
Innovative Partnerships in Affordable Housing

Reviewing HRC's session at the 2019 BC Land Summit



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The Housing Research Collaborative (HRC) based at the University of British Columbia organized a session during the 2019 BC Land Summit, held from May 8th - 10th at The Westin Bayshore, Vancouver. This multidisciplinary event gathered professional practitioners in fields related to land and land-use from British Columbia for educational, professional development, and network opportunities.

The topic for our session was Innovative Partnerships in Affordable Housing and our expert panel included presentations from Tiffany Duzita, Director of Community Land Trust, Karen Hemmingson, Director of Research and Corporate Planning at BC Housing, Dr. Penny Gurstein, Director of the Housing Research Collaborative, and Consultant on Organization Development and Change Management Ric Mathews. We split our session into two sections; in the first half, our team presented case studies of innovative housing partnerships, and in the second, the audience was engaged in a facilitated discussion.

Penny Gurstein introduced the session by briefly describing the housing affordability crisis in BC, an impediments in the housing delivery system and its structural elements. She also



HRC's presenters (from left to right) Karen Hemmingson, Ric Mathews, Penny Gurstein, and Tiffany Duzita.

discussed the challenges of the real estate industry as the main generator of economic activity. Instead, she envisioned the need for the secure, affordable housing to be a supporting platform for economic development and social welfare. She concluded by highlighting some of the key characteristics and benefits of Multi-Sectorial Partnerships in the housing system.

In the first presentation, Tiffany Duzita introduced partnerships that have been modeled by Community Land Trusts (CLT). CLTs are locally based, non-profit organizations that acquire and hold land for the benefit of the community, making them perpetually available for affordable housing. Typically, CLTs separate the value of the land from the buildings on it, effectively removing it from the private real estate market. They later undertake development or redevelopment projects on these properties. The resulting units are managed as part of a real-estate portfolio, increasing efficiency in the development and operation stages, and enabling cross-subsidization from higher rent units to lower end of market units across the portfolio. By 2017, the Community Land Trust's portfolio had 275 units, but thanks to large municipal and community partner investments, that number increased to 1681 by 2018 and is expected to go over 2600 in 2019.



In the second presentation, Karen Hemmingson spoke about HousingHub, a program created in 2018 by the Province of British Columbia to increase the supply of affordable housing for middle-income earners (households with average incomes between \$50,000-\$100,000) who have been priced out of the housing market. The goal of this policy is to identify and advance innovative approaches to the creation of affordable homes, (both for rent and for purchase) in the communities that need them most. Housing projects produced under HousingHub are funded through partnerships between private firms, non-profits, and government agencies at all levels. Every project is unique, allowing each partner to collaborate in the way that best utilizes its strengths.

Finally, Ric Mathews presented the concept of Inclusive Communities of Care. Traditionally, societies have developed in a way that results in the progressive and systematic exclusion of those who don't fit in a mainstream community due to mental health, addiction, or other issues despite the implementation of containment and management strategies. Inclusive communities have key characteristics that allow these individuals to become active members of their environments. They promote a sense of belonging instead of tolerance, "family" relationships rather than "care-giver" relationships, and in general, a change in the way communities provide assistance to all of its members, including those that don't belong respond to the mainstream.

The second part of our session consisted of three facilitated discussions with participants in the audience that generated insightful remarks around the following questions:

- 1) Based on your housing experience, what do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities of partnerships?
- 2) What needs to be done to foster housing partnerships in BC?
- 3) What unique partnerships are you working on? What does each partner bring to the table?

Key findings of the discussions:

1. What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities of partnerships?

Addressing the biggest challenges for partnerships, the groups took different approaches according to the background, expertise, and area of focus of its members. However, in all of the groups, the discussion turned towards the challenges faced in the coordination of the multiple public, non-profit, and private organizations involved in the different stages of a partnership. The conversations perfectly demonstrated the numerous layers of complexity entailed in the process of setting up and managing a successful partnership for an affordable housing project. These are some of the relevant ideas that we were able to capture:

- *Lack of Governance:* Currently, in BC, no single organization has the responsibility for overseeing and coordinating partnerships. This lack of governance results in uncertainty and unclear directions that delay operations and increase costs. Moreover, financial and technical burdens are often unequitable shared among partners, thus hindering the sustainability of projects. In the future, all parties involved as well as the communities they serve could find great benefits in an institutional structure that defines roles for collaboration (in terms of both funding and technical expertise), eases building permit issuance, and sets processes for long term cooperation.
- *Lack of Information:* Unavailability of precise and organized information also represent a complex barrier to overcome to build strong partnerships and create affordable housing projects. These limitations can show up as the inability of organizations and governments to identify key actors and opportunities to improve the chances of success. Lack of information is affecting governments as they struggle to reach out for financial and technical support from non-profits and private firms. It is also undermining their capacity to champion non-profits to help empower communities to guide major aspects of these projects..
- *Engagement Obstacles:* Other relevant points of the discussion highlighted the



Part of the discussion groups.

obstacles in engaging with homeless people to produce long-term policies that effectively respond to their unique challenges. This also relates to the difficulties to get a broader variety of actors (like health institutions) on board with partnerships for housing projects.

2. What needs to be done to foster housing partnerships in BC?

The discussion took a more reflective tone with the second question, resulting in a number of proposals that, in different ways, addressed the major issues previously identified. Consequently, many of the ideas addressed the organizational challenges of coordinating information and resources between actors involved in housing-related partnerships. These are some of the key takeaways from the discussion:

- There is a need for a centralized institution undertaking a leadership role, to coordinate non-profits, private firms, and government bodies at different levels. This institution would organize information and advocate for regulatory changes that facilitate and accelerate the formulations of partnerships for affordable housing projects. Such an institution should also serve as a matchmaking platform where organizations could share their experiences and find each other through all sorts of promotion and database management mechanisms.

- Since private firms are usually reluctant to partner with non-profits due to the perceived high risks investments, there needs to be a way to increase confidence between potential partners for housing projects. This could happen in many ways: a) by making processes and available business models for affordable housing development more flexible; b) by making more financial information available; and c) by increasing the accountability and monitoring of these partnerships.
- Other ideas introduced in the discussion touched on the need for additional training in partnerships, wider public engagement, and information dissemination.

3. What unique partnerships are you working on? What does each partner bring to the table?

In the last question, we learned about the partnerships in which the different members of the groups have been working, as they reflected on the challenges they have faced:

- The City of Kelowna recently partnered with the Interior Health Authority to develop the Healthy City Strategy, an extensive plan comprised of multiple themed areas that has community development and housing as the main two priorities. They have identified the need for an increase in housing supply, complemented by more education to get the community to embrace the project. They have engaged with various stakeholders, sharing knowledge and expertise through collaboration tables.
- In the City of Quesnel, landowners and developers have created partnerships to be able to build affordable housing units on regular private lots.
- The City of Port Moody has partnered with VanCity in a rent-to-own project that allows residents to pay rent at a subsidized price for two years before purchasing the units. The program is currently at its early stages and is looking to expand.
- In Vancouver, the Strathcona Village project involved the rezoning of an entire city block on industrial land. The resulting project is a multi-use development that has light industries, market housing, and social housing.
- At Mole Hill, partnerships were formed to preserve heritage homes and transform them into affordable housing units. The focus of these projects is the development of the community over the actual number of units built.
- In Nanaimo, the lack of political will have proven to be a great challenge for housing projects, even if strong partnerships are already pushing forward for affordable housing initiatives..

As shown above, Multi-Sectoral Partnerships are complex, and multifaceted. Given the current expectations of government to encourage these partnerships, the ideas generated above provide a snapshot of the strength and weaknesses of these partnerships, and how they can be realized in British Columbia.

We wish to thank all those who participated in our session and facilitated discussions. Please note that the tekaways mentioned above were captured during the process of the group discussions and do not represent the views of any individual, nor they suggest group consensus. Furthermore, we would like to state that the HRC generally supports the concerns and ideas mentioned above, but we do not endorse any one specific statement from the participants.

The Housing Research Collaborative thanks...

Authors: Andres Penaloza, Craig E. Jones, Penny Gurstein.

Pannelists/Discussion Facilitators: Karen Hemmingson, Ric Mathews, and Tiffany Duzita.

Notetakers: Wonjun Cho, Alexandra Heinen, Emily Huang.

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