

Subject: Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy

Report to: Planning and Economic Development Committee

Report date: Wednesday, December 4, 2024

Recommendations

1. That Report PDS 24-2024 Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy **BE ENDORSED.**

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to seek endorsement of a Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy for Niagara, developed as one of the actions identified in the Region's Attainable Housing Strategy to optimize existing housing stock.
- The Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy provides information on student housing, focusing on the Niagara context; best practices and areas for improvement; and proposed actions to facilitate post-secondary student housing in the amounts, quality and types required.
- The Strategy aims to improve housing for students and potentially unlock housing options for other groups needing similar rental accommodation.
- Implementation of the recommended actions will occur collaboratively with other external partners having key roles in post-secondary student housing and are aligned with recommendations identified in the Attainable Housing Strategy.

Financial Considerations

There are no direct financial considerations related to this report. Funding required to undertake some of the actions in the Strategy will be funded from existing operating budgets or included in future operating budgets.

Analysis

The Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy (PSHS) is an action identified in the Attainable Housing Strategy under recommendations to "optimize existing housing supply." The PSHS looks at wider issues and Niagara-specific contexts to understand the current state of post-secondary student housing, key issues facing it, options for improving it, who can facilitate change, and how. Understanding and addressing issues

in post-secondary student housing can inform actions with potential advantages not only for students but also for members of the broader Niagara community faced with a difficult housing market.

The post-secondary student housing environment is complex and composed of diverse, increasingly intertwined issues. While the Strategy acknowledges this complicated history, and that there are a number of challenges and benefits that post-secondary students bring to our communities in social, cultural and economic terms, the PSHS focuses specifically on housing issues related to post-secondary students. This is not to diminish or dismiss these other social impacts; it merely serves to scope this work as it relates to optimizing Niagara's housing supply. Similarly, while providing context for student housing, efforts are made throughout the Strategy to understand how issues present themselves in the community and how progress may best be adapted specifically in Niagara.

Data

A frequent observation from those working in and researching post-secondary student housing is that despite its importance, reliable data about student housing is minimal. This lack of data, particularly quantitative data, regarding post-secondary student housing resulted in staff engaging a wide range of sources and where possible, attempting to collect key information that previously had never been collected. This included original questionnaires completed by administration and student union representatives at Niagara's post-secondary institutions; in-person meetings with those in Niagara involved in a variety of ways with post-secondary student housing in both public and private sectors (e.g., off-campus private sector developments); multiple site visits of on- and off-campus student housing; and numerous engagements with representatives in post-secondary student housing across the country. This engagement included college and university staff and student groups, developers, building and business managers, mayors and municipal staff, planners, and housing and transit staff. As a direct result of the survey requests for data to support this strategy, Brock University identified a gap in their data collection and collation and have subsequently already made changes to improve their student housing data collection.

Recent federal and provincial policy changes are primarily aimed at addressing growing issues related to historical policies in education, immigration, housing and economic development. These changes are already beginning to affect the geography, demographics, economics, curricula, data collection and other aspects of post-secondary education, and certainly of post-secondary student housing, which was a

driving force behind many of the changes. Though these changes have been captured wherever possible in the PSHS, these developments are resulting in substantial shifts to the post-secondary student housing landscape, the impacts of which will not be fully captured or understood for some time. Though the recent changes are designed to alleviate some housing pressures, like many aspects of student housing their effects will vary depending on location and situation. Considering the effects of these changes in both the long and short terms will be critical when implementing next steps in post-secondary student housing. Given these recent (and ongoing) provincial and federal policy and funding interventions, it is evident that updating the PSHS and monitoring the data and trends in student housing further upstream will be key to ensuring Niagara's municipalities are positioned to respond to opportunities to support post-secondary student housing strategically and rapidly.

Engagement

As a result of some of the data gaps, it was important to engage many groups involved in student housing to create a robust and balanced picture of Niagara's environment. This engagement included college and university staff and student groups, developers, building and business managers, mayors and municipal staff, planners, the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Committee, and housing and transit staff. These individuals and groups contributed valuable information and insights on the historical and contemporary student housing environment, student housing business models, funding and financing, development matters, planning challenges and goals, student needs, equity issues, and more.

The backdrop of ongoing and major changes to this environment made it vital not only that a range of interested partners be engaged, but that they continue to be a part of the process as the Strategy developed – with many projected to play a role in implementation of the recommendations. As noted above, since the beginning of work on the PSHS in fall 2023, several consequential changes to policies and funding pertaining to post-secondary institutions and their students have been introduced by the provincial and federal governments. Given these ongoing changes which are significantly affecting post-secondary institutions, their students, and student housing, several key partners consulted in development of the Strategy continued to be consulted throughout its development, most notably the four major Niagara institutions: Brock University, Niagara College, University of Niagara Falls, and Sheridan-Canadian College of Technology and Trades (CCTT). Extra time was spent engaging these organizations in a concerted effort to ensure the Strategy was informed by those in the student space.

In particular, the two largest institutions, Brock University and Niagara College, and their representatives were engaged multiple times throughout the process to ensure accuracy of information and current state. Their assistance in confirming information, providing updates on their own evolving organizational plans and policies, efforts to locate and collect additional data provision of clarity around the aim and requirements of new governmental directions, and interest in both their specific community of concern as well as the broader context of student housing was all critical in achieving the current iteration of the Strategy. Their appreciation of what student housing looks like in Niagara, its issues and where and how they will need to be met, was instructive and will remain important to the advancement of Niagara's student housing landscape.

Recommendations

The PSHS describes the type of institution (e.g., public, private, partnership) of the four major post-secondary institutions in Niagara; the number and type (international, domestic) of student enrollment; the amount and types of student housing available on- and off-campus; how critical policy decisions (funding, international student policies) have affected post-secondary student housing generally and Niagara specifically; best practices already at work in Niagara and elsewhere to address post-secondary student housing issues, with potential for their use in Niagara; and the central groups involved in post-secondary student housing and their roles. In addition to outlining the regional student housing environment, the PSHS focuses on five main areas in which post-secondary student housing may be improved, including successful steps taken by various groups and municipalities in Niagara to work on them, and makes recommendations for actions moving forward. The five areas of focus are:

- Data
- Housing Supply On- and Off-Campus
- Funding and Financing
- Policies, Plans, Enforcement
- Partnerships and Coordination

Final sections of the PSHS identify recommendations for ways Niagara Region can facilitate the collaborative work that will be required to progress on student housing issues, centred on educating, innovating, and advocating for effective change on post-secondary student housing. The recommendations of the PSHS are provided in detail in the table below.

DATA

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
Adapt and implement data collection and analysis models	1) Host forum on current status, sources, requirements, and tools for collecting student housing data 2) Develop baseline data collection across post-secondary institutions in Niagara	Niagara Region PSIs	Immediate
Monitor and support student housing data collection	3) Monitor Niagara data on student and rental housing 4) Monitor and support ongoing efforts for student housing data collection (e.g., UTILE survey, Waterloo Region models) 5) Annual review and analysis of Niagara baseline data on student housing	Niagara Region	Immediate and Ongoing

HOUSING SUPPLY

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
Build more housing geared to/suited for students	1) Encourage buildings suited to/geared toward students and broader rental construction in Niagara (e.g., incentives for rental builds near transit, removal of process barriers) 2) Investigate and promote co-location of student housing in new builds (e.g., create potential site list for co-location of housing and services, identify synergies between services and student study paths such as long-term care and gerontology, PSW programs)	Niagara Region	Short-term and Ongoing
Repurpose existing stock for student housing	3) Encourage conversion of existing buildings or vacant/underused sites for housing geared to students (e.g., strip malls, parking lots, hotels, office buildings) 4) Advocate for intensification of housing suited for students (e.g., accessory dwelling units, homesharing)	Area Municipalities	Short-term and Ongoing

FUNDING AND FINANCING

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
Explore expanded student housing business and financing models	1) Host education session on innovative financing models and best practices for financing and managing student housing (e.g., Niagara models; Canadian models such as Ontario, BC, Quebec; and international models such as Australia, UK, US)	Niagara Region	Short-term
Promote and advocate for housing geared to students as an investment	2) Share information on success of student housing investments elsewhere and positive outlook and outcomes in Canada	Investor groups	Short- to Mid-term
Advocate for government funding for on-campus housing	3) Coordinate with partners to advocate for targeted, consistent government funding for on-campus student housing	PSIs	Short-term

POLICIES, PLANS AND ENFORCEMENT

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
Exchange information on local municipal provisions related to student housing	1) Share information, existing templates for local policies related to student housing	Niagara Region	Short-term
Advocate for reforms and service levels at the Landlord and Tenant Board tribunal	2) Engage with sector partners including landlords, tenants, interested parties to ensure coordinated, broad-based advocacy 3) Compile Niagara-specific issues (e.g., unresolved submissions, time to resolve) with LTB tribunal and list of potential reforms for advocacy (e.g., a separate track for student-related complaints)	Niagara Region	Immediate

PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
Create, connect, and communicate with cross-sectoral working groups on student housing	1) Facilitate a workshop on student housing in Niagara (overview, projections, best practices, next steps) aimed at creation of working groups for specific issue areas 2) Create and engage a cross-sectoral list of groups involved with student housing to consult and request support from for advocacy initiatives	Niagara Region	Immediate
Highlight student housing needs in related work	3) Identify and highlight student needs in infrastructure planning and capital initiatives (e.g., transit, water and wastewater infrastructure) 4) Include student housing concerns in larger forums on affordable, attainable and rental housing (e.g., Attainable Housing Strategy)	Niagara Region	Mid-term

Efforts are already underway on creating opportunities to share information, collaborate with area municipalities, assess and adapt successful local strategies and best practices elsewhere, and advocate collectively for targeted change. These actions will go forward in conjunction with ongoing work by those in post-secondary student housing and related fields, and in step with implementation of the Attainable Housing Strategy, to generate better housing prospects for post-secondary students and all residents of Niagara. Partnering with and supporting our area municipalities in their efforts to address student housing in their communities as the landscape continues to shift will be a key part of a successful path forward.

Alternatives Reviewed

This report is for endorsement; it implements an action of the Attainable Housing Strategy approved by Council. Endorsing the report will realize a recommended

strategic action; promote the availability of information about and improvements to an important sector of Niagara's housing market; and encourage steps to optimize housing in Niagara for all residents.

The Strategy itself provides for consideration a range of alternatives to address post-secondary student housing issues. Recommendations in the PSHS are based on what approaches may be most applicable and effective for Niagara now. The document presents a wider range of alternatives, some of which have not been recommended at this time because practices that work some places, or in some contexts, may not work in Niagara at this juncture. However, given the rate and range of change, these options may be able to be adapted, or prove successful in the future. Awareness of many alternatives, not just those applicable to Niagara in this moment, will help equip all groups involved with student housing in Niagara to make the best choices now and to strategize for future actions.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy identifies ways to generate appropriate affordable and attainable housing available to post-secondary students, and to potentially unlock housing for all Niagara residents, through suggested strategic actions informed by an understanding of the student accommodation sector in Niagara. This Strategy supports Council Strategic Priority Equitable Region: 3.3 Improve access to affordable and attainable housing.

Other Pertinent Reports

[PDS 27-2023 - Attainable Housing Workplan](#)

(<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=0837b49f-bb37-4c99-a521-975479f3ea79&Agenda=Agenda&lang=English&Item=13&Tab=attachments>)

[PDS 14-2024 - Attainable Housing Strategy](#)

(<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=900a3803-1a2c-4638-8898-e4257ed3a3e2&Agenda=Merged&lang=English&Item=15&Tab=attachments>)

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Post-secondary Student Housing Strategy