

**Florence Stratton****INTRODUCTION**

My name is Florence Stratton. I participate in the Making Peace Vigil. I am also a life-long Rider fan.

The City of Regina has its priorities upside down. As part of its Revitalization Initiative, it wants a brand new stadium with a total price tag of **\$675 million**. Of this amount, it would seem that at least \$400 million will be taxpayers' money.

Regina already has a perfectly serviceable football stadium. Why tear it down—especially after it has been refurbished to the tune of **\$14 million** for the 2013 Grey Cup?

Regina is in the midst of a housing crisis. It has the lowest rental vacancy rate in the country: 0.6%. Because of a lack of affordable rental housing, a growing number of Regina citizens are experiencing ever-increasing levels of misery and suffering. Yet City officials remain obsessed with a new football stadium. Affordable rental housing isn't even on City Hall's agenda.

In fact, there is no affordable housing of any sort in the Revitalization Initiative. What the plan calls for is "up to 700 new **affordable, market-rate** housing units." As everyone knows, the market-rate for housing in Regina is anything but affordable.

**WHAT CITY COUNCIL CAN DO**

Ask City Council to do something about Regina's affordable housing crisis, and the response is always "Housing is not a municipal responsibility." This is not a helpful reply. While City Council cannot solve all of Regina's housing problems, there are many things it can do:

**1. If City Council can spend \$400 million worth of public money on a new stadium, it can spend \$400 million on affordable housing.** How many affordable housing units could we get for one stadium? At a cost of \$150,000 per unit, \$400 million will get us **2,667** affordable housing units.

**2. Regina can adopt a Housing First plan,** as many other Canadian cities have done—including Saskatoon, Vancouver, and Edmonton. Housing First is an approach to homelessness that “says the first step in solving the problem is to find people permanent homes and give them the support they need to keep them” (*A Place To Call Home: Edmonton’s 10 Year Plan To End Homelessness* 8).

In 2011, in its second year of implementation, Edmonton’s Housing First plan secured 956 permanent homes for 1,352 people who had been homeless. In that same year, the number of Edmontonians staying in homeless shelters dropped by 23% (*A Place to Call Home: Edmonton’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness—update Year 2*).

Currently, homelessness in Regina is managed through a shelter system. In Regina, homeless shelter use rose by 44.5% between 2006 and 2010 (Hirsch Greenberg et al, *Homelessness in Regina: 2010 Report*, 9).

Shelters do not end homelessness. Moreover, the shelter system is extremely costly. Research cited in the Edmonton document shows that it costs two-to-three times more to respond to homelessness with emergency services, such as shelters and hospitals, than it does to provide a homeless person with appropriate housing and support (22).

How is the Edmonton plan funded? While the plan was instigated by the Edmonton Mayor and City Council, the Province is the primary funder. Why isn't the City of Regina seeking funding from the provincial government for a Housing First plan, rather than for a stadium?

**3. City Council can require developers to include a certain number of affordable housing units in their plans or to pay a fee into an affordable housing account.**

Here the City of Toronto provides a possible model. In 2009, Toronto updated its Development Charges Bylaw to place “more responsibility on developers” to contribute to affordable housing. Under this bylaw, “a greater portion of development charge revenues are dedicated to affordable housing.” (*Housing Opportunities Toronto: An Affordable Housing Action Plan 2010-2012*, 31)

**4. City Council can pass bylaws to protect rental housing.**

a) City Council is to be commended for having already passed one such bylaw, the condominium conversion bylaw prohibiting condo conversions when the city's vacancy rate is below 2%. This bylaw was approved at the January 2012 meeting of City Council.

b) At that same meeting, Council decided there were “no options available to prevent the demolition of the 46 unit apartment block at 1755 Hamilton Street.”

Of course City Council isn't powerless to stop apartment block demolitions. It can pass a bylaw prohibiting such demolitions until the supply and availability of rental housing returns to a healthy state

Since 2007, Toronto has had such a bylaw as part of its rental protection policies. Moreover, Toronto City Council will only issue a demolition permit if the owner agrees to replace the

units in the new development the demolition is making way for. The new units must be similar in size and rent to the original units.

**5. City Council can follow the lead of Saskatoon and establish a Land Bank Program.** I am

encouraged by the presence of another item on the agenda of tonight's meeting: the item concerning the City's acquisition of land from the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation.

Could this be the beginning of a City of Regina Land Bank?

Under its Land Bank Program, the City of Saskatoon puts revenue from the sale of City-owned land into the City's Affordable Housing Reserve.

If, indeed, the City of Regina is about to have its own land bank, then a commitment must be made to use all of the revenue to finance affordable housing projects. I am concerned about the frequent occurrence in the document of statements such as the following: The acquisition of this land is "also an opportunity to pursue an alternative revenue source for other City purposes" (2. The same idea is repeated twice on page 5 and twice again on page 6). I sincerely hope the intention is not to use this revenue for any purpose other than to fund affordable housing.

## **CONCLUSION**

Regina's economy is booming. A booming economy sounds like a very good thing until we ask the question: Boom for whom? Because of the boom, the city's population is growing, house prices have shot up, and rents have skyrocketed.

The result is that, while many Regina citizens are experiencing unprecedented prosperity, others are facing unparalleled misery and suffering because of a lack of affordable housing.

In 2007, at the beginning of the boom, City Council participated in the production of *The Regina Community Plan 2007: A Home For All*, a plan that had as one of its goals “To reduce immediate homelessness and to cut the estimated 3,700 households at greatest risk by 50% by 2011.” This plan must be gathering dust on some shelf.

More recently, at its December 2011 meeting, Council approved “the disbursement of \$100,000” for the development of another plan, this one called “a City of Regina Comprehensive Housing Strategy.” Seven months later, all we are hearing about is a new stadium.

I watched on TV as Premier Wall and Mayor Fiacco made the stadium announcement. I didn’t see much fan jubilation at Mosaic. While a few folks did stand up and cheer, most remained seated, looking glum and gloomy.

Media polls on the stadium don’t show much enthusiasm for the project either.

Why not let citizens decide whether we want a new stadium? A referendum could be held in the fall during the upcoming municipal election. According to the *Leader-Post*, “the last major taxpayer-funded overhaul of the stadium followed a 1977 plebiscite” (July 16 2012, 2). Was Regina a more democratic place in the 1970s?

Who is the stadium project good for? Not for Rider fans, who will now have to pay a \$12 facility fee for every ticket they purchase. Not for Regina citizens, who will spend years paying for the stadium through their taxes. Not for those who are struggling with housing. They don’t have enough money to pay the rent, much less buy a ticket to a Rider game. Who will the stadium project benefit? Only a few select developers, contractors, and realtors.

In 2010, over 3,400 people used one or more of the city's shelter services. Many others double-bunked, couch surfed, or lived in overcrowded unhealthy conditions (Hirsch Greenberg et al, *Homelessness in Regina: 2010 Report 7*).

I am deeply ashamed to be living in a city where, in the midst of so much affluence, there is so much unnecessary misery and suffering.

We don't need a stadium. We already have one. We are in desperate need of affordable housing.