

A Company Town Grows Up

How the community of Deep River is identifying—and adapting to—the changing needs of an aging population

The town of Deep River, Ontario, was founded over 70 years ago as a planned community for employees of the nearby Atomic Energy Canada Limited research facility. When it was first established, the population was composed almost entirely of young (and usually unattached) research scientists, teachers, health care providers and other professionals.

Today, this former “company town” has evolved into a diverse community of more than 4,000 residents, with a rich and vibrant culture, history and natural beauty. Many of the town’s residents are now seniors, who want to stay in the homes and community they love as they grow older. But most of the town’s housing stock still consists of large, single-family homes, which simply weren’t designed to accommodate the needs of older residents.

In 2015, Deep River created a Citizen Housing Advisory Committee to help identify the changing needs and preferences of its aging population—and come up with some creative ways to meet those needs head-on.

Deep River’s Housing Strategy: A Brief Timeline

“In the 50s, we had four elementary schools and a high school,” says Monica Mulvihill, Chair of the Deep River Housing Advisory Committee. “One seldom saw anyone with grey hair, and when they did, it meant someone’s grandparent had come to visit. Now, we have just one school for the whole town, and more than 23% of our population are seniors.”

While the aging of Deep River had been going on for some time, the lack of suitable seniors housing didn’t become a prominent issue until the 2014 municipal election. As Mayor Joan Lougheed explains: “During the election, it was clear that housing was a top priority for many of our residents.”



Photo: Deep River

Quick Facts

- Deep River was established in 1945 to accommodate employees of the Chalk River Nuclear Laboratories.
- In the 1950s, almost none of the town’s residents were over the age of 65. Today, more than 23% of Deep River’s population are seniors.
- Many of those seniors want to stay in their homes and community as they grow older. But the large, single-family homes that make up much of Deep River’s housing stock weren’t built to meet the needs of an aging population.
- Deep River also has one of the widest disparities in income in the province. While some families have incomes that are well above the national average, others survive on as little as a \$1,000 a month. As a result, the town has a three-year waiting list for rent-geared-to-income housing.

Source: Deep River Housing Advisory Committee

“There were a variety of issues they wanted us to look at, from zero per cent vacancy rates to the need for more housing choices. Since almost a quarter of our population are seniors, we decided to start there.”

As soon as the new Council was sworn in, it established the Housing Advisory Committee to come up with a series of recommendations. One of the Committee’s first orders of business was to carry out a comprehensive Housing Survey of seniors throughout the community, to be sure any new policies or procedures would accurately represent their needs, wants and values.

A Comprehensive Survey of Seniors Across the Community

The survey was drawn from a variety of sources and fine-tuned based on feedback from local experts, developers and other stakeholders. The 34 questions covered everything from residents’ satisfaction with their current homes, to their preferences for future housing options. The survey was then distributed to residents over the age of 60 across Deep River and the surrounding municipalities using paper copies with online access available.

“Part of our mandate was to keep the cost to taxpayers to a minimum,” Mulvihill says. “So rather than distributing the survey by mail, we used a network of distribution points and drop-off boxes in central locations all over town, including Town Hall, the library, several places of worship and the Long-Term Care Centre. Our goal was to make it as easy as possible for seniors to get a survey, fill it out, and return it.”

Survey Objectives

1. To assess the types and extent of supportive services needed by seniors.
2. To identify current housing needs and preferences.
3. To predict the type and extent of housing needs in the future.
4. To assess the financial and other support in the community for the development and operation of new housing.

The *Deep River Seniors Friendship Club* helped spread the word among the town’s older adults. In addition, the Housing Committee partnered with the local newspaper, the *North Renfrew Times*, to publish a series of articles featuring other communities that had adopted innovative approaches to seniors’ housing.

“When most of us think of seniors’ housing, we think of large-scale, multi-unit retirement residences that offer a range of services, but which can be unaffordable for many seniors,” Mulvihill says. “In fact, there are many options beyond those big retirement homes. Many communities, some smaller than Deep River, have successfully built and operated seniors’ housing that is appropriate to their population.”

The Results: Changing Needs for a Changing Population

Despite having a budget of just over \$700, the Deep River survey received almost unanimously positive feedback, and achieved an impressive 30% response rate. The results were then grouped into several key topics, such as:

- **Aging in Place:** many older respondents expressed a desire to stay in their current homes for as long as possible.
- **New Housing Options:** while most seniors preferred to stay in their homes, many pointed to a need for more affordable and supportive housing options.
- **Desired Features:** residents wanted housing with age-friendly adaptations like indoor parking and single-level living.
- **Rentals and Condos:** many participants expressed a preference for a wide range of rental apartments and condominiums, to meet a variety of income levels.

Many of those who took part in the survey also highlighted ways in which housing could become part of a larger effort to address issues related to aging and accessibility, such as expanding their health care options or connecting housing investment to the town’s overall economy.



Next Steps: A Forum on Housing

In May 2016, the Committee followed up on the success of the survey by joining with the Deep River Accessibility Advisory Committee to host a Housing Forum for developers, housing professionals and residents. More than 70 participants attended the full-day event—so many that the cut-off for the venue was exceeded, and a waiting list had to be created.

Moving forward, the town's Advisory Committees on Housing, Accessibility and Economic Development are already working together to address the issues, challenges and opportunities that were identified in the survey. There are also plans underway to create a Deep River Housing Corporation to work with potential developers, and help pave the way towards building more new homes for area seniors.

“Our work won't be complete until we have a varied housing stock that not only allows our seniors to age in this community, but which also attracts young families,” Mulvihill says. “We are a unique community, with a great deal to offer people at every stage of their lives. The Housing Survey and Forum were great first steps in creating a happier, healthier and more diverse community for everyone.”

According to Mayor Lougheed, one of the best results to come from the survey was that it allowed the voices of the town's residents to be heard loud and clear.

“People were able to tell us in their own words what they want or need when it comes to their homes, and the future of housing in Deep River,” she explains. “Now, the local community is becoming more involved. We're exploring new ideas. And investors have started taking note of the opportunities we have to offer.”

“There's still a lot more to be done. But watching people work together to help the whole community move forward has been a very rewarding experience for all of us.”

To find out more about how Deep River is working to meet the changing needs of its resident, visit the Housing Advisory Committee website at www.deepriver.ca/projects/housing-advisory-committee/.



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