

Ottawa restarts housing programs

The federal Liberal government has jumped back into funding affordable housing programs, including ones to promote rental housing construction and bolster rent supplements.

It unveiled a suite of small but targeted programs Tuesday aimed at helping seniors, low-income renters, and social housing providers struggling to make necessary renovations.

At \$2.3 billion over two years, the money isn't anywhere enough to make a significant dent in the housing affordability problems of places like Vancouver. But it is a welcome re-entry by the federal government into the housing community, according to Thom Armstrong, executive director of the Cooperative Housing Federation of B.C.

"The message I am taking away is that we have a \$2.3-billion investment by the federal government that wasn't there yesterday or anywhere in the last 10 years," he said.

The funding is broken up over a number of programs in what appears to be an effort to please many with a bit for each. The lion's share, \$1.4 billion, is broken up into five groups: \$504 million to double affordable housing programs; \$200.7 million for improvements to seniors housing, \$573.9 million for social housing renovations, \$89.9 million for shelters for victims of violence, and \$111 million for homelessness programs. There's also \$30 million being "reallocated" for rent subsidies for low-income residents of social housing facilities whose long-term operating agreements are coming up for renewal.

The federal government is also putting in \$739 million for improving housing in First Nations, Inuit and northern communities. On the rental housing front, it is putting \$208 million into a new Affordable Rental Housing Innovation Fund. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is also looking at possibly supplying \$500 million a year in loans for five years to municipalities and housing developers that could result in 10,000 new rental units being built over five years.

Penny Gurstein, the head of the University of B.C.'s School of Community and Regional Planning, says the investments are merely modest ones that send a message of hope.

"It is all good. It is better than nothing but it doesn't address the need in places like Vancouver where there are huge waiting lists of people wanting to get into B.C. Housing units," she said. "It may be shoring up some housing that is in really bad shape, like existing social housing."

Vancouver's housing problems are the worst in the country, she said, but the Liberals also need to spread out the money across the country to places where existing housing is deteriorating.

Much of the money is contingent on cost-sharing by municipalities and provinces. Armstrong said that's what the Co-op Housing Federation and the B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association has advocated.

"What we've really been asking is for the federal government to come to the table in a way that sets the stage for the province to deliver rent supplements that could help low-income co-op members," Armstrong said. "They answered that by setting aside that \$30 million to continue assistance to those members whose agreements are expiring."

But Armstrong said a more important message is simply that the federal government is back in the housing business. The low-interest loans and affordable housing programs should be leveraged by the province and municipalities, he said.

"I think that is a very direct challenge to provinces and municipalities now to pony up," he said. "Let's lever the impact of this federal investment and make something truly dramatic. It is a very concentrated kickstart."