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TCHC board votes to sell over 700 homes

Patrick White

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Toronto Community Housing CEO Len Koroneos in April 2011. (Peter Power/The Globe and Mail)

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The board of Toronto's social housing agency has voted to sell 706 homes despite pleas from dozens of tenants concerned about potential eviction.

A crowd of social housing advocates chanted "We are not for sale" through much of a five-and-a-half hour Toronto Community Housing meeting on Friday, silenced only after a 10-2 vote in favour of offloading much of the agency's scattered housing stock.

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TCHC CEO Len Koroneos argued that the \$336-million he hopes to raise from the sale would be put towards the \$650-million repair bill the agency is currently facing. Much of that backlog is for stand-alone homes that need, on average, \$60,000 in repairs compared to \$30,000 for apartment units, according to the agency.

The waiting list for TCHC, Canada's biggest landlord with 164,000 tenants, currently stands at 78,000. The homes slated for sale currently hold over 2,600 tenants.

Despite that math, Mr. Koroneos insisted the waitlist would grow only if they chose not to sell.

"Where we might actually see a reduction in our affordable housing stock is if we have to board up and shut down buildings because they are in such a poor state of repair," he said. "That's the road that we're headed down if we don't act, and act now."

The proceeds would be ploughed into a state of good repair fund forecasted to yield five per cent a year, roughly \$17-million, for capital repairs.

Once TCHC worker, Ron Johnson, equated the liquidation to selling "your backyard to fix up you front yard."

Over 50 other speakers expressed similar sentiments, including tenants, non-profit workers and city councillors.

"You don't see the police selling stations to pay for repairs on other stations, you don't see the TTC selling buses to pay for repairs on subways and you don't see libraries selling books to pay for shelves," said Councillor Adam Vaughan.

Several tenants complained that they only heard about the potential sales of their homes through the media or word of mouth.

When Councillor Janet Davis phoned affected tenants in her ward, over half of them had no idea their homes could soon be on the block,

she said.

“I do think we fell down in communicating to them,” admitted director Christian Buhagar, who urged the TCHC guarantee alternate units for displaced tenants.

It was the first significant test for a board that took over the TCHC in the summer.

Mayor Rob Ford purged the old board in March following a spending scandal and appointed former city councillor Case Ootes to act as a one-man place-holder board. It was Mr. Ootes who recommended the agency sell its scattered housing before his term ended in June.

“I voted for Rob Ford to get rid of the waste at City Hall,” proclaimed one tenant, “not to sell my home out from under me.”

Not all directors were on side with the plan. “You can’t sell houses with people in them, it’s an inhumane violation,” said eighteen-year-old Munira Abukar, one of two tenant representatives on the board, who proved herself to be a firebrand defender of tenant interests.

Her motion to defer the entire decision for the lack of information contained in a 12-page report lost with only two supporting votes.

Councillor Cesar Palacio had a motion passed that asks staff to partner with other affordable housing agencies such as Habitat For Humanity during the sell-off and audit the \$650-million backlog to insure the figure is correct.

The plan still requires the approval of City Council and the province, a process that will take at least six months, according to Mr. Koroneos. He hopes to put 70 vacant homes on the market by June, followed by a phased sale of the rest of the stand-alone stock over the next several years.

Critics have alleged that the sale amounts to the termination of Toronto’s long-standing commitment to mixed community housing where tenants are scattered amid middle-class neighbourhoods to avoid the creation of government-sponsored ghettos.

Mr. Koroneos countered that new developments in Regent Park and Lawrence Heights dispel that notion.

“We remain committed to this mixed community model,” he said., “where it makes financial sense.”

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