**Playing the long game: energy efficient *and* affordable housing**

*A Liverpool co-op illustrates how energy-efficient buildings are more affordable in the long-term and a good model for communities looking to address the housing crisis.*

By Moira Donovan, Climate Story Network

In addressing the housing crisis, affordability and sustainability are sometimes cast in opposing roles.

But in Liverpool, a co-operative housing model is seeking to combine the two.

Queens Neighbourhood Co-operative Housing (QNCH) is planning 100 units of affordable passive housing for Queens County in southwestern Nova Scotia, with a 26-unit development in Liverpool to start.

The co-op is hoping to meet an increasingly desperate need for affordable rental housing in the county, while also showing how affordable housing can meet climate-friendly standards for efficiency and renewable energy.

“It's like the stairs and the moon have aligned for us with people, programs, land,” says QNCH president, Patti Pike. “It's been remarkable.”

QNCH came out of Queens Care Society, a seniors’ advocacy group that started in 2015 to provide local seniors with transportation and assistance to age in place.

Recognizing that aging in place also means having a place to live, the Society began looking into housing, and while working with Earl Mielke of Inclusive Homes Consulting, approached the Region of Queens Municipality, which suggested a number of potential sites in the region for co-op housing projects.

The first project, on Lawrence Street in Liverpool, will include 16 one-bedroom, eight two-bedroom, and two three-bedroom units, organized in two L-shaped, two-story buildings around a central courtyard, with greenspace and community gardens.

While the development targets seniors, and prioritizes accessible design, it will also have a mix of residents, including young people and families.

Mielke says though having the development built according to passive design principle is more expensive up-front, it pays off in the long run by keeping utility costs low, while also tapping into funding streams that reward sustainability.

This means addressing how buildings use energy.

“We’re implementing [passive design principles] to significantly reduce or completely eliminate the buildings’ reliance on fossil fuels,” says architect Molly Merriman, with Passive Design Solutions. The company tasked with the project’s design.

In the Liverpool development, this entails a super-insulated building envelope — the walls, roof, and foundation — as well as triple glazed windows and an airtight envelope assembly; all of which allows for mechanical heating and cooling systems that are themselves highly efficient, in addition to a design that also includes on-site solar.

This results in low or no power bills, says Merriman — and more comfortable houses. While some people associate this approach with an elitist kind of development, Merriman says it’s showing promise as a way to address the housing crisis, as demonstrated by Passive Design Solutions’ other projects including multi-unit affordable housing builds with Adsum House and the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia in the HRM.

“It feels like it's the only way forward, really,” says Merriman. ‘It’s showcasing that this design approach is not only possible but actually is, in itself, one of the reasons for the project’s affordability and long-term viability.”

In the near term, Patti Pike says the hope is to break ground on the Liverpool development in August or September, and to have people living in the units in two years’ time. Ultimately, QNCH plans to build 100 units of housing over three sites in the region.

With a current housing shortfall of nearly 400 units in the county — and rents that have doubled over the pandemic — proponents say it’s particularly important this first development be successful, as demonstration that this approach can work.

Mielke says this could have implications for other small and rural communities looking to the co-op model as a solution to the housing crisis.

“Co-op is all about affordable housing. Developing affordable housing can happen in rural areas, right, not just in big cities,” he says.

But Pike says it’s thinking of the people in Queens County in need of housing — like the seniors who currently face coming home from hospital to homes with no running water — that’s the most motivating factor.

“We have a vision of seeing people move to this community where they're safe, and they're warm, and they can afford to live outside of paying rent — that's what keeps us going.”

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*The Climate Story Network is an initiative of Climate Focus, a non-profit organization dedicated to covering stories about community-driven climate solutions.*