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PRESENTATION TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING/TENANT ISSUES COMMITTEE

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My name is Kenn Hale and I am here on behalf of the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario – a community legal aid clinic with a provincial mandate to advance and protect the interests of low-income tenants. It is very encouraging to see members of Council working together to link up the crucial issues of tenant protection and affordable housing supply. The City of Toronto is moving on a number of fronts to address the housing crisis that low- and moderate-income are facing. More effort needs to go into co-ordinating these efforts, but this is a good start.

We know that the Government of Canada has proposed a long-term funding plan to be rolled out in support of a National Housing Strategy. We expect that the Province, in its upcoming budget will make its own long-term commitments to partner with the Feds. And we believe that, through its Affordable Housing Office, Toronto is ready to put any money that these governments make available to work. But even the most optimistic among us know that actual housing from these programs is years away. And any impact that such investment will have on market rents is even further away, if it comes at all.

But we are facing a crisis right now. The province has repeatedly ignored the City's requests that their legislation be tightened up so that tenants are better protected from rent increases and unfair evictions. The Mayor seems to have given up hope of such help. So let's look at what the City of Toronto could actually do with its powers and a little bit of political will.

1. Be a good landlord that makes things better, not worse

Toronto Community Housing is the biggest landlord in Canada. Plans for implementing the "Tenants First" report will be coming to you soon from City staff. Make sure that those plans ensure that no TCH units are left unoccupied, all units are fit for habitation and all tenants are treated with dignity and respect. This means you must be prepared to spend City dollars to fulfill what the law requires you to do. Furthermore, all redevelopment proposals of TCH properties MUST include a significant addition to the number of rental units that are affordable to the people on the social housing waiting list. The Regent Park redevelopment demonstrates that TCH can build new communities. Let's make sure that future TCH redevelopments use their public resources to meet the most pressing public needs.

2. Expand programs that protect tenants from displacement

Tenants are members of Toronto's many diverse communities. Protecting those communities means protecting tenants from displacement. The City has a number of existing programs that seek to provide that protection. Those programs need to be continued and expanded:

- enhance eviction prevention;
- increase support for tenant organizing;
- improve the Tenant Defence Fund's ability to facilitate tenant participation in above-guideline rent increase hearings;
- review your rental housing protection policies and eliminate the exceptions; and
- develop a focussed public education program to inform tenants of their rights and to help them assert those rights

3. Continue to refine and invest in supports for keeping renters in their homes

The Rent Bank and later the Housing Stability Fund have saved the homes of thousands of tenants each year since 1998. The City must ensure that these programs are refined and expanded in a way that continues to address the need – even if the programs are not fully funded by senior governments.

4. Permit multi-tenant homes in all residential communities and integrate their regulation with apartment building registration

The Planning Division and Municipal Licensing and Standards are engaging in a never-ending series of consultations seeking to limit the provision of affordable housing in multi-tenant homes. Let Council know that these efforts are working against the goals of your Committees and seek directions to regularize the zoning of these properties and apply appropriate regulation that aligns with Council's decisions on multi-unit properties.

5. Forget about subsidizing “affordable home ownership”

Vast amounts of City resources have been squandered in trying to come up with a plan and a justification for using social housing money to build more condos. Private developers and the banks – with the taxpayer backing them through CMHC mortgage guarantees – are damn good at building ownership housing. They are not so good at the affordable part without a public contribution. Any contribution the City might make could better be applied to the real needs of people who cannot afford even the most modest market rents. Leave affordable ownership to the developers and the charities and let them create models that do not rely on the taxpayer to prop them up.

Conclusion

Threats of eviction, unaffordable rent increases or unacceptable living conditions are disrupting our communities by driving tenants into the outer suburbs or into unaffordable condominium ownership. The province must respond to the City's call for more supply and better regulation. But the City must use the tools it has, including its financial resources to directly address the problems that are faced by the most vulnerable tenant households.