bathroom and kitchen that they can prepare their food in. That is so much of an improvement to being out on the street or more commonly in the shelter system," said Adams.

"Having micro housing is an important piece of the puzzle to addressing homelessness. But there is a resistance to it particularly in the planning department that I see as a barrier that we need to overcome."

St. Clare's was approached by RESCON to partner on this project, which Adams said is a sound investment.

"It will both address an ethical concern but also is just good financial sense because it is a more affordable way to address homelessness than through the criminal justice system, through the hospital system, through the shelter system, through long-term care," Adams noted. "Those are all extraordinarily expensive reactions to homelessness."

The Ontario Formwork Association (OFA) has contributed \$50,000 towards the project.

"We don't normally give out contributions but we felt this was for a good reason that was giving back to the community that more or less keeps us in business," said Dennis Cancian, executive director of the OFA. "We've taken up quite a few places in the downtown area to build condos so we thought it would be nice to give back to the people who need it the most."

Jason Ottey, director of government relations and communications for the Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 183, said both the Ontario provincial district council and the local were supportive of the idea and donated \$50,000 each.

“This is an opportunity to be part of a project that is giving back to the city but also presents a model that can be replicated in the future to help people who are really in need of housing and giving them an opportunity to have shelter which is the basis for being able to find employment,” said Ottey. “It just seemed to meet all of our markers for contributing.”

The Heavy Construction Association of Toronto also contributed \$50,000 to the cause.

“It fit in with what we're trying to do and it's nice to help build something in the community,” said Peter Smith, the association's executive director. “People in this industry, they work hard but they also want to give back to society.”

Other corporate donors participating in the fundraising effort include Aspen Ridge; Brown Group; Great Gulf Homes; Greenpark Homes; Laurier Homes; Liberty Development; Lindvest; Mattamy Homes; Menkes; Silvercore; Tridel; and Yorkwood.

For more information or to make a donation visit www.stclares.ca.