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How the mayor can keep a roof over TCHC's head

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Nick Falvo

Mayor Rob Ford recently backtracked on a crucial issue.

First he threatened to use revenue from the sale of public housing units to balance the city's budget. Twenty-four hours later, he flip-flopped and agreed that the revenue should be used to fix Toronto's existing social housing stock (as originally promised).

Ford's about-face speaks to the real-life nightmare that would ensue if important repairs were not made to existing public housing units. It also speaks to the power of advocates who are both glaringly aware of what those nightmares would look like, and are prepared to fight tooth and nail for social housing.

But the mayor's U-turn is not enough. He must also use his political clout to lobby the federal and provincial governments to step up their respective commitments to affordable housing.

Public housing, by definition, is housing that is owned and operated by a public housing authority, such as the Toronto Community Housing Corp. (TCHC). It serves a purpose.

Rent in most parts of Canada — especially in large cities — is out of reach for a substantial portion of households. Today in Toronto, average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is more than \$1,100 a month. Yet the maximum shelter allowance that a single adult with one child receives on social assistance is just \$578 a month.



Social housing units help low-income households afford housing they need. It is highly likely that, without government-assisted housing on a large scale, tens of thousands of Torontonians would be destitute, pockets of the city would look like small refugee camps, and thousands of children would be apprehended by child welfare authorities.

Historically, public housing units in Canada have been made possible due to substantial funding from both the federal and provincial governments. That funding has helped not only to pay the mortgages, but also with the operation and maintenance of the units.

Funding agreements involving all three levels of government typically last between 35 and 50 years per unit. And because most of the roughly 200,000 public housing units that exist across Canada today were built in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these operating agreements have recently started to expire.

Without ongoing funding from senior levels of government, there is no money to undertake proper maintenance on most public housing units, hence the media headlines aplenty that draw attention to the much-needed capital repairs to TCHC units. (So severe is the repair backlog that some units are uninhabitable in their present state; they remain vacant while 77,000 households sit on TCHC's waiting list.)

Fortunately there is an upside to these expiring agreements: Funding that was once leaving federal and provincial coffers to subsidize these units is now being freed up.

This freed-up money, often referred to as "legacy savings," represents an opportunity to recommit. And this has prompted many to urge the federal government to lead a national effort to reinvest these "legacy savings" into current social housing stock.

[Steve Pomeroy](#) is one of Canada's foremost experts in affordable housing. He argues in a [report](#) prepared for the [Canadian Housing and Renewal Association](#) that it is far more cost effective to repair existing stock than it is to build new housing (which is not to say that new units are not needed as well).

Thus, not only could senior levels of government reinvest in existing housing stock without incurring additional net spending, doing so would in fact be more cost-effective than building from scratch.

If Rob Ford wants to respect the taxpayer, he should stand up to both Stephen Harper and Dalton McGuinty. He should remind them that their funding for Toronto's social housing stock has been declining and that roofs are leaking.

If Toronto's mayor wants to prove himself as a fiscally conservative leader, he should push both the Prime Minister and the premier to reinvest "legacy savings" into current TCHC stock.

For a mayor who respects taxpayers past, present and future, it's the logical thing to do.

Nick Falvo is a PhD candidate at Carleton University's School of Public Policy and Administration and teaches a course on affordable housing at Carleton's School of Social Work.