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HOUSING NOW ADVANCES

Rob Jowett

The City of Toronto is advancing phase two of its Housing Now program which will add much-needed purpose-built rental and affordable housing to the city's low supply, as well as a number of market-priced housing units.

At its meeting May 28, Toronto city council approved six city-owned sites to be redeveloped with buildings that include affordable housing units. The sites are located at the Danforth Garage at 1627 and 1675 Danforth Avenue, 1631 Queen Street East, 158 Borough Drive, 2444 Eglinton Avenue East, 405 Sherbourne Street, and 150 Queens Wharf Road. Collectively, these new sites are expected to provide between 1,455 and 1,710 residential units, including 1,060 to 1,240 purpose-built rental units, with 530 to 620 being affordable rental units and the rest market units. As part of the approval, council also approved \$47, 652,480 in financial incentives to support the creation of affordable housing

as part of its Open Door program.

"[The sites are] at the conceptual stage. We haven't done detailed due diligence yet or detailed planning yet, but we've looked generally and conceptually at the residential yield that might be appropriate," Toronto chief planner **Gregg Lintern** told *NRU*. "We've looked at the ability to move as quickly as we can from concept to approval, so the sites are reasonably less complicated

than perhaps other sites might be."

Housing Now is a program being led by city planning and **CreateTO** that is meant to help address Toronto's ongoing housing affordability crisis and is a part of the city's larger HousingTO 2020-2030 action plan, which aims to provide 40,000 affordable rental units, including 18,000 supportive housing units, over the next decade. The program involves zoning

city-owned land for housing development and forming partnerships with development companies to redevelop the land into housing, with a goal of ultimately providing 10,000 new affordable rental units. Phase one of the program was launched in November 2019, with 11 city-owned sites being identified for redevelopment, and it is estimated it will be able to provide 10,750 units, including 7,800 purpose-built

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Traffic flows along the Gardiner Expressway at dusk while a billboard on the south side of the highway displays an image from The Bentway's public art exhibit, *It's All Right Now*. The exhibit appears on stationary and mobile billboards and other surfaces across the city and in digital form online from May 22 to July 1. See story page 3.

ARTIST: ANI CASTILLO
PHOTOGRAPHER: SAMUEL ENGLISH
SOURCE: THE BENTWAY

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rental units, 3,900 of which would be affordable.

“We’re setting up a kind of a development pipeline... we’re moving from concept to approvals to procurement to construction to occupancy,” says Lintern. “The second phase feeds the pipeline at the concept stage as we move different projects through the

[rest of the] process... we want to be able to regularly advance a new batch of sites and work them through the concept and approval process so that we can bring a steady stream of units onto the market.”

Lintern says the new sites were selected because they are likely to yield a significant amount of housing space and

are spread out across the city. He adds that many of the sites are close to transit or park spaces and are meant to help achieve other community-building goals like providing local retail and childcare spaces.

“I think the idea is on the right track in terms of putting in place incentives that will enable an increase in the availability of affordable [and] deeply affordable housing in the city, as well as actual funding supports that will enable that,” **Toronto Shelter Network** executive lead **SN Management** owner **Sonja Nerad** told *NRU*. “The focus

on rentals is also something that we’re encouraged by and the significant target that’s been established in terms of rentals... [the] the biggest challenge is that we’re talking about a bureaucracy [at the city] and so we were happy to hear that a second phase is coming on board and [we] hope that it can roll out quite quickly.”

Nerad says to maximize the efficacy of both this phase and of the Housing Now program as a whole in addressing the housing crisis, several of the sites need to be operated by not-

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Clockwise from top right:

Location of the 2.04-hectare Housing Now site at the Danforth Garage at 1627 and 1675 Danforth Avenue. The Housing Now units would be included as part of a larger redevelopment of the site.

Location of the 0.42-hectare Housing Now site at 1631 Queen Street East. The site currently includes the Beaches Employment and Social Services Centre facility and a Children’s Services childcare facility (part 1) and a road allowance (part 2).

Location of the 0.59-hectare Housing Now site at 158 Borough Drive in Scarborough. The site currently contains a two-storey parking garage with 350 parking spots (part 1) and a vacant industrial facility and parking lot (part 2).

Location of the 1.15-hectare Housing Now site at 2444 Eglinton Avenue East in Scarborough. The site contains a TTC commuter surface-level parking lot and the local community has expressed concern with constant changes to redevelopment plans for the site.

Location of the 0.30-hectare Housing Now site at 405 Sherbourne Street. The site currently contains a Toronto Parking Authority surface parking lot with 110 parking spaces.

Location of the 0.15 Housing Now site at 150 Queens Wharf Road. The vacant site is adjacent to the city’s proposed Rail Deck Park project.

SOURCE FOR ALL: CITY OF TORONTO



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for-profit or non-profit housing organizations rather than by for-profit companies.

The Housing Now program is an important piece of city-building for Toronto, Ward 19 Beaches-East York councillor **Brad Bradford** told *NRU*. Two of the new sites are located in his ward and Bradford says they will contribute greatly to the buildup of neighbourhoods in his ward as areas like Danforth Avenue are intensified, while providing the city overall with much-needed affordable housing.

“[We need to be] laser focused on delivering more housing to Torontonians,” says Bradford. “The need for affordable housing, I think is growing in our city every single day. And we have to come together as a community to make sure that we’re creating and supporting a full range of housing options to meet the diverse needs of Torontonians.”

In particular, Bradford says he is glad to see the Danforth Garage site, which is already being planned for redevelopment, being included in the program. He says Housing Now sites like the Danforth Garage can provide new investment opportunities for neighbourhoods and provide much-needed community amenities in

addition to affordable housing.

Rezoning for three sites that were included in phase one of the Housing Now program has already been approved: 140 Merton Street, 50 Wilson Heights, and 777 Victoria Park Avenue. A fourth site, 705 Warden Avenue, is expected to be considered at the planning and housing committee meeting June 16. Bradford said that the first phase of the program has provided several learning opportunities that will help the city improve the overall efficacy of the program, including the need to be focussing on providing new and needed neighbourhood amenities.

“I think that the numbers of opportunities for units on the first site that came forward, initially, were low,” says Bradford. “And then, we at the city had to go back, take another look and come forward with something that was more ambitious. And I think in this second phase, there needs to be some learning from that experience, and [we need to] make sure that we are leveraging these sites to the fullest ability to achieve affordable housing.”

Redevelopment of some of the sites will come with inherent challenges, some of which were already seen in the first phase, **Ryerson University** centre

for urban research and land development director **David Amborski** told *NRU*. He says he worked with some of his students to identify some of the challenges faced by the city in phase one, such as where to put the existing use for the non-vacant sites

“A couple of the sites were [Toronto Transit Commission] parking lot sites. What happens to the parking and trying to encourage people to use transit?” says Amborski. “The other major concern had to be that once you have these units developed, who’s going to manage the affordable housing units? And presumably it’s the NGOs, [so] do we have enough NGO capacity to manage these?”

Lintern says that overall, city planning staff are trying to strike a balance between competing local needs and that community building is more important than parking for these sites.

Ward 21 councillor **Michael Thompson** says he supports the Housing Now program, but residents have identified some issues with the 158 Borough Drive site, which is one of two phase two sites located in his ward. He says the site, currently a two-storey commuter parking lot with 350 spaces serving the Scarborough Town Centre, has been the subject of a lot of redevelopment interest and area residents are becoming frustrated with the constant planning changes to the site and the uncertainty about whether or not there will be parking

available once the construction begins.

“There [was] going to be a development taking place. The city had engaged the adjacent landowner... about using an alternative site... that’s within a three-minute walk from that site to use as city parking... then, all of a sudden the file got turned over into the Housing Now site,” says Thompson. “There’s great confusion in terms of what was going on. The community is really upset that the city is not following through. What they had thought was going to happen was that there’s going to be condominium development on that site. ... I think there’s going to be strong opposition on that site... people are saying ‘we were not consulted.’”

Thompson adds that he believes the program should include affordable ownership options in addition to rental to provide a more complete range of housing options to people and to help people realize the “dream of homeownership”.

Lintern says a third phase identifying new sites is likely to be presented to council in late 2020 or early 2021. 🌱