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VICTORIA'S BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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COMMUNITY



CRISIS

PEOPLE WHO WANT TO **WORK** HERE
NEED TO **LIVE** HERE



When climbers scale an Everest, they plant a flag at the summit to say "we got here." Belinda Jickling planted a basketball hoop in her driveway — it was the first thing the single mom did when she moved into her new home in Langford. It was more than a gesture to attract neighbourhood kids so her young son would have some playmates. The hoop was like a symbol for the 44-year-old. She had achieved what had long been impossible. Jickling had bought a house. A brand new house at the entrance to the Bear Mountain development for only \$170,000.

She couldn't have done it without the city of Langford's commitment to building low-cost housing — attainable, achievable, single-family units well below market price. It's another coup for the town that continues to outpace the region's other municipalities with innovative, socially forward thinking, like building new housing for working families who can't afford the average house price of well over half a million dollars.

While Greater Victoria muddles over how to house the homeless, there's another, much larger group of citizens who face a similar quandary. A lack of affordable shelter — be it rental or for purchase — is hurting businesses that are finding it increasingly difficult to lure employees to Victoria from other parts of the

country. Even universities and colleges, paying handsome salaries, are watching academics turn down job offers because they don't want to be mortgaged to the hilt. A recent study by UBC professor Jim Frankish pointed out that only 3.5 per cent of the almost 12,000 employees in Canada's third-largest university could afford to purchase property in the immediate vicinity of the school. The same metrics are applicable here surrounding UVic in areas like Ten Mile Point and Oak Bay.

And for non-professionals, those who make ends meet on \$12-an-hour jobs in tourism, it's dire. Victoria's rental vacancy rate continues to slouch at below one per cent, the lowest in Canada. Finding a space can be punishing. Paying close to \$1,000 for a one-bedroom suite or up to \$2,000 for two bedrooms is frightening.

Jim Bennett doesn't like to sound alarm bells, but the chair of the CRD's Housing Action Team is fully aware that people who want to work here need to live here. "We have a community crisis." Urgently needed is "workforce housing," affordable housing to accommodate people who provide essential community services, such as construction workers, police officers, teachers, nurses, retail clerks, and hotel and restaurant staff.

"I'd say it's the number one solvable social challenge that we have in Victoria," says Budd

Hall, director of UVic's Office of Community-Based Research. "What's alarming is, each year, we're producing more people who have trouble finding a place to live."

Affordable housing has been identified as the top priority of Victoria businesses and residents for several years as evidenced in the annual citizens surveys, but we still lack an affordable housing strategy with clear targets.

Dave Eddy, Vancouver-based president of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, suggests big employers need to work with non-profits to lobby senior government to pony up some cash to kick-start projects. "If we can leverage money from businesses to build some of this housing, then we can probably leverage money from BC Housing to build affordable housing."

But senior government hasn't had much interest in housing for decades. The province hasn't paid for bricks and mortar housing since 2001. In 1972, Ottawa dramatically changed tax policies pertaining to the rental industry resulting in a disincentive to build apartments. Developers make much more money building non-rental condos. We're in crisis because there hasn't been significant private-sector construction of rental units in the region in 30 years and yet condo towers proliferate. Subdivisions have sprawled out to Colwood and Sooke where density is defined



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