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INITIATIVE 1—DEVELOPING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONTARIO RENTERS SOCIAL HOUSING INNOVATION FUND

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, October 2, 2007, from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The Regional Municipality of York commit \$500,000 of the \$9.665 million Provincial Developing Opportunities for Ontario Renters funding to the creation of a Social Housing Innovation Fund to assist housing providers with playground and accessibility upgrades.
2. Housing providers be eligible to make application for funding from the Social Housing Innovation Fund provided they are able to contribute 50% of the funds required for any playground replacement and 25% of the funds required for accessibility upgrades, with a proviso that the Commissioner of Community and Housing Services may waive all or a portion of the contribution requirement if the Commissioner is satisfied that a business case supports the need to do so.

2. PURPOSE

This report proposes the creation of a Social Housing Innovation Fund to assist housing providers with playground replacement and accessibility upgrades. The \$500,000 proposed for this initiative would be funded through the Region's allocation under the Provincial Developing Opportunities for Ontario Renters (DOOR) initiative.

This Fund is the first initiative to be presented to Committee since the Developing Opportunities for Ontario Renters Funding strategy was presented at the May 30, 2007 Community Services and Housing Committee. It is proposed that DOOR funding of \$9.665 million be used to leverage both Regional and housing provider funding to create in the range of 100 -120 new units of affordable rental and transitional housing in four municipalities across the Region. Reports will be brought forward over the coming months for consideration of each proposal.

3. BACKGROUND

At the June 21, 2007 meeting, Council approved a report describing the DOOR initiative and outlining principles for allocation of the \$9.665 million the Region received under the program, through the adoption of Clause No. 3 of Report No. 6 of the Community Services and Housing Committee. Regional Council approved the following principles to guide the use of DOOR funding:

- Increasing/extending affordable housing supply.
- Using funds for housing related purposes not allowed under other very prescriptive programs.
- Distributing funds to extend and complement existing housing investments.
- Leveraging funding through use of regionally owned land and equity contributions.
- Increasing access to those who are disabled, where possible.

Staff were directed to report back to Council with specific program plans, while the DOOR funds were deposited into a deferred revenue account until such time as they are required for Council approved program initiatives.

This report is one of several that will be presented to Council proposing programs to implement the DOOR funds in accordance with the Council approved principles.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Housing providers need playground and accessibility improvements

Social housing providers are challenged by limited funds and aging facilities, leaving limited opportunity to make improvements that fall outside of the basic program framework. In recent years the Canadian Standards Association introduced more stringent safety standards for playground equipment. A number of housing providers could not afford to upgrade their play facilities to meet the new standards. In some cases, the play equipment had to be removed, leaving the children in those communities without a safe place to play.

Housing providers are also struggling to address changing standards and expectations with respect to accessibility modifications. Seniors aging in place and tenants with a wide range of disabilities may require modifications to their units or the common spaces in their buildings. For example, many social housing apartment buildings were originally built without automatic doors in the building entrances. However, some seniors find it difficult to open these heavy security doors without assistance. Some seniors' housing providers have installed powered doors but others would be unable to afford the retrofit costs without financial support.

4.2 Providing project cost-sharing through Social Housing Innovation Fund

It is proposed that housing providers would be eligible to make application for funding from the Social Housing Innovation Fund subject to a requirement to raise 50% of the total cost of proposed playground replacements and/or 25% of the total cost of proposed accessibility upgrades. The housing provider's share of the cost could be funded from their accumulated operating surpluses or fundraising initiatives. In the event that the proposed project falls within the program parameters for capital expenditures, the housing provider may be permitted to fund their share of the cost from their capital reserves. In the event that a housing provider has a demonstrable need for a playground or accessibility upgrade and the Region is satisfied that the housing provider does not have the capacity to raise the required matching funds, all or a portion of the matching contribution may be waived at the discretion of the Commissioner based on the business case provided by the housing provider. No more than 20% of the fund will be allocated to projects with less than the prescribed housing provider matching contribution.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The provincial DOOR funds provide the Region with a unique opportunity to address community needs that are not adequately met through existing programs. The Social Housing Innovation Fund will enable housing providers to afford to make much needed playground and accessibility upgrades. Providing the funds on a matching basis will maximize the benefits generated through the Social Housing Innovation Fund.

Subsequent reports will follow on the remaining initiatives proposed in the May 30, 2007 Community Services and Housing Committee report to Council. DOOR funding from the Province does not have prescribed deadlines for the use of these funds.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Social housing buildings are located in every municipality in the Region. Ensuring that children have safe places to play is integral to the well-being of any community. Furthermore, providing necessary accessibility modifications enables people to live and participate in their communities of choice.

7. CONCLUSION

Social housing providers have limited resources with which to meet changing regulatory requirements and tenant needs. By providing funding from a Social Housing Innovation Fund on a cost-matching basis, the Region can help housing providers ensure that children in their communities have safe places to play and that people with disabilities have the accessibility modifications they need.

For more information on this report, contact Sylvia Patterson, Director, Housing Services Branch in the Community and Health Services Department.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.