

Affordable housing issues discussed

by Richard MacKenzie
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Tackling issues around affordable housing in Antigonish was the goal of a public roundtable Saturday morning at St. James United Church.

The roundtable was organized by Katherine Reed, co-ordinator for the Antigonish Affordable Housing Project through the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre.

While there wasn't a large turnout, Reed said she was pleased with the lively conversation and wealth of information that was shared.

"A lot of people know the traditions around developing affordable housing around Nova Scotia and when they get together and start telling each other what they know suddenly the entire group knows the whole package. There is great value in doing that," Reed said, as participants filed out of the church's hall.

She also talked about where the conversation has to go from here.

"We need to develop a vision for addressing the housing need in Antigonish and it needs to be a creative, innovative strategy that meets the needs and accomplishes a number of other very worthy things," she said.

"(Things) like reducing the use of energy and growing food locally. Those two things would be very important to accomplish in the process of housing people

who can't afford market rents."

As for challenges, Reed was quick to point out money as a hurdle.

"In affordable housing, one needs to have a very low mortgage in order to make the housing affordable and that is not an easy place to get to," she said.

She talked about different models which could be adapted and incorporated as strategies.

"(Models) such as the Habitat for Humanity model where there is just a ton of donations that are solicited," she said.

"In-kind donations, sweat equity and all of that... that's how they manage to turn over a property to a given family with a very low mortgage and a covered down-payment, I presume.

"So there is a tremendous amount of community and government contributions that need to go into the development of a complex in order to make the rents affordable."

To focus the roundtable discussion, Reed posed three questions to participants.

The questions, all starting for the premise, 'if affordable housing was developed in Antigonish,' asked, 'who would it be designed for? Where would it be located? What assets does this community have to support it... e.g., land, labour, equity, connections to other who could help?"

Reed talked about the general consensus answers discussed by the group, starting with question one.



Antigonish Affordable Housing Project co-ordinator Katherine Reed chats with Dan Ross and Hugh Haley as Saturday morning's roundtable discussion wraps up. (Richard MacKenzie photo)

"We need a diversity of residents in any complex that we would build. We wouldn't want to have a complex that simply houses one type of household or one group of people... diversity is incredibly important," she said, answering the 'who' question.

As for location?

"The answer to that is it depends upon who we're building for and where the land

is available. So that question is a wide-open question... Antigonish town or county might be the answer for the moment."

As for question three regarding assets, Reed, quoting the group, talked about the recent L'Arche building and how people mobilized.

"People spoke to the tremendous amount of assets that were brought forward recently when L'Arche built a

home for its residents," she said.

"People with contractor skills, building skills... people made donations and gave of their time. Those kind of assets exist in Antigonish and it's just a matter of recruiting and organizing those assets."

Reed's work fits into the efforts of the Antigonish Poverty Reduction Coalition which is having a draft action plan launch Thursday, 7 p.m., at the People's Place Library.

Antigonion Casket, January 18, 2012.

APRC to unveil draft plan

by Corey LeBlanc
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The Antigonish Poverty Reduction Coalition (APRC) is set to launch its draft action plan aimed at dealing with poverty issues in the community.

The public will have an opportunity to review the plan and offer contributions to making Antigonish a "healthier and more equitable community" at the People's Place Library community room Thursday at 7 p.m.

"It will be a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere – the focus will be on action and responding to the document, so it will be less on talking about the issues from experience, but more on drawing on that experience to give input on tangible projects that we can take on," Paula Cameron, APRC project coordinator, said.

Since June, she and Marion MacNeil, public health nurse, have been conducting focus group sessions in Antigonish communities, gathering feedback regarding poverty issues.

"We have talked to more than 100 people in the communities about how Antigonish can be made better – what the strengths are and also how we can move forward and make sure that health and well being are shared equally by everybody," Cameron said.

She added the APRC representatives learned a great deal during the sessions, noting participants were "very honest and articulate" in sharing their perspectives.

"To actually sit down with people who have experienced multiple barriers to thriving and the creative ways that they address those barriers, and the fact that they are still moving forward despite those barriers, is incredible," Cameron said.

"They have been so brave and resilient. They are coping with things that most people would find just hard to imagine."

Cameron said community members "educated each other" during the sessions.

"People were very honest about what they were experiencing and what could be made better," Cameron said, noting others listened respectfully.

Along with the community roundtables, the APRC has hosted planning sessions – public events where people have given feedback on how to act on those needs.

"Part of my job has been to listen and then to take what people have said – and there are so many tangible suggestions – and put them together in a type of format that we can follow or move forward with," she said.

Cameron said the draft action plan is divided into eight

most often focussed on during the sessions – transportation, housing, income security, food security, childcare, recreation, health services and education.

"People will be giving feedback about what was suggested – what are the gaps or what are the weaknesses – and how could those actions be made stronger," Cameron added.

She said many of the people they spoke to during the sessions "who are struggling now haven't always struggled," noting issues come up in peoples' lives such as divorce, illness or disability, along with "systemic racism," which she described as a huge theme.

Cameron said a common myth is that there is a group of people out there "sucking the system dry and don't give back."

"It's just not the case and

people need to know that," she noted.

Cameron said one of the keys will be "raising public awareness about what is going on that we cannot see."

"We want to share that with people," she noted.

The draft report will become a five-year action plan to address community needs, which will be presented to the community in a report and public presentations. The goal is to form action groups to implement recommendations.

*Antigonish Casket,
 January 18, 2012.*