



Honourable Marc Garneau
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada
K1A 0A6

March 25, 2022

Dear Mr. Garneau

Thank you for receiving my contribution as part of your examination of how the housing shortage is affecting Indigenous Peoples across Canada. This is an important opportunity for our territory as we seek new ways to address our housing concerns and to continue developing collaborative relationships with our First Nations partners. However, I request that my remarks are received as representative of the Government of Yukon. As such, the comments and recommendations may not align with the view point of Indigenous Yukoners or Yukon's Self-governing First Nations. I encourage you and the Federal Government to continue Nation-to-Nation discussions with Yukon First Nations on housing initiatives.

It is clear that housing is a growing concern that spans the entire country, especially as the cost of housing development grows. All levels of government are expressing an interest in exploring further opportunities to support the improvement of housing options and standards. However, as already shared by our colleagues in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, northern regions face their own unique housing challenges.

YUKON CONTEXT

In our territory, a healthy housing system requires options that address land and shelter needs, and provides stability to both renters and owners at prices people can afford and in the size that meets their needs. However, the availability of land and the high cost of housing in the Yukon, particularly in Whitehorse, coupled with strong population growth continues to make market affordability for rental and purchase out of reach for some.

1. POPULATION AND COMMUNITIES

Our territory is comprised of 14 First Nations, 11 of which are Self Governing, as well as 14 municipalities that collectively cover 474,712.64 km. All Yukon communities are connected by the highway network, with the exception of our one fly-in, fly-out community of Old Crow. Even with this highway connection, the nearest community to the City of Whitehorse (CoW) is a 1-hour drive away, with most communities being a 2 to 6-hour drive.

Statistics Canada's 2021 census found Yukon's population to be 40,232, which represents a 12.1% population increase since the 2016 census and makes the Yukon the fastest growing province or territory anywhere in the country. Whitehorse continues to be our largest populated centre at 31,913 people, or 79.3% of the total population. The second largest municipality, Dawson City, saw a 14.7% population increase resting at 1,577 Yukoners.

We have yet to receive the 2021 census statistical breakdown of our population including that of our First Nations, Inuit and Metis population. However, the 2016 census showed that 23% of Yukoners identify as Indigenous.

2. AFFORDABILITY

We know that a variety of factors, including Covid-19, have increased affordability challenges in both the homeownership and rental markets across the Yukon. This fact is contributing to the pressures on Yukon Housing Corporation's community housing stock. We are experiencing the highest ever waitlist of 489 applicants in addition to the nearly 1,000 Yukoners already receiving some form of rent subsidy and/or supplement support as of March 2022.

Similar to the other two territories, we continue to look to Canada to support our community housing investment by utilizing available federal resources to appropriately meet our community housing needs. Amongst this work, I am pleased to share that an additional 74 more units will be on line by March 2023. We have made significant progress, but there is still a lack of affordable housing stock.

I also note that our ability to provide affordable housing options is directly correlated to the cost of materials and the necessary labour to develop the stock. This continual pressure was well described in 2019 by Chief Steve Smith of Champagne and Aishihik First Nations who was quoted in the Senate Special Committee on the Arctic-Northern Lights: Wake-Up Call for the Future of Canada¹. Chief Smith recognized that

Housing in the Yukon is always under pressure. We've seen immense growth similar to places like Vancouver, Toronto and other big urban centres. We have seen a significant rise in housing costs. We feel this pinch because we're trying to attract people to come here and work for us but we

¹ [Northern Lights: A wake-up call for the future of Canada \(sencanada.ca\)](https://www.sencanada.ca/2019/06/19/northern-lights-a-wake-up-call-for-the-future-of-canada/)

don't have the housing available...and we need to develop land (to build new homes) but the support to develop the land is five or six years down the road...

3. STOCK AND MATERIALS

Housing stakeholders have struggled to increase supply to meet the pace of demand. Yukon Bureau of Statistics estimates that the population in Whitehorse will have grown by between 6,000 to 8,400 by 2030. This means that an additional 270 and 370 new housing units per year are required with, ideally upwards of 400 new units per year being developed. In the last two years alone, municipalities across the territory have issued close to 1,300 permits for residential construction – significantly higher than the historic average. Arguably, the City of Whitehorse is making significant strides to support the necessary development, but this may still not meet the public expectation of affordability or demand.

A key challenge is the cost of construction materials. The Yukon Housing Corporation alone has experienced a 55-60% increase in construction costs over the past year as noted in recent tenders. This corresponds to Canada's Consumer Price Index (CPI) which rose to its highest level in 30 years in December 2021, at 4.8%. While CPI is being driven by rising food prices, the rising costs of residential building are a major contributor. In the first quarter of 2021, prices for residential building construction increased by 5.6%, led by softwood lumber prices (+11.9%) and veneer and plywood (+20.1%).^[2] Northern and remote communities are being hit especially hard by rising building costs, as they compound other challenges related to transportation, a short building season, operational needs (power, water, fuel) and availability of raw materials and skilled contractors.

4. VULNERABILITY

The pressures on the limited housing supply along with our growing population² has deepened housing affordability concerns in all segments of the housing market. It has also compromised access to housing for the most vulnerable Yukoner. Of the mentioned applicants waitlisted, 33% are homeless and 44% note an affordability challenge as of February 2022.

Allow me to further describe this situation for our more vulnerable Yukoners. In April of 2021, a Whitehorse Point in Time Count³ was held to determine the extent of homelessness over a 24 hour period. At least 151 people identified as experiencing homelessness with 43 absolutely homeless and 108 provisionally accommodated. Of this,

- 44% were female, 54% male, and 2% other gender;
- 85% of respondents identified as Indigenous;
- 67% were between 25-55;

^[2] <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210506/dq210506b-eng.htm>

² [population1_2021.pdf \(yukon.ca\)](#)

³ [2021_PiT_Count_Report_FINAL.pdf \(yapc.ca\)](#)

- 26% were older adults; and
- 7% youth

Of the four common reasons for housing loss, loss of income and unfit or unsafe housing were included. The top two barriers to finding housing included affordability and discrimination.

We continue to explore new ways to support our most vulnerable through initiatives that align with the National Housing Strategy, more specifically Reaching Home. This includes the implementation of a Coordinated Access System. This process is supporting Yukoners experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness to access community-level resources where trained workers use a common assessment tool to evaluate the housing need and prioritize that need with available housing focused interventions. The success of these initiatives can be attributed to our consistent and deliberate engagement across governments and community providers. Our territory is fairing well with our collaboration, which does speak to deliberate strategies⁴ and a deep willingness to work together.

5. YUKON INITIATIVES

Our territorial approach relies on partnerships with First Nations, municipalities, private sector, non-government organizations and others in our ongoing effort to offer safe, affordable and adequate housing options across the Yukon.

A few examples that highlight our efforts:

- Whitehorse Housing First*: a 16-unit supportive housing development operated by Connective and the Council of Yukon First Nations;
- Rapid Housing Initiative Round 1*: Yukon Housing Corporation was approved to build three triplexes in Mayo, Watson Lake, and Whitehorse which will contribute nine units towards supporting affordable community housing options for Yukoners.
- Boreal Commons*: an 87 unit affordable and rental housing development with private and multi-level government partnerships;
- Old Crow*: a partnership between Yukon government and Vuntut Gwitchin Government to develop a new health and wellness centre with a complementary 10-plex housing unit.
- Rapid Housing Initiative Round 2*: 55 units for the Safe at Home Society to support Yukoners in uncertain housing situations, experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or living in temporary shelters because of the pandemic.

⁴ [yhc-housing-action-plan-2015-2025.pdf \(yukon.ca\)](#); [Safe at Home: A Community-Based Action Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness \(yukon.ca\)](#)

However, we also know that our continued, collective efforts require quality data and information sharing so all partners are able to make evidence based decisions on what housing gaps are best addressed to support Yukoners.

6. INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND PARTNERSHIPS

It is only through efforts like these that the Yukon will see successful outcomes across the board. This will be partially measured by how we can engage all Yukon First Nation governments and our ability to collectively harness the various federal housing programs. It will also be essential to predicate this success on our collective understanding of the territorial needs and pressures.

Direct engagements are a critical pathway to foster a collective understanding. For example, in 2020 the Yukon Housing Corporation co-hosted a virtual First Nations housing workshop with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, and Indigenous Services Canada, on emerging housing needs and strengthened partnerships opportunities. The event provided a platform for information gathering, shared learning, and collective decision making. We need to keep the dialogue going.

I do not speak for Yukon First Nations on what they are experiencing in their respective communities. However, I am aware that Self-Governing Indigenous Governments, including those in the Yukon, have collectively identified housing repairs and/or construction of new houses on their lands as both a pressing need as well as an opportunity for economic stimulus. I encourage this nation-to-nation discussion between Yukon's First Nations and the federal government.

The Yukon Housing Corporation continues to work with individual First Nations on unique initiatives that support their housing needs. This is largely attributed to the federal Rapid Housing Initiative program and the Yukon government's Housing Initiative Fund. For example, we are anticipating that new housing projects for Champagne & Aishihik First Nations (20 units), Ta'an Kwäch'än Council (11 units) and Carcross Tagish First Nations (10 units) will benefit from these programs.

Finally, Yukon Housing Corporation's First Nations Energy Efficiency Program to all 14 Yukon First Nations offers support to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from First Nations housing. Since 2019, six Yukon First Nations have accessed the Low Carbon Economy Fund (LCEF).

SOLUTION

It is acknowledged by the Government of Yukon that partnership opportunities between all levels of government, non-profit organizations and the private sector are key to addressing Yukon's housing issues. This approach will create opportunities across the housing continuum. These

include increased housing supply, housing support for successful tenancies, affordable rental housing, and home ownership options.

The newly formed Supply and Confidence Agreement (SACA) identifies the following strategic solutions:

1. Implement a Homebuyer's Bill of Rights and tackling the financialization of the housing market by the end of 2023.
2. Extend the Rapid Housing Initiative for an additional year.
3. Re-focusing the Rental Construction Financing Initiative on affordable units by expanding the eligibility scope.
4. Move forward on launching a Housing Accelerator Fund which is intended to remove barriers and help municipalities build housing more quickly.
5. Include a \$500 one-time top-up to Canada Housing Benefit in 2022, which would be renewed in coming years if cost of living challenges remain.

In addition, I look forward to discussing the following Yukon specific solutions:

1. The federal government's plan to develop an Indigenous Urban, Rural, and Northern Housing Strategy is commendable. It is important that Northern and self-governing First Nations perspectives be acknowledged and integrated as this strategy develops.
2. Collecting, interpreting and providing access to housing data and research will provide more opportunities for a coordinated and collaborative approach to housing priorities. It represents a meaningful option for partnerships between all levels of government and the Yukon University to create and fund a Northern Housing Data & Research Centre. We believe this will support the development of evidence based housing solutions, initiatives and programs for Yukon and across the pan-northern community
3. There has been excellent uptake from Yukon households for the Canada Yukon Housing Benefit launched in November 2020 and we are eager to expand and increase this co-developed program to meet current demand. The flexibility for this program has been pivotal to its success and we hope this continues.
4. The current First Time Home Buyer Incentive (FTHBI) program is not sufficient to make a meaningful difference in the current Yukon market. We hope the program for our territory can be doubled to 10%.
5. Yukon Housing Corporation urges the Government of Canada to consider funding options that will help the territory to incentivize developers to build more rental housing.
 - a. Yukon is interested in introducing additional "Rapid Housing Initiatives" through an intake process based on Yukon specific criteria. These would include considerations for a short construction season, limited trades capacity, high construction and labour costs, target population restrictions not reflective of community needs as outlined in the recent Community Needs Assessments.

- b. Continue to support initiatives such as the Northern Carve Out for new, affordable housing.
- c. Continue to explore nation-to-nation opportunities on fiscal policy development initiatives such as the housing construction fiscal stimulus.
- 6. Timelines and costing for federal funding should continue to reflect short building season and comparatively higher cost of construction in the North.

Thank you for your support and interest in understanding and addressing the current acute housing shortage in the Yukon and the north. I do look forward to offering any additional information that may be helpful including the opportunity to speak with you in person.

Sincerely,



Ranj Pillai

Minister responsible for the Yukon Housing Corporation