

## WEEK 2 – Getting answers on vacant housing in our community

By **Dan Gray** - March 25, 2022 @ 5:11 pm



There are 30 weeks left in this term of council. This is the second week we have taken a question from the community and posed it to all the councillors as well as the Mayor.

In this format, responses received are posted in the order in which they are received.

This week's topic was regarding vacant housing in our community. According to a study conducted by Point2homes, between 2011 and 2021, Sault Ste. Marie had a 61% change in vacant homes in our community. This represents the largest change in unoccupied dwellings across the province.

*Sault Ste. Marie leads vacancy rate change across Ontario, – Point2homes*

SaultOnline reached out to all the ward councillors and Mayor Provenzano for comment on this topic.

**We asked three questions –**

**Do you believe this is a problem?**

**What do you think can be done to reduce this trend?**

**Is there anything else you would like readers to know about vacant housing in our community?**

Four Councillors responded to our inquiry.

Ward 2 Councillor Luke Dufour was the first to reply.

*Yes, I believe that we have an issue with vacant homes. Vacancy isn't always a negative thing, as having some dwellings vacant increases competition among landlords for tenants and can create better leverage for tenants. In the case of SSM however, I believe that our vacancy rate has more to do with properties that have been removed from the market rather than ones that simply can't find a tenant.*

*Property standards has been a major area of focus for me during my term, as many of the vacant houses cause issues for my constituents in Ward 2. These issues have been addressed in two main ways, enhanced enforcement and creative reuse.*

*We have enhanced enforcement over the course of the last Council term by adding more By-Law Officers (from 1 to 2.5), adding a new City solicitor (to ensure cases that go to Court get the resources they need to be successful) and by completely re-writing the City's Property Standards By-Law. All of these initiatives were done through the Building and By-Law Task Force, struck by Council, at my initiative and with my full participation in 2019.*

*Creative reuse of vacant buildings is equally important to enhanced enforcement. The purpose of enforcement is to push these units back into the market where they can be of use. For right now, there are two main avenues to directly invest in creative reuse. One is the Low Income Home Ownership program being run by the DSSAB. This program has purchased homes in areas of low assessment growth and is renovating them back up to standards to sell them to folks who are working and ready to graduate out of public housing. The other great program, through the SSM Housing Corp has been able to purchase and then demolish vacant buildings and gift the land to Habitat for Humanity who has been able to build affordable housing on that land.*

*There is more to be done on this file over the end of this term and into the next. We need to find a way to fund a Community Improvement Plan that can continue to target these areas of the community for reinvestment. I have asked Minister Clark for changes to the Municipal Act to help cities like ours be more proactive when it comes to tax sales on these vacant properties, I believe we should continue to lobby for these changes.*

*Sorry I went on for a bit there, I have a lot to share on this issue!*

The next Councillor to answer our inquiry was from Ward 3 Matthew Shoemaker.

*Thanks for the opportunity to write on this one. The steps we've taken are numerous, so it may be a lengthy response.*

*On September 14, 2020, I moved a motion, and Paul Christian seconded it, asking staff to investigate a program like one that used to be funded provincially in the 1980s that provided direct (provincial) grants to homeowners for the improvement of their properties. This type of program was hugely successful in Sault Ste. Marie (especially the Bayview subdivision) in the 1980s and increased the assessment of many houses around town at that time. Staff reported that no such funding exists any more, and that to pay for such grants municipally would be cost-prohibitive.*

*On September 28, 2020, I moved a motion, and Luke Dufour seconded it, asking staff to develop a community improvement plan (sometimes called a tax rebate incentive program) to redevelop vacant buildings into habitable buildings. Staff recommended against such a program.*

*On November 30, 2020, I moved a motion, and Councillor Paul Christian seconded it, asking staff to look for any funding opportunities from higher levels of government to tear down derelict or abandoned properties. Staff did this investigation but were not able to find any available funding programs.*

*Most recently, on the February 25, 2022 Council Agenda, staff recommended against community improvement plans for both the demolition and redevelopment of derelict properties, and for the re-use of existing building (like turning an abandoned property into a rental or multi-unit property). Despite staff's recommendation, I moved a motion with Councillor Dufour seconding it that insisted a tax rebate incentive program be developed for both those problems. We further insisted the plan be brought forward by August so that it could be implemented before the end of the year.*

*In addition to this, I was a member of the property standards review committee that recommended changes to the property standards bylaw. The result of those changes is that we've clamped down hard on vacant properties, requiring them to be secured against entry from squatters or risk being torn down by the City and the cost added to the taxes of the property. Another requirement we've imposed on the owners of vacant properties is to keep \$2M liability insurance on the property, which is extremely difficult to get. This change, we are hoping, will either spur the property owners to tear down vacant houses, or fix them up so that they are habitable.*

*These changes have all taken time to get to, but hopefully we'll start seeing the positive effect of them in the coming years.*

The third Councillor to respond was from Ward 1 Lisa Vezeau-Allen.

*I think if you were to review the many resolutions from this past Monday [March 21, 2021] housing is a high priority. Further to that the formation of the IMET has created a collaborative team in addressing derelict buildings.*

*This council (and staff) since late 2018, in my opinion has worked together with both private and public sector in addressing vacant buildings, most noticeable would be the many projects that have been a result of vacant schools.*

The fourth Councillor to answer was from Ward 5 Matt Scott.

*I do think this is a problem, one that has impacted our community more than most. This particular issue is one that can't be fixed overnight, or simply by municipal government alone. We will have to work collaboratively with our provincial partners and federal partners to help reverse this trend.*

*This particular council, I believe, has done more than any other councils in recent memory to help reduce the amount of vacant housing in our community. It's work that takes time,*

*collaboration, and commitment. I'm happy to have been a part of these discussions and will continue to work in any way that I can to help stop this trend.*

As promised, our staff will be tracking the councillors who respond to the weekly inquiry and also those who do not in a graph to facilitate quick glance evaluation.

*This is a running total of responses received by representatives in a week over week tally – Week 2 (Dan Gray/SaultOnline.com)*

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If you have a question you want posed to the Mayor and Councillors feel free to reach out to me at [d.gray@superiormedia.ca](mailto:d.gray@superiormedia.ca).

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### **Dan Gray**

A native of Centre Wellington, Ontario, I have worked as a freelance journalist all over the province of Ontario. Most recently I ran a local news page in my hometown of Fergus, Ontario. I look forward to bringing my experience covering breaking news, municipal matters and general interest stories to the team at Superior Media and communities we serve.

