IMPORTANT CONGREGATIONAL UPDATE: DECEMBER 20, 2020
VISION, GIFTS, MINISTRY & MISSION: YOUTH AND HOUSING

It has been a long time since there has been a congregational update provided on our Vision, Gifts, Ministry & Mission process begun back in 2018. A written update was last provided on February 2, 2020 and a verbal update was provided by Paul Howard at the annual Vestry meeting on February 23. At that time, St. John's was in conversation with Carebridge Community Support, Cahdco and the Town of Smiths Falls regarding the possibility of an affordable housing project on a vacant property in the town. Cahdco submitted a seed grant application to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation(CMHC) with which to conduct a feasibility study and develop a business plan and preliminary development designs, following Phase I ESA (Environmental Assessment Study) on the property. St. John's was represented on Smiths Falls' Housing Task Force, whose mandate it was to examine the current state of housing supply and make recommendations for strategies and opportunities to expand access for residents.
https://www.smithsfalls.ca/media/2019/10/HousingTask-Force-Terms-of-Reference-Final.pdf

For earlier congregational updates and timeline, visit St. John's website at www.stjohn-smithsfalls.com

What has happened since?
In March, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in swift and dramatic lockdowns and preliminary suspension of non-essential activity. Cahdco continued to work on the CMHC application and that was submitted. Ultimately, the plight of people precariously housed, homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, already a crisis, came more clearly visible when the March lockdown occurred. How do you shelter in place when you have no home? How do you access food when you live in accommodations that don't have adequate kitchen facilities, and day programs are cancelled? Where do you go if you are in an abusive relationship? How do go to the bathroom, deal with personal hygiene, do laundry, access e-mails or on-line government or medical applications when public washrooms, businesses and libraries are closed? When you have no safe place to go, it is hard to "stay home."

On October 27th, 2020, CMHC launched the Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI) – a $1 billion program to help address urgent housing needs of vulnerable Canadians, through the rapid construction of approximately 3,000 affordable housing units.

RHI provides capital contributions for eligible projects and could fund up to 100% of the project cost including land. No operational funding is provided as part of this initiative. All units must serve and be affordable to targeted vulnerable populations that are in severe housing need, at high risk of homelessness, or homeless. Affordability relates to a minimum 70% of median market rent, as defined by CMHC and must be maintained for a minimum of 20 years.

The program has two streams: The Major Cities Stream ($500M pre-assigned to 15 large municipalities), and the Projects Stream ($500M not pre-assigned, open to all of Canada). As Smiths Falls is not one of the municipalities identified in the Major Cities Stream, Carebridge would apply to the RHI through the Projects Stream, through CMHC's online portal system. More details about the RHI program can be found here: https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/nhs/rapid-housing-initiative

Applications are due by December 31, 2020, and allocations are targeted to be assigned by March 31, 2021. Completion of projects funded under the Projects Stream must be completed by March 31, 2022 (or 12 months from agreement). A key consideration for applications to the RHI, is whether a project can be completed within the tight timelines. To meet the timelines, only modular construction will be considered for new build projects. Additionally, projects that apply to the RHI Projects Stream will be scored, and the highest scoring projects have the best chance of being awarded funding. A number of factors can increase a project's scoring, including: appropriately zoned land, other contributions to the project (i.e. land, equity/donations, waived municipal fees, operational funding), projects targeting women and indigenous populations.

In mid-November, St. John's Affordable Housing Task Force reconvened with Carebridge, Cahdco and the Town of Smiths Falls in light of the RHI funding model. Existing properties for renovation were considered, as well as vacant land for modular building. The application deadline was one which normal development processes are accelerated and Carebridge moved swiftly.

Following its November 23rd meeting, St. John's Parish Council passed the following motion which was shared with Carebridge Community Support: **That Parish Council commit to: a) supporting Carebridge Community Support's application to CMHC for RHI funding to create permanent affordable housing units in Smiths Falls; and b) developing a partnership with Carebridge that will call upon St. John's to wisely and faithfully offer its gifts to address the affordable housing shortage in Smiths Falls.** There is no financial commitment attached to this motion. It signals a willingness by St. John's leadership to develop a partnership with Carebridge moving forward, in light of broad support expressed by the congregation in earlier congregational meetings.

On December 10th, members of St. John's Affordable Housing Task Force met with Carebridge CEO Robert Eves, Carebridge Community Engagement Director Jeff Mills, Carebridge Admin. Assistant Annie Wiggins, Cahdco (non-profit real estate development corporation), Project Manager Cynthia Jacques (who is submitting the RHI funding application on behalf of Carebridge). In order to strengthen the RHI application, a letter of support from St. John's was sought. At the December 14th Town Council meeting, Carebridge presented its RHI proposal and concept site plan for a modular build at **44 Chambers St**. and received enthusiastic support: https://www.hometownnews.ca/carebridge-community-support-smiths-falls-support/

Here is the current status:

- An intent to purchase the lot on Chambers St. has been filed by a third party;
- Peter Mansfield, an architect based in Almonte has drafted the concept site plan;
- Modular builder RCM in the Eastern Townships has been approached by the Saumure Group and is interested (no contract signed) https://www.rcmgroupe.com/en
- Interval House in Carleton Place is willing to fully support units assigned to them for housing women ready to move into permanent housing;
- Lanark County Mental Health is willing to partner to support those who will be housed who will be in need of additional support;
- The concept site plan shows 28 units in a modular build: combination of mostly 1-bedroom with some 2 and 3-bedroom units, community room, laundry facilities and outdoor amenity space. This plan would not require any zoning changes for the property;
- The town is fully on board with waivers on permit fees, property tax abatement and planning;
- Cahdco is submitting the RHI application to CMHC the week of December 21;
- Carebridge is committed to building affordable housing in Smiths Falls even if the RHI application isn't approved;
- A letter of support from St. John's was provided to Carebridge for inclusion in the application package. In this letter, the November Parish Council Motion was stated and it was further indicated that we are now engaging the congregation through our governance process in order to offer financial support to the project.

Next steps

This is simply a briefing note to bring the congregation up to date on what transpired in a very short period of time from mid-November until now, following a period of relative quiet on the file. It was important to get this update to you in order to inform you of the shift in the project plan, the acquisition of partnering agencies and to signal that a process to engage the congregation through information sessions, Q&A's with the intent to make a decision regarding financial commitment to this project will be put forward very soon. With COVID restrictions in place, this process will present some unique challenges but, as the angel said to Mary in the Gospel reading for Advent IV, "nothing is impossible with God." Other parishes in our diocese have been able to move forward on time sensitive initiatives designed to serve the broader community during the pandemic restrictions. We know it can be done. It is important for the congregation to have access to current and above all, accurate information, and to have a voice in determining our role in the affordable housing solution for our community.

<u>Watch this space for further updates and information.</u>

This is an exceptionally exciting opportunity for us to make a positive, lasting impact for the most vulnerable in our community. Safe, secure, affordable housing is the necessary platform upon which a person or a family can live a life of dignity and health.

If you have any questions, please speak with one of the members of Affordable Housing Task Force: Canon Catherine Ascah; Karen Bryan; Brenda Ferguson; Paul Howard; Bob Mulrooney; Tammy Mulrooney; Kathy Porter.