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## NEWS & VIEWS

# Quebec's sole housing program slashed 'Real social effects'

By Joel Ceausu  
The Suburban

It's not the wholesale scrapping advocates feared but it's almost that bad.

The province's only social housing program was slashed in half last week in the Liberal government's budget. AccèsLogis provides 40-50 percent of the costs to create rental housing in partnership with community groups, municipalities and private developers. With annual budgets of around \$250 million, it helps create some 3,000 housing units each year, but Minister of Finance Létião announced only \$126 million for the construction of 1,500 units, part of an overall \$284 million social housing envelope.

Most of the balance — \$123 million — will go to rent supplements, direct payments to qualifying tenants to obtain private rental housing, and another \$35 million to help adapt homes for low-income families.

Social housing advocates are decrying the partial shift to subsidies as a transfer of the social responsibility to create decent, affordable housing in viable communities to the private market.

What Sheetal Pathak of Project Genesis finds disconcerting is that the Liberal government announced a first year's 1,500 social housing units but rent subsidies for 1,000 then 1,200 new subsidies over the next four years. "They are talking about rent subsidies for the coming years but nothing about AccèsLogis, which tells us that they may be phasing it out."

Pathak and other critics say private subsidies don't ensure quality, has no long-term gain and may actually increase rents, while building housing can stabilize rents and boost quality of private properties.

"We think this is a step toward privatizing housing services with no guarantees of quality and will encourage slumlords who will not feel compelled to improve conditions." Competing with social housing for tenants compel disreputable landlords to improve their properties, but that won't be necessary says Pathak, because they have 'become' social housing. "In that way it is a gift."

"Studies show that subsidies put up-

ward pressures on rents, whereas building social housing creates a societal asset." She says the move may reflect a combination of shortsightedness and ideology, given that in the long-term, the economic and social benefits favour social housing.

The government's own figures show that every social housing dollar spent generates \$2.30 of wealth through employment, construction and other spinoffs, while annually saving taxpayer cash — estimated at \$130 million — in social programs related to homelessness, seniors, the handicapped and mental illness.

For the Quebec Federation of Housing Cooperatives (CQCH), cutting AccèsLogis is incomprehensible. "The need remains significant. More than 225,000 Quebec tenants spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing," said president Jacques Côté, adding the government should closely monitor their program over the next year for "the real social effects and economic impacts of this decision."

Rental vacancies are quite low in many of Quebec's urban centres, particularly for large families — about three percent — as is the dismal case of Côte des Neiges, where almost 15 percent of tenant households spend more than 80 percent of their income on rent, and where above-average rents meet below-average incomes. (In NDG, average rents also outpace the Montreal norm.)

According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation only 12 private rental homes were created in the area between January 2011 and September 2014, compared to 1597 condominiums, and the vacancy rate of three-bedroom rentals in CDN stands at a dismal 1.3 percent.

Groups also fear that as vacancy rates vary from year to year, a sudden drop may prompt landlords to drop out of the program. "If a landlord finds that they can charge a lot more, says Pathak, it could be really difficult to find apartments."

Pathak says Project Genesis will be educating the public on the new changes and what they mean, "and we'll continue to pressure the government to change their mind, if not this year then next year." ■



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