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Is municipal planning responsive to urban Indigenous housing needs? An examination of housing plans and policies in British Columbia

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a study conducted in partnership with the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) and explores how municipalities in British Columbia, Canada are responding to Indigenous housing needs through Official Community Plans (OCP) and housing strategies. Using a content analysis of OCPs and housing strategies, survey responses and semi-structured interviews with municipal planners in British Columbia, this research aims to better understand the barriers municipalities perceive they face in addressing urban Indigenous housing needs. This discussion offers key considerations for municipal planners for identifying and responding to urban Indigenous housing needs in municipal level housing policies. To better address urban Indigenous housing needs, municipal housing planners must first identify Indigenous housing needs as distinct needs in urban settings. Further, municipal policies and programs aiming to respond to Indigenous housing needs must be developed through Indigenous-led and Indigenous-informed processes in order to uphold Indigenous rights. By addressing urban Indigenous housing needs, municipalities can demonstrate their commitment to action on reconciliation efforts in Canada.

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude menée en partenariat avec 'l'Aboriginal Housing Management Association' (AHMA) et explore la manière dont les municipalités de la Colombie-Britannique, au Canada, répondent aux besoins de logement des Autochtones par le biais de plans communautaires officiels (OCP) et de stratégies de logement. À l'aide d'une analyse du contenu des PCO et des stratégies de logement, des réponses à un sondage et d'entrevues semi-structurées avec des planificateurs municipaux de la Colombie-Britannique, cette recherche vise à mieux comprendre les obstacles que les municipalités perçoivent auxquels elles sont confrontées pour répondre aux besoins de logement des Autochtones urbains. Cette discussion propose des considérations clés aux planificateurs municipaux pour identifier et répondre aux besoins en matière de logement des Autochtones urbains dans les politiques de logement au niveau municipal. Pour mieux répondre les besoins en matière de logement des Autochtones en milieu urbain, les planificateurs municipaux du logement doivent d'abord identifier les besoins en matière de logement des Autochtones comme des besoins distincts en milieu urbain. De plus, les politiques et programmes municipaux visant à répondre aux besoins de logement des Autochtones doivent être élaborés par le biais de processus

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dirigés et informés par les Autochtones afin de faire respecter les droits des Autochtones. En répondant aux besoins de logement des Autochtones en milieu urbain, les municipalités peuvent démontrer leur engagement à agir dans le cadre des efforts de réconciliation au Canada.

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Introduction

This article presents findings from a study conducted in partnership with the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA)¹ in British Columbia (BC), Canada, and aims to shed light on whether and how urban Indigenous housing needs are identified and addressed in urban areas through Official Community Plans (OCPs) and housing strategies. While the housing needs of urban Indigenous peoples in municipalities across Canada are well understood by urban Indigenous organizations, Indigenous peoples living in urban areas are left out of federal, provincial, and municipal housing policy (Aboriginal Housing Management Association 2022). Most often Indigenous housing ‘needs’ are correctly understood and experienced as a housing crisis on reserves (Monk 2013; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada 2017). A growing body of research also focuses on the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness or precarious housing (Anderson and Collins 2014; Belanger 2013; Leach 2010; Patrick 2013; Peters and Christensen 2016; Peters 2012). However, this framing leaves a gap in the understanding of and response to the housing best suited for individuals and families who identify as Indigenous (First Nation, Metis, or Inuit) and live within a municipality’s jurisdictional boundary (rather than “on reserve”).² In British Columbia (BC), 78% of Indigenous peoples reside in urban and off-reserve areas (Government of British Columbia, 2023). As the number of Indigenous peoples living in urban areas is increasing in the midst of a country-wide housing affordability crisis, a robust understanding of urban Indigenous housing needs, and how these needs are (or are not) being addressed at the local level, is imperative.³

While large scale housing policies and programs across Canada remain in the provincial and federal purview, local governments (e.g. municipalities) are well positioned to support the development of Indigenous-specific housing in urban spaces. Municipalities in BC ideally know the local and specific context, considerations, and goals of their communities and are responsible for planning decisions pertinent to housing (such as zoning, permits, and bylaws). In 2019, British Columbia mandated municipalities to produce housing needs reports by April 2022, and every five years after. These housing needs reports are meant to identify housing needs that will then inform Official Community Plans (OCPs) and housing strategies. Official Community Plans and housing strategies are relevant to urban Indigenous housing because these documents provide direction and outline requirements for municipal planning staff and the development community, communicate the community’s vision, needs, and priorities, and inform council decision-making. In theory, the housing needs reports should and will contribute to an improved knowledge base about Indigenous housing needs.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of the relationship between municipalities and urban Indigenous communities in Canada and how the field of planning can both hinder and support municipal responses to urban Indigenous housing needs. We then set the context for urban Indigenous housing in British Columbia and discuss the relevance and potential of OCPs and housing strategies in addressing urban Indigenous housing needs. We then explain our methods and highlight four key findings pertaining to the lack of consideration of Indigenous housing needs in municipal planning processes. Overall, this paper aims to provide key considerations for planners working on municipal housing policy.

Municipal-Indigenous relations and urban planning

Indigenous peoples in Canada hold inherent and collective rights because Indigenous societies existed on the lands and waters now known as Canada long before the arrival of settlers. This means Canadian governments, including local governments, must address the unique needs of remote and rural Indigenous communities, as well as urban Indigenous peoples (Horn 2021; Anderson and Flynn 2020; Tomiak et al 2019). While Canadian municipalities have responsibilities to uphold Indigenous rights, most municipalities continue to struggle to work with Indigenous peoples in many areas of policy (*Heritz 2018; Tembo 2018; Asher 2023*), including housing (*Dorries 2020; Pysklywec*

et al. 2022). Municipalities cannot continue to ignore the ‘duty to consult’⁴ as it is predicted to expand in scope to include municipalities (Hoehn and Steven 2018; Anderson and Flynn 2020; Pysklywec et al. 2022). Further, municipalities have made significant commitments to Indigenous peoples by responding to the Truth and Reconciliation of Canada’s 94 Calls to Action and some municipalities are now adopting strategies to acknowledge the colonial effects that have led to the marginalization of urban Indigenous peoples (Asher 2023; Tembo 2018), including strategies to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)⁵ (Saul 2022). Concerningly, a recent study of municipal-Indigenous collaboration in climate planning suggests reconciliation is not a motivating factor for municipalities and regions to initiate relationships with Indigenous peoples (Asher 2023). At the same time, Indigenous peoples rightfully claim urban spaces as their home (Peters and Anderson 2013; Dorries 2019) and expect to play a meaningful role in the planning and programming in their cities (Nejad et al 2019; Tomiak et al 2019). Indigenous peoples have responded to the dominant forms of urban policy and planning by enacting their own planning practices that remain accountable to Indigenous communities and not to settler structures (Jojola 2013, Harjo 2019, Matunga 2013).

Through processes of settler colonialism—perpetuated by western planning practices—Indigenous peoples continue to be dispossessed from their lands and waterways, including traditional territories that have been transformed into urban areas over time (Anderson and Flynn 2020). Municipal planning is an area where key responsibilities to Indigenous peoples are manifested through day to day actions, interactions and decision-making. However, the field of planning has a complicated and evolving relationship with Indigenous peoples in Canada, in part because Indigenous peoples and their authority have been largely kept out of cities (Porter and Barry 2016; Barry and Thompson-Fawcett 2020). Where Indigenous authority is recognized in urban contexts, it is often confined to specific topics such as archeology or heritage (Porter and Barry 2015), or models of Indigenous representation are frequently displaced by policies of service delivery for urban Indigenous populations (Heritz 2018). As described by Stanger Ross (2008), “municipal colonialism” is the implementation of city-planning processes purposely designed to manage Indigenous peoples in urban settings. Its effect has been to deny Indigenous social, economic and political claims to the city (Belanger et al 2019). Inevitably the assumptions built into municipal colonialism have influenced present day housing policies and programs, and in turn, continue to disproportionately and negatively affect urban Indigenous peoples. Another recent study suggests municipal planners have been (and continue to be) unaware or uninterested in local Indigenous communities or unsure of how to build a relationship with Indigenous peoples living within municipal boundaries and/or adjacent areas (Pysklywec et al. 2022). As a start to repair the harm of western planning practices, municipal planners can and must play a robust role in advancing Indigenous-specific housing for urban Indigenous peoples and communities. Housing is ripe with opportunities for municipalities to uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples and address reconciliation commitments specifically through urban planning policy.

Urban Indigenous housing policy

Support to adequately address urban Indigenous housing needs is currently lacking from all levels of Canadian governments. Due to systemic discrimination in laws and policies, resource allocation, and racism, Indigenous peoples in Canada are the most likely to live in poor housing conditions (OHCHR 2009) and experience homelessness (Belanger et al 2019). At the same time, calls for adequate housing for Indigenous peoples living both on and off reserve are not new. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) report states adequate housing for Indigenous peoples necessitates access to affordable and culturally appropriate housing that is intentionally developed to meet their needs. More recent calls from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Final Report (2019, 182) require all levels of Canadian governments to “immediately commence the construction of new housing and the provision of repair for existing housing to meet the housing needs of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.” Importantly, addressing urban Indigenous housing needs is more than just adding affordable low-barrier housing to the housing stock (Aboriginal Housing Management Association 2022); it is related to the cultural suitability of housing (Fineblit 2015).

In January 2022, AHMA⁶ released the *British Columbia Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy* (referred to as “the Strategy” hereafter) as a direct response to the failure of the federal government and the 2017 National Housing Strategy (NHS) to address the housing rights violations experienced by Indigenous people residing in rural, urban, and northern communities in British Columbia. In this report AHMA see regional districts and municipalities playing an ongoing role in implementing the Strategy through actions like:

“contributing to and/or supporting land allocations for new housing development; participating in potential partnerships with private sector developers through supports such as tax considerations and other incentives, and; providing input into issues related to zoning and bylaws that may impact the development of new housing structures” (Aboriginal Housing Management Association 2022, 42).

In BC, housing is managed by the British Columbia Housing Management Commission, also known as BC Housing. While most municipalities in BC do not have the human and financial capacity to lead the development of housing (i.e. run their own housing departments or employ dedicated housing planners) they have the ability to significantly impact housing development through policy, regulations, and plans such as Official Community Plans (OCPs) and housing strategies. In 2018, the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) put forward a province-wide housing strategy aimed at establishing local governments’ role in housing policy and development, recommending that “local government collaboration with First Nations and other Indigenous organizations represent an important opportunity for addressing issues of joint interest, including addressing housing needs faced by rapidly growing urban Aboriginal populations throughout B.C” (Union of British Columbia Municipalities, 2018, 9). OCPs and housing strategies that accurately represent and advocate for urban Indigenous housing are clear ways for municipal planners to contribute to ensuring urban Indigenous housing needs are at least on the agenda, let alone addressed, and to support the inherent and human rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Official Community Plans (OCPs) and housing strategies in British Columbia

Local governments in BC, including municipalities and regional districts, operate within the framework of delegated authority from the Province of British Columbia under the *Community Charter Act*, 2003 and the *Local Government Act*, 2015. The *Local Government Act* outlines municipalities’ and regional districts’ planning obligations and enables municipalities to create Regional Growth Strategies (RGSs) and OCPs through bylaw legislation without significant intervention from the BC government. RGSs and OCPs are documents through which municipalities and regional districts formally articulate their long-term vision for community development, and they contain policies that guide planning decisions and legislation adoption. Often these documents are required to include policies for affordable housing, rental housing, and special needs housing (Bish and Clemens 2008).

There are 162 municipalities and 27 Regional Districts in BC, most of which have an OCP, RGS, or both (Government of British Columbia 2020). Many local governments have also created separate housing strategies, which supplement OCP and RGS policies. Municipal housing strategies outline shorter, five to ten-year policies and initiatives that respond to the current housing need in the community. Given the diversity of housing issues and community circumstances, there is not a singular housing strategy template, however most include actions to support social housing, targets for creating or preserving affordable housing to meet future demand, and affordable market housing policies (Government of British Columbia 2018). In 2019, British Columbia mandated municipalities to produce Housing Needs Reports by April 2022, and every five years after. These housing needs reports are meant to identify housing needs that will then inform Official Community Plans (OCPs) and housing strategies. In theory the Housing Needs Reports should and will contribute to an improved knowledge base about Indigenous housing needs, though whether this happens depends on a range of factors, as this research will show. Municipalities are not currently required to include Indigenous-specific data in their housing needs reports despite the significant portion of Indigenous people who reside in urban areas. The analysis below shows the extent to which urban Indigenous housing content is articulated in existing OCPs and housing strategies, followed by an explanation of four key findings.

Methods

This study used a document content analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews to better understand how BC municipalities address urban Indigenous housing needs in their Official Community Plans and housing strategies.⁷ A content analysis utilizes coding frameworks developed from the literature and adjusts the codes based on the textual data in an interactive process (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This study used a study sample of 37 small (under 10,000), medium (10,000–50,000), and large (50,000 +) regionally dispersed municipalities across BC that had adopted an OCP or housing strategy since January 1st, 2015.⁸ First, a content analysis was conducted on 39 OCPs and housing strategies from the 37 sample municipalities.⁹ Second, 24 survey responses and interview data from eight

Table 1

Data Sources by type and population

Population	Documents			Surveys			Interviews		
	OCP	HS	Total	OCP	HS	Total	OCP	HS	Total
0 - 10,000	8	2	10	5	1	6	3	0	3
10 - 50,000	14	1	15	9	1	10	1	1	2
50,000+	4	10	14	2	6	8	6	2	8
Total	26	13	39	16	8	24	6	2	8

semi-structured interviews with municipal planning staff were analyzed to better understand the considerations and processes undertaken to create a municipality's OCP or housing strategy. See Table 1 above for a breakdown of the data sources by type and municipal population.

Using NVivo, the text of each Official Community Plan and housing strategy was scanned for statements containing key terms relevant to municipal-Indigenous relations (e.g. reconciliation, Indigenous, First Nation) and housing.¹⁰ Following previous analyses of OCPs in Canada (Youmans 2014; Baynham and Stevens 2014), the resulting content of this scan was categorized as fact base, goals, policies or implementation, and then coded. Codes were adjusted and added to an initial coding framework that was developed from a literature review of urban Indigenous housing experiences (e.g. overrepresentation, effects of colonialism, culturally appropriate). For each code, the number of documents and the number of references were recorded across all sample documents. Using a manifest content analysis (Cope 2010) key themes related to how urban Indigenous housing needs are (or are not) addressed in OCPs and housing strategies were identified based on the codes with the highest and lowest occurrence in each category. To better understand the themes revealed through the content analysis, municipal planning staff from the sample municipalities who had in-depth knowledge of the processes undertaken to create their municipality's OCP or Housing Strategy were recruited to participate in a short online survey (n=24). The survey results were anonymized and combined, and analyzed to derive summary statistics. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 8 of the survey respondents. Interviews were conducted over the phone and ranged from 24–57 minutes in length. Interviews were transcribed, grouped by question and analyzed for recurring themes using an interpretive process. The themes revealed from the interview data, combined with the survey results, provided insights into municipal perspectives and approaches regarding acknowledgement and inclusion of urban Indigenous housing needs in OCPs and Housing Strategies. It is these findings we turn to next.

Current municipal responses to Indigenous housing needs

Overall, this study's findings show BC municipalities are failing to address urban Indigenous housing needs in any significant way. Put differently, BC municipalities have a major opportunity to fulfill their obligations to Indigenous peoples living in urban areas by advancing tangible housing outcomes in their mandated Official Community Plans, in housing specific strategies and in housing needs reports. In this section we discuss four main findings: 1) too many municipalities do not recognize urban Indigenous housing as a phenomenon and/or a distinct need, 2) in general, municipal planners perceive many barriers to supporting urban Indigenous housing, 3) a handful of municipalities are progressing initiatives to support Indigenous-led housing in urban areas, 4) OPC's remain an effective tool (among many) for addressing urban Indigenous housing needs.

Urban Indigenous peoples have unique housing needs

Explicit responses to urban Indigenous housing needs rely on an awareness that the housing needs of Indigenous peoples living in municipalities are unique and require specific attention and resources from municipal planners and policy makers. The content analysis of 39 OCPs and housing strategies adopted after 2015 from municipalities across BC confirms that consideration of urban Indigenous housing needs is not a wide-spread priority among municipali

ties in BC. For instance, 23 out of 39 (59%) documents analyzed include a statement acknowledging the traditional territory on which the municipality operates. Rooted in this acknowledgement, the most common goal, objective, or policy with regards to Indigenous peoples in OCPs and housing strategies is to work in relationship with local First Nations or Indigenous representatives. For example, the City of Fort St. John has the goal “to have respectful, growing and mutually prosperous relationships with our First Nations and Métis governments and Indigenous neighbours” (Fort St. John 2017, 37). Six out of the 39 (15%) municipalities communicate intent to recognize and uphold Indigenous rights, including Aboriginal rights, Treaty rights, and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), through statements such as:

“Recognize the importance of meaningful reconciliation and explore opportunities to apply relevant calls to action detailed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s final report and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples *at the local level*” (Town of Creston 2017, 99, authors’ emphasis).

Ten out of 39 (26%) of OCPs and housing strategies recognize a portion of the municipal population is Indigenous, usually described as a percentage of the population. Eighteen percent of municipalities identified Indigenous peoples among marginalized or disadvantaged groups such as seniors, lone-parent households, or persons with disabilities. A smaller subset of municipalities also recognized Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in populations experiencing precarious housing or homelessness. However, only three out of the 39 documents (8%) directly reference the historic and ongoing impacts of colonialism, which is a significant root cause of many issues urban Indigenous people experience (Patrick 2014; Weasel Head 2011; Anderson and Collins 2014).

While twelve of the 24 municipal survey participants (50%) indicated it is necessary to identify urban Indigenous housing needs, uncertainty remains about whether those needs should be explicitly considered in the development of municipal housing policies, strategies and plans. Concerningly, only 43% of municipalities surveyed in our study (10 out of 23)¹¹ had or intended to distinguish urban Indigenous housing needs in their most recent or upcoming housing needs report. Only nine out of the 24 survey respondents (38%) indicated Indigenous housing needs were considered in the creation of their latest OCP or housing strategy. One survey respondent did share,

“the urban Indigenous population has some needs that are distinct from the general population. This includes the need for culturally appropriate housing, but there are also some demographic factors that are unique (younger population, higher proportion of youth in care, etc)” (P10).

While this sentiment demonstrates some awareness, the overall failure to recognize urban Indigenous housing in Official Community Plans—let alone policies specific to housing—is staggering. One could argue this lack of recognition reinforces the myth that Indigenous peoples only live in remote and rural communities; that the city is not for *Indigenous peoples*. *Several research studies, statistics, and lived experiences by over half of the Indigenous population in Canada tell important stories and provide strong evidence to the contrary (Peters and Anderson 2013; Nejad et al 2019). For almost all municipalities in this study—even those actively working toward better relationships with local First Nations governments—municipal planners perceive they face several challenges to address the housing needs of urban Indigenous peoples in municipal policies such as OCPs and housing needs reports. It is these perceived barriers we turn to next.*

Perceived barriers to addressing urban Indigenous housing needs in OCPs and housing strategies

Perhaps the most illuminating findings are the insights from municipal planners surveyed and interviewed about the barriers they perceive exist to 1) identifying Indigenous-specific housing needs, and 2) concretely addressing these needs in Official Community Plans and housing strategies. Table 2 outlines factors inhibiting the consideration of urban Indigenous housing needs when developing housing plans and policies from the perspective of some municipal planners in BC.

Interview participants also shed light on factors contributing to why a municipality may find it difficult to include Indigenous-specific housing needs in Official Community Plans and housing strategies, even when the needs are identified. These factors include: 1) the document is high-level or does not identify specific populations (implicitly meaning urban Indigenous housing needs should be captured within broader community housing needs), 2) there are no housing needs within the urban Indigenous community to address, 3) uncertainty if urban Indigenous housing

Table 2

Factors inhibiting the consideration of urban Indigenous housing needs

Barriers to identifying Indigenous-specific housing needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing needs are identified by housing type or household income rather than demographics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty whether needs are unique or could be covered in responses for the general population
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of direction from the community (local First Nations, urban Indigenous, or non-Indigenous) to identify urban Indigenous housing needs (community guides process)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of direction from Council to identify urban Indigenous housing needs (i.e. council guides process)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty of the municipality's role or jurisdiction to engage on Indigenous issues, or take action to address Indigenous housing needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of available Indigenous-specific housing data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited resources (time, staff capacity, financial)

should be something regulated or incentivized, and 4) uncertainty with appropriate level of detail to include. An interview participant stated,

“When we look at housing needs we evaluate based on demographics but not race or ethnicity. We look at global needs rather than the needs of subgroups. Given the size of our community sub classifying/ categorizing is likely not an effective use of time and resources” (P12).

Several of the barriers listed above are disturbing and will be discussed in more detail below. An important barrier to draw attention to is the lack of Indigenous-specific housing data. Planners rely on census, homeless counts, and housing stock data as well as information from non-municipal consultation or research completed by provincial or regional governments, or academic sources. Information regarding housing at the regional level is particularly useful for smaller municipalities that respond to housing circumstances through coordinated regional efforts. Importantly, Indigenous-specific data within each of these sources is essential. An interview participant reflected that “knowing the stats and data ... that’s one thing that’s really helped us, knowing what’s your urban Indigenous population, what are the needs, what is the data saying” (P10). Without access to disaggregated data, municipalities’ ability to understand the experiences of distinct populations is limited. This quote demonstrates at least one BC municipality involved in this study has and/or is progressing toward working with local Indigenous housing organizations to identify Indigenous-specific housing needs and is attempting to address these needs in municipal housing policies. We now turn to findings illuminating the enabling conditions for municipalities to identify urban Indigenous housing needs and begin to address them in housing related policies and plans.

Enabling conditions for identifying Indigenous-specific housing needs

On the positive, there are examples of large and small municipalities across BC considering and identifying urban Indigenous housing needs in the development process of Official Community Plans and housing strategies. Insights from the survey data and interviews revealed factors that have motivated municipalities to identify urban Indigenous housing needs and to include content regarding Indigenous housing in OCPs and/or housing strategies, including:

- Urban Indigenous people are often at a disadvantage for access to information and opportunities for homeownership

- Racism and discrimination are ongoing barriers for urban Indigenous renters
- Homelessness is disproportionately affecting Indigenous people
- There are different funding models and streams available to support urban Indigenous populations
- There are specific federal and provincial relationships and community partnerships with Indigenous leadership
- There are specific cultural protocols, culturally appropriate housing, and culturally different views of land ownership
- There are unique demographic factors that need to be considered, such as a younger population and a higher proportion of youth in care
- An OCP can be a means of advancing reconciliation and strengthening Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships
- Identifying Indigenous housing needs through an OCP process enables small municipalities and local First Nations to combine resources to address common issues

Enabling conditions for municipalities to identify urban Indigenous housing needs and support the inclusion of Indigenous-specific needs in OCPs and housing policies include: Indigenous specific housing data; financial resources; council commitment to and support for reconciliation efforts; municipal staff support and recognition of Indigenous histories and experiences. Importantly, having a good relationship with urban Indigenous advocates and service providers and with local (land-based) First Nations governments and communities was identified as playing an important role in ensuring urban Indigenous housing needs are identified and addressed by a municipality in a meaningful way. Consistent with the focus on municipal-Indigenous relationships found in OCP and housing strategy content, interview participants expressed relationships and networks with individuals who have a knowledge base and can speak on behalf of different populations is definitely a required resource:

“the network - the connection to who has information and knowledge to share... getting the perspective of what are the issues or gaps, where people struggling are or are experiencing housing stress as part of that whole spectrum of things ... as a resource, it's going to be a whole lot of connections with people in the community” (P07).

Municipal planners also believe the political will of decision makers is crucial for any significant municipal consideration and identification of urban Indigenous housing needs. From political and senior staff understanding and support, flow adequate financial resources and time to work in relationship with urban Indigenous communities to identify urban Indigenous housing needs. As one interview participant stated, “the political will, the senior staff will and then the development communities’ will to follow through on all of it is so significant” (P03). Another participant explained: “The main [enabler] is going to be council. It’s the council who approves the OCP. ... It’s council direction essentially, so council would need to be on board with everything” (P16). In other words, without political support, municipal staff feel they are left without adequate resources or approval to take action.

Further, a handful of municipalities recognize they are not positioned to speak on behalf of urban Indigenous communities, organizations or individuals. Many interview participants expressed the desire to work with the urban Indigenous leadership and local First Nations to more deeply understand urban Indigenous housing needs. Municipal staff identified the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) as a key advocate for the urban Indigenous population and resource for municipalities looking to understand the housing needs of the urban Indigenous population.

Official Community Plans: Potential to enable long term change?

Despite the inclusion of high-level commitment to work on relationship-building with Indigenous communities, it is unclear how broad municipal-Indigenous statements of intent or goals are actualized through Official Community Plans and housing strategies. As an interview participant stated, “there are a lot of references in the OCP to First Nations and working with the [local First Nation] on partnerships—nothing specifically that addressed urban Indigenous housing” (P06). This seems to be a missed opportunity as OCPs articulate the long term vision for a community and contain policies that guide planning decisions and legislation adoption. One interviewee provided several examples of where Indigenous housing considerations and policies could be embedded, including: municipal housing strategies like housing needs reports, terms of reference for an affordable housing reserve fund, and a Memorandum

of Understanding with BC Housing. While these housing specific supplementary planning documents/policies are seemingly appropriate and effective places for Indigenous housing considerations, one municipal planner interviewed suggested these mentioned policies regarding Indigenous housing could be strengthened by being written in the OCP. As the interviewee explains:

“Because a danger can be when [housing] is in a separate plan, it kind of falls when you’re looking at development applications. So I think the marching orders need to be within the OCP, and then the policies from that plan. The best thing is to list it into the OCP and then we have it in our day-to-day use, so it’s not forgotten and it doesn’t collect dust” (P16).

While OCPs do not “get into the detail that a housing strategy does”, another interviewee explained OCPs are required to contain policies for affordable housing, rental housing and special needs housing. This same interviewee suggested these OCP policy areas could include regulations to support the strategies (i.e. housing needs reports and affordable housing strategies) that articulate how urban Indigenous housing needs will be met. The survey and interview data revealed several municipal planners are keen to respond to urban Indigenous housing needs in OCPs: “It’s really a tangible way for the district to take steps towards reconciliation and strengthen that relationship with Indigenous communities because housing is a common challenge for Indigenous and non-Indigenous [people]” (P07). In this way a municipal planner is recognizing the opportunity for their municipality to demonstrate its commitment to reconciliation through housing policies written into the Official Community Plan. However, the extent to which urban Indigenous housing can help strengthen the relationship between municipalities and the urban Indigenous diaspora depends heavily on the knowledge base and the sense of agency of municipal planners and policy makers.

Discussion

Municipalities and municipal planners cannot respond to urban Indigenous housing needs if they do not have the knowledge base and consider the existence of such needs. Planners, like any group, have a spectrum of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous histories, rights, law and governance systems. Individuals (and therefore municipalities) are at varying places on their journey of reconciliation and this impacts where in BC Indigenous housing needs are considered and how municipalities respond.

The lack of consideration and recognition of urban Indigenous housing needs as distinct needs mirrors findings that, despite the convincing body of work asserting that Indigenous-specific social services provide better outcomes for urban Indigenous populations, within non-Indigenous service providers there remains a reluctance, indifference, or lack of intentional development of Indigenous spaces (DeVerteuil and Wilson 2010). Understanding what Indigenous housing needs are enables a municipality to build a case for support and attract investment to their community. As an interview participant stated,

“It’s difficult for the City to do much on our own, and we’re not housing providers. We don’t have any agency, we don’t have a housing management arm, we don’t have the capacity to develop and manage affordable housing. But we have the ability to get things like a housing needs report done that we can then provide to First Nations, other service providers, to bolster their applications and to present the case really clearly” (P19).

As housing needs reports—which capture the current and most pressing local housing needs—are now mandated for BC municipalities, this interviewee (above) is signaling the role a planner can play in addressing urban Indigenous housing needs. Importantly, identifying urban Indigenous housing needs at the local level enables municipalities to support public, non-profit, and private developers in accessing funding from federal and provincial programs specifically for Indigenous housing. In other words, it is imperative that municipal planners take the time and resources (both financial and human) to collect data on the housing needs for urban Indigenous peoples and include this data in their housing needs reports. As an initial step, municipalities can work with urban Indigenous representatives and/organizations like the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) to understand and include ‘a statement of need’ in their housing needs report. The process used for such a step will most likely require different kinds of engagement processes than most municipal planners are comfortable with or currently trained to undertake.

It is critical that municipalities do not simply integrate urban Indigenous communities into existing colonial planning processes, but rather enter into relationships with urban Indigenous communities and organizations as a learner, prepared to adjust their ways of knowledge generation at the direction of the Indigenous community or organization. Some Indigenous coalitions, such as the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC), have specific guidelines for those looking to engage the urban Indigenous community they represent, including “share control over the knowledge generated by co-developing the report recommendation” (Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee, n.d. 12). To illustrate this recommendation in practice we offer an example. When the City of Surrey developed their latest housing needs report, planners took notable action to identify and include ‘a statement of need’ pertaining to the urban Indigenous communities in Surrey. To draft this statement Surrey planning staff worked with SUILC, who had already conducted their own ‘housing lab’ to identify urban Indigenous housing needs in the municipality. SUILC’s process used robust community engagement, embedded Indigenous wisdom and methodology, and was guided by a task force with members from AHMA, Indigenous housing providers in Surrey and all levels of government (P19). Rather than duplicate engagement processes with the urban Indigenous communities in Surrey, the Surrey planning staff supported SUILC in crafting an Indigenous statement of need for their report. In this way, the urban Indigenous community in Surrey had control over how urban Indigenous housing needs were identified and communicated. This example highlights broader themes about the work and learning required by settler governments to support meaningful reconciliation. We conclude this paper with reflections on these larger questions.

Conclusion

This study explored whether and how urban Indigenous housing needs are addressed in BC municipalities’ Official Community Plans and housing strategies. We found the unique housing needs of Indigenous peoples living in several urban areas in British Columbia are not being addressed in these planning documents in any significant way. Where urban Indigenous housing needs have been identified, challenges remain in integrating these needs into OCPs and housing strategies, such as a lack of available data, time, resources, and political mandate. Despite these barriers, municipal planners can and must continue to play a key role in working with urban Indigenous organizations to address urban Indigenous housing. This work will require municipal planners and decision-makers develop the competencies needed to support Indigenous-led processes to adequately respond to urban Indigenous housing needs. Potentially helpful considerations for BC municipalities working on housing plans and policies include:

- Learn the Indigenous histories and context of the lands your municipality resides on
- Understand the collective inherent rights of Indigenous peoples and become familiar with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), as well as the UNDRIP legislation in British Columbia: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA)
- Dedicate significant time and resources to foster intentional relationships with the local land based First Nations and urban Indigenous leadership and organizations
- Take direction from Indigenous communities, leadership, and organizations on how to identify and articulate urban Indigenous housing needs
- Co-develop a ‘statement of housing need’ with the appropriate Indigenous leadership and/or organizations and include it in your housing needs report

The good news is there are models and tools to help guide municipalities in their efforts to tangibly address urban Indigenous housing needs, such as the working relationship between the City of Surrey planning staff and the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC), as well as following the guidance in AHMA’s comprehensive research reports and policy briefs. Interestingly, AHMA has identified the need for a tool to help gather the data needed to articulate what Indigenous housing needs are, with the goal of including this gathered data in municipalities’ housing needs reports. Tools like Housing Assessment Resources Tools (HART)¹² have the potential to assist in gathering the resources needed to appropriately frame and collect this much needed data at the local level. Given the TRC’s Calls to Action, and Canada’s adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), housing policy can and should be an avenue for municipalities to work in more meaningful ways with urban Indigenous communities, and in turn advance powerful reconciliation efforts.

End notes

¹ AHMA's mission is to lead and advance housing rights for all Indigenous people living in British Columbia. AHMA works across BC to support urban Indigenous service providers and advocate for Indigenous-led housing solutions at the provincial and national level.

² This paper defines 'urban Indigenous housing needs' as the dwellings, buildings, spaces best suited for Indigenous peoples living in urban areas.

³ As a recent report by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous people states (2021, 4), "Indigenous peoples living in urban areas continue to experience the legacy of colonization, intergenerational trauma and face a unique set of challenges to their sense of identity, culture and connection to land and resources."

⁴ The duty to consult currently requires the Crown to consult Indigenous peoples about proposed activities that may negatively affect existing or potential Indigenous rights.

⁵ UNDRIP is emerging as a potentially influential part of Canada's political landscape. In November 2019, the BC government passed the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA), and Canada followed in June 2021 by passing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA). What this legislation means in practice for the inherent, collective and human rights of Indigenous peoples is currently being worked out and deserves much attention.

⁶ As the umbrella organization for 41 Indigenous non-profit housing providers in BC, AHMA supports and advocates on behalf of urban Indigenous housing providers, working in partnership with federal, provincial, and municipal governments to meet the housing needs of urban Indigenous peoples.

⁷ A province-wide understanding of municipal responses to urban Indigenous housing needs requires an analysis of both OCPs and housing strategies as the majority of small and medium sized municipalities (under 50,000+ population) use their OCP to articulate priorities and planning for housing and housing related issues within the municipality. However, the majority of the large (50,000+ population) municipalities have housing strategies that work in concert with their OCP as well as other related plans.

⁸ Three municipalities with OCPs adopted prior to 2015 were included in the sample due to having a higher proportion of Indigenous population and locations of AHMA member housing providers. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released 94 Calls to Action in 2015 and Canada endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2016. With these significant national commitments and seemingly improved political attitude towards Indigenous peoples, we anticipated that municipalities may have articulated their responsibilities and relationship with urban Indigenous community members with greater intention, accuracy, and timeliness.

⁹ For two of the sample municipalities, both their OCP and housing strategy were analyzed.

¹⁰ Indigenous content with no link to housing or general municipal-Indigenous relations (i.e. content specific to public art) was noted and excluded from the analysis.

¹¹ One participant did not respond to the survey question regarding distinguishing urban Indigenous housing needs.

¹² HART is a federally funded research project with the goal to develop standardized, replicable and equity-focused tools to improve housing supply decision-making at all levels of government.

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Interviews

P07, P10, P12, P19 (2020)

P03, P06, P16 (2021)