

Housing opportunities linked to quality of life

In this issue of the *WREN*, a front page story speaks to the real estate industry adopting a Quality of Life program that supports quality growth by encouraging economic vitality, provides housing opportunities, and to build better communities with good schools and safe neighbourhoods.

Sounds like motherhood and apple pie, and to a large extent it is. However, when you start applying it to real life urban issues, it is not as straightforward. Sound planning for proper development and growth is required.

One of the planks in the program is housing opportunities.

- How do we make housing a priority in our city so people not only have the chance to have a roof over their head, but have a range of choices in housing design, style and price?

- What about having choices of locations where you can live in an affordable home that is close to where you work, shop or play?

- Is there a readily available supply of housing options in Winnipeg in locations where people prefer to live?

Certainly, REALTORS® are well versed on some of these questions since they are intimately aware of local market conditions and can back up some of their own experience with overall MLS® statistics that point to shortages in housing accommodations. They know they need to look beyond individual homes and to consider the health of the community they live in. Few know better than REALTORS® what people value in a home and a community. It is their business to know.

Other issues around housing inevitably are brought to a REALTOR®'s attention such as schools, parks, recreation facilities, traffic congestion, road infrastructure, transit availability, safety, taxes, etc. Essentially, housing becomes part of a bigger picture. Housing really entails a community or area's livability and often it is determined in relation to other areas. Home buy-

ers definitely like to comparison shop when it comes down to making one of, if not, the most important purchasing decision in their life.

There is no lack of local issues when we start talking about the need to find more housing opportunities for present and future Winnipeggers. The latter group is one of great importance since immigrants, other Manitobans and out-of-province people may not come here if housing, in its broadest sense, is inadequate from a quality, availability and/or affordability perspective. Do we have a plan in place at the civic level that addresses the need to meet increased demand for housing through either internal or external demand?

There is the whole issue around inner-city housing revitalization that the tripartite Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative is spearheading with the support and participation of key and vital housing organizations or groups. They include the Winnipeg Housing Rehabilitation Corporation, the North End Housing Project, the Housing Opportunity Partnership, Lazarus Housing, Westminster Housing Society, West Broadway Development Corporation, Habitat for Humanity, Kinew Housing, the University of Winnipeg and Kinkora Development, the Spence Neighbourhood Association and the North End Community Renewal Corporation.

Others may also emerge, if some have not done so already, but regardless of whom the actual housing providers are, questions have to be answered.

- Are the right mechanisms, resources and supports in place through government and other participating agencies to sustain this very laudable and comprehensive renewal effort?

- Is the right mix of housing being made available?

- What about the current policy and regulatory environment? Is it conducive to encouraging more private multi-family investment to create much needed accommodations in the extremely tight rental mar-

ket?

- Can more effort and thought be applied to creating public/private partnerships that would include a sharing of equity participation in proposed projects — new or rehabilitation?

- Is there enough capacity building going on to ensure stakeholders in the various inner-city neighbourhoods can successfully execute and carry out a neighbourhood revitalization plan on a long-term sustainable basis?

On the new home construction side, there has been more and more talk about the shortage of building lots in Winnipeg.

- What are the implications of severe lot shortages, especially if they are in quadrants of the city where people want to live?

- Does this mean they will choose to build outside Winnipeg or choose to move somewhere else altogether?

The law of supply and demand is already active in our local market with shortages in existing homes and lots driving up prices. This has implications on businesses as well if they can not find suitable accommodations for their employees within fairly close proximity.

- What about the impact on our local assessment base if it turns out new subdivisions are sprouting outside the city as a result of lack of lot availability in Winnipeg?

- Are we not trying to provide people with as many housing options as possible within areas they wish to live?

Challenges in a city such as ours do exist and need to be tackled on a sound and reasoned basis. REALTORS® are already involved in housing issues on many fronts — for example, HOP, support of Hannah Taylor's Ladybug Foundation — and will become even more active in a positive way through this quality of life program.