

Regina mayor's housing commission to start Thursday

BY VANESSA BROWN, LEADER-POST OCTOBER 23, 2013



Mayor Michael Fougere.

Photograph by: TROY FLEECE, REGINA LEADER-POST

The mayor's new housing commission is to begin Thursday, and members have high hopes that the committee will help alleviate the city's continued rental housing crunch.

The nine members are to meet for the public meeting at City Hall at 4 p.m., and a look at the agenda shows they will be busy right out of the gate.

"We have a full agenda of things we're going to talk about, and we have a strong team (of commission members)," Mayor Michael Fougere said Tuesday. "We're ready to go, and we're really excited about that."

The inaugural session will kick off with an overview of ideas presented at Fougere's two-day housing summit in May. Members will also be tasked with reviewing the downtown residential incentives policy and recommending possible updates to the administration. The commission will discuss the controversial condominium conversion policy, which currently restricts

apartment buildings being converted to costlier condos when the rental vacancy rate falls below two per cent. That rate is now at 1.9 per cent, but city planners have suggested that city council consider boosting the threshold to a healthier three-per-cent vacancy rate.

Commission members will also discuss the comprehensive housing strategy and the official community plan as it pertains to housing.

The mayor wrapped up his spring housing summit, which drew participants from various sectors to discuss the housing issue, by pledging to put together the special commission to deal specifically with Regina's housing issue. With a vacancy rate of 1.9 per cent, the city is grappling with ways to balance population growth with the housing stock.

The commission is to meet monthly, and will function similar to the planning commission by making recommendations to city council. Its primary task is to find ways to get innovative housing projects built faster. The city has faced criticism for reacting too slowly to new housing solutions. For example, city officials may like an idea for a new rental building, but current zoning bylaws could prohibit it from being built in certain neighbourhoods. The housing commission will look for ways to bring such projects to market quicker.

"The intent is that we streamline the process, that we expedite applications, and we continue to look at new and innovative ways to deliver more timely responses and a more diverse range of housing options for the community," said Blair Forster, president of Forster Projects and one of two commission members from the development community.

Malcolm Neill, vice-president of residential services at the Ranch Ehrlo Society, will bring a perspective to the table from the social housing side of the equation.

"I just want to make sure that people recognize that there's a diversity within the community, and we have to make sure the policies encompass everyone," Neill said Tuesday.

The mayor will chair the commission that will also include first-term Counc. Barbara Young, Bob Hawkins and Bryon Burnett; local builder Terry Canning; Tim Gross from the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, a provincial body; and Robert Byers of the Namerind Housing Corporation, which seeks to find affordable housing for aboriginals. The city has set a vacancy rate target of three per cent by 2017.

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