

Feds, province to maintain funds

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By Evan Duggan

The federal and provincial governments announced plans Monday to carry through with previous commitments to support affordable housing in B.C.

Both levels of government will contribute \$90 million each over the next three years to support the housing needs of low-income individuals, families and seniors, backed by continued commitments from B.C. and Canada.

The federal government's share of the money comes from funding announced in 2008, when \$1.9 billion was set aside for housing and homelessness throughout Canada.

Those funds were followed up by a one-time infusion of \$2 billion as part of the government's Economic Action Plan to finance new and existing social housing.

An additional \$2 billion was made available in the form of low-cost loans to municipalities for housing-related infrastructure, according to a government release.

The announcement came at the official unveiling of Sorella, a new 108-unit supportive housing development for single women and children in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"Our government is committed to working with the province of British Columbia to develop and implement solutions to housing," James Moore, minister of Canadian heritage, official languages, and the B.C. region said at the announcement.

"This agreement recognizes the need for local solutions to housing challenges and the importance of reporting on achievement of outcomes," he said.

Moore said the federal government favours partnerships with provinces instead of a nationwide framework for housing.

"The rhetoric of a national housing strategy sounds good," Moore said, when asked by reporters why the federal government has resisted calls to form a national housing strategy.

"The truth is we think this structure - this framework - works better."

After Sorella's opening ceremony, Mayor Gregor Robertson said "mayors across the country have been asking for a national housing strategy for years.

The reality at this point is the federal government is more focused on targeting funding into programs such as this."

Robertson said he welcomed the funding and the federal government's interest in working together with the province to help municipalities, but more is needed.

"Ultimately we'd like them to keep stepping up and contributing more, because we have a long way to go," Robertson said.

In the last 10 years, "the province has invested \$2.8 billion and created more than 20,000 new units of affordable housing," said B.C.'s minister responsible for housing, Rich Coleman.

The province of British Columbia provided a \$14.6-million grant and pledged \$472,961 in annual operating funding for the Sorella development.

The City of Vancouver chipped in the \$2.6-million piece of property, located at 525 Abbott St., in addition to the \$400,000 development cost levies and a grant of nearly \$3 million to develop commercial retail space on the ground floor.

The federal government contributed more than \$6.1 million to support the construction of the project, which the city had been working on since 2007.

The building, which houses 12 pregnant single women, and 35 children, is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and provides social services and community programs like yoga, in addition to housing, said Janice Abbott, CEO of Atira Women's Resource Society, the non-profit that operates Sorella.

"We will have 12 newborns here in the next few months," she said.

Sorella is already full, Abbott said, adding that no wait-list would be recorded because it would grow unreasonably long in a short period of time.