

Housing alarm

May 8th, 2013

A group of community organizations is sounding the alarm on unhealthy living conditions in Côte des Neiges.

The Organisation d'éducation et d'information logement (OeilCDN), the Corporation de Développement Communautaire, Maison Bleue and Project Genesis came to borough council Monday night to press politicians about their concerns and demand resources in next year's budget to combat degradation of rental housing.

In a statement, the groups say that in Côte des Neiges, where a fifth of the dwellings were built before 1946 and 60 percent before 1970, they encounter residents daily living in unsanitary conditions with mold, vermin, water infiltration, faulty plumbing and more.

Dangerous homes

Bernadette Thibaudeau sees those effects first-hand. A nurse at Maison Bleue, she treats many children with upper respiratory tract infections and lesions caused by bedbug bites. "Their homes are endangering their health," she says. "The City of Montreal can play a key role in solving the problems of these unsafe situations in Côte des Neiges." She told borough mayor Lionel Perez that some of the homes "are so dilapidated that I need to call the (Quebec workplace health and safety commission) CSST to accompany her on a visit. "And for people whose first language is neither French or English, it can be very difficult to know where to go or who to ask for help."

The groups cited a 2011 public health study, which found 38.4 percent of homes on the territory of the CLSC Côte des Neiges with children aged six months to 12 years had excessive moisture or mould problems. It also identified the presence of cockroaches or rodents in 22.6 percent of homes.

While the borough has introduced some measures to improve access for tenants to municipal inspectors, improving housing conditions, they say, requires significant investment in inspections.

"Last year, we had four to five municipal inspectors for over 52,000 rental units," said Jennifer Auchinleck of the Community Development Corporation of Côte des Neiges. "We want to see a substantial increase in resources," she told The Suburban, adding that with increased numbers of inspectors, there can be more prompt follow-up of inspections and actions, "and at every stage so nothing is left hanging, so people know what is going on."

That even further drives the need: With follow-up on every aspect of the process comes greater workloads for inspectors, already in short supply: "If they are appearing in court or at the Rental Board then they are not out inspecting."

Perez says that there have been improvements to the borough's approach — a housing committee was set up and an additional inspector was hired - and that even more are coming, soon.

Prevention, coercion

Auchinleck acknowledges the improvements, including the additional inspector and some new communication materials, but she says as the budgeting process for next year is set to begin, now is the time to highlight the pressing need for even more resources, because "so much more is needed. I think it's great that a new plan is coming, I really do, and we are anxious to see it, all of the groups that are working on this. But we think an investment over three years with more inspectors and a proactive approach could be very effective."

The proactive element includes inspections of all units in buildings with mould or infestations, "because cockroaches and bedbugs don't prefer one address over another." It also proposes looking at buildings with no current complaints but with a history of issues or reports by tenants to community organizations. People don't complain for a number of reasons, from language issues to ignorance of their rights, "but that doesn't mean that there isn't a problem."

Activists and community workers would also like to see a tougher approach to get obstinate landlords to take action. "Coercive measures will let them know that there are real consequences," she says, adding "with enough inspectors and the right enforcement, the existing règlement will be effective. "If we get a three-year blitz on this, they will get the message. If people knew the borough had zero tolerance, it would have a definite impact." n

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