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David Rider and San Grewal

The sale of 22 single-family Toronto Community Housing Corp. houses is the start of a great social housing sell-off — a sea change in the way the city houses the needy, critics charge.

Allies of Mayor Rob Ford did little to quiet the speculation Wednesday, with one key member suggesting 900 other houses are next, followed by some of TCHC's apartment blocks.

"We have to revisit our policies on all of it," Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti told reporters. "The city is stuck with an old stock of housing that we just cannot fix up. We've got to make some very difficult decisions."

After debate that spanned much of Tuesday and Wednesday morning, a motion to evict the tenants and sell the houses — all in need of repair, some in upscale areas including the Beach — easily passed 33-10.

City staff recommended the sale, at the urging of the Ford administration, to free up cash for a TCHC repair backlog that stands at \$600 million and growing. The estimated revenue of \$15.7 million will be reduced because four of the houses are occupied by tenants with lifelong leases and can't be sold immediately.

Nine of the houses are fully vacant; some others have more than one unit.

"This is just the beginning," warned Councillor Janet Davis. "How many (units) will come back next time? 50? 100? 200? There's no disguising the agenda here . . ."

"This approach says that poor people should not live in decent neighbourhoods, should not be able to live in houses, that they should all live in highrise apartments in the suburbs . . . We want to have mixed neighbourhoods and low-income people living in every neighbourhood across this city in different types of housing."

Residents the *Star* spoke with were not particularly upset by the news.

“I’m glad the house is selling,” says Maria Upyr, who has lived at 761 Crawford St., a three-bedroom semi backing onto Christie Pits Park, for seven years with her two grandsons. “My home is totally dilapidated inside.”

Upyr got a letter in December 2008 that informed her the house was going to be sold because of the high upkeep costs.

“They didn’t repair anything for three years, but after Mayor Ford got into office my daughter called him and shortly after, my plumbing, broken doors and other things were fixed.” But she says it’s still a safety risk, with exposed wire throughout and other issues. “The city is a slum landlord. There’s no other way to describe it. I pay my rent, but we’re treated like second-class citizens.”

The letter promises to offer her “equal rental accommodation,” ongoing rent-geared-to-income subsidy if she qualifies, moving costs and “ample notice of any changes to your tenancy.”

Earlier this month a TCHC official showed her a home in the Roncesvalles area that was “absolutely beautiful,” she said. “I’m holding my breath that I get it, but I’m still in limbo.”

Jose Pineda and his family of five have lived at 96 Marchmount Rd., also a three-bedroom semi on the sell list, since 1987. “The roof leaked for two years before anyone even came to look at it. That gives you a picture of how badly it’s maintained,” Pineda said.

He isn’t too worried about finding a new place, because, at \$1,500, he pays close to market value. But he said he won’t get stressed about things until he gets the word officially.

Case Ootes, who was interim head of Canada’s biggest landlord until Wednesday’s approval of a new board of directors, rejected Davis’s characterization that the agency is “throwing families into the street.”



Maria Upyr, standing with grandson Jakiw Zenczuk in front of their home at 761 Crawford St., has known for more than two years the house would be sold. It's in poor condition, she says, with safety hazards such as exposed wires that have not been repaired.

SAN GREWAL/TORONTO STAR

“We will be finding suitable accommodation for them in our existing stock,” said Ootes, who could not provide details of whether they will go to the top of TCHC’s waiting list of 77,000 low-income households, or jump it altogether.

The single-family homes must be sacrificed so the city can “provide as many units available to existing tenants, and people on the waiting list, so they can have decent housing,” he said.

Last week, as departing director, Ootes proposed that the city sell off all of its roughly 900 single-family houses to help pay for repairs to TCHC’s apartment blocks.

Talking to reporters after the vote, Mammoliti, chair of the affordable housing committee, went further, arguing the city should also sell off some of the crumbling highrises that house most of TCHC’s 164,000 tenants.

His vision would shift Toronto toward providing more low-income residents with rent subsidies to live in private apartments, and away from its traditional role as a landlord.

Ford mused about the shift during last year’s civic election campaign, saying that as councillor he tried to help tenants living in deplorable conditions. But he has since sent mixed signals about the future of TCHC’s \$6 billion worth of housing stock.

After Ootes said a house sell-off could bring in more than \$400 million, Ford initially said he was in favour and would grab half of that to help bridge the city’s operating budget deficit.

The next day, the mayor backtracked and said all of the revenue would go toward TCHC’s repair backlog.