

Chair Huson and fellow Councillors, thank you for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. We appreciate the members of this committee being available to hear directly from residents like us. My name is Alexis Kleiman and I speak to you today as a representative of NEXTNiagara. I am joined by my fellow Council member, Kristen Nilsen. NEXTNiagara is a volunteer Council of the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce, composed of young and engaged Niagara based professionals, representing the voices of professionals under 40 in the region. We are all proud residents of Niagara who share a collective desire to see Niagara grow as a vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous community where the NEXT generation can create, connect, collaborate and call home. Our mission is to represent and amplify the voice of the NEXT generation within the community.

We have requested your audience today as we understand a review of the Niagara Official Plan is underway, a plan that will shape the physical, economic and social development of the region over the next 30 years. At this time, we do not feel that Niagara's emerging generation, the one that we represent, has been appropriately consulted or considered as equal value stakeholders in this process to date. The plans and policies being considered will have a significant impact on our futures and we believe it is important that the NEXT generation have the opportunity to help shape this future. With the current cost of living, youth are being pushed out of the housing market, a trend that we fear will lead to Niagara becoming a less attractive place to live for the next generation. Given this trend and the emergence of a new plan, we ask you to consider bringing our voice to the table in this decision making process as stakeholders.

We recognize that you have provided opportunities to learn more about the new Official Plan through your website and virtual public information centres, as well as the opportunity to provide feedback online, and we're happy to see this. We also recognize the onus of responsibility is on all members of the community to show up -- but we're asking for intentional engagement with our demographic in these public forums. Furthermore, we're asking for you to directly engage with youth community groups as formal stakeholders in this new official plan, many of whom are experiencing the greatest impact of the lack of housing affordability in the region. We believe it is in the best interest of the Regional Council, and the community as a whole, when looking to the next 30 years, to directly engage with youth and young professionals in our community, as formal stakeholders. In an effort to assist with this process, we encourage you to specifically reach out to groups like ours, NEXTNiagara, such as the Brock University Students' Union, Brock University Graduate Students' Association, Niagara College Student Administrative Council, JCI, and more, that represent the under 40 population in Niagara. A targeted call from your council to young professionals and youth in Niagara who have valuable insight to share with you given the opportunity would be a meaningful way to start a dialogue. Young professionals with lived experience and expertise, who are frustrated and are looking for ways to increase housing affordability in Niagara, would provide meaningful feedback related to the issues you are aiming to address in the official plan. They work and live right here in Niagara, and we ask you to call on them, and engage us in the process.

One of the most common reasons we hear that our generation does not engage in community development and local politics is that we feel our opinions and ideas are not considered or valued. We are speaking about a demographic that may not be property owners yet. Too often, we find the only voices that you hear are those with pre-established large platforms, such as property owners or business owners. Given that young professionals and those in Niagara under 40 have not consistently had access to the same platforms, we ask that you specifically engage us in this process.

We understand that youth retention and housing affordability have both been identified as priorities resulting from your public consultation; we are glad that these have been identified however are concerned that action will only go this far. It is important to us that specific action items will be included to address these priorities directly.

We understand that the province of Ontario has issued some fairly aggressive growth goals based on forecasted population models. This forecasted growth will only further the gap in housing affordability and will continue to drive Niagara's youth into poverty or out of the region in search of affordable housing elsewhere. We realize that those in attendance do not influence the price of lumber or the availability of trades, and that housing affordability is a responsibility all levels of government must work together to address, however, we do see your ability to influence how lands are used, work to develop innovative housing solutions and explore new models of affordable ownership. In order to meet the aggressive supply goals, all local municipalities must be willing to consider options that may differ from the views of an already established generation of homeowners, and that shake up the status quo. We are not development or planning experts so we cannot offer any concrete solutions, however we are able to remind you that you have available to you a significant sector of our population that is open to change and a willingness to adapt to a different vision of the ideal lifestyle. The current challenges we face are a huge opportunity for innovation and we would be remiss to not take advantage of this potential.

We are confident that the Official Plan will provide a theoretical roadmap for reaching these goals, however our concern is that no matter what directives the region puts out, the local municipalities will continue to operate the same as they always have. Local councillors will continue to feel pressure to represent only their loudest and most opinionated constituents, those who are familiar with how to engage with local politicians, and will not consider their community as a whole. We see a trend that established residents will always fight against development projects occurring in their own backyards; however we ask that you all also consider the opinions of those who do not yet own backyards.

We acknowledge that many micro decisions are determined at the municipal level and do not fall solely to this group specifically, however we still appreciate the opportunity to share our opinions with you as our representatives. We ask that you all return to your local municipalities with a reminder of how important the decisions you make are to those who will someday be the leaders of our community. It is also our duty to welcome new residents to Niagara and contribute to the quality of their life and future in Niagara. It is also our goal to make Niagara a place for young professionals to have meaningful careers, and we would hate to see talented individuals leave, or avoid Niagara, because they cannot afford to live here.

We ask that the directives of the Official Plan include specific actionable items to support youth retention, attraction, and housing affordability. We recommend that development decisions be balanced to consider the wellbeing of both current and future residents to in turn support good community building practices. Our ask is for you to consider the livability of those that will make up the majority of the Niagara community for the next 30 years, not just those that are influential today, and not just those who own property today. We need to feel that the interests and futures of all our residents are considered, over simply protecting the assets of those who have been able to establish themselves as home and landowners.

In closing, we ask this committee to undertake an assessment regarding policies that will increase Niagara's housing units relative to its population, using policies and best practices that encourage sustainable development, and we're asking you to engage us in the process. We are

also asking that targeted engagement plans with youth and young professionals be explored to ensure as many perspectives are being considered in the development of the Official Plan.

We thank you for the opportunity to be heard this afternoon and would welcome the opportunity to engage with you further as the NEXTNiagara Council. We hope you will consider the emerging generation of families, leaders and residents in your work shaping the use of available land, and development, in this new official plan.