

Stakeholders keen to work with Chow on housing

Don Wall June 28, 2023

Construction stakeholders have congratulated Olivia Chow on her Toronto mayoral byelection victory June 26 and are pledging to work with her to get more housing built.

The former NDP MP and ex-Toronto city councillor came third in the 2014 mayor's race but topped the polls this time with 37.2 per cent of the vote, besting former councillor Ana Bailao, who finished a clear second with 32.5 per cent of the votes. Former police chief Mark Saunders was far back in third place with 8.6 per cent.

"I will dedicate myself to work tirelessly in building a city that's more caring, affordable and safe where everyone belongs," Chow said in her victory speech.

"I said to Premier (Doug) Ford, who graciously called me tonight...he said, 'We look forward to working together and finding common ground.'

"Well Mr. Premier we're ready, let's work together to get things done."

The byelection was held to replace John Tory, who resigned in February following an indiscretion with a staffer.

Housing was one among several of Chow's top priorities during the campaign but it now appears to be a primary focus as she prepares to be sworn in July 12. She has pledged to implement her City Homes Plan, building 25,000 new rental units with the city as developer; she will look for approvals efficiencies to enable NGOs and private builders to build new homes more quickly; and she will work with the federal government to unlock new funding for housing.

She told a radio interviewer, "I know there are quite a few applications for social housing, for affordable housing, that are proposed by nonprofit groups...It's been two years and stuck at city hall. My first order of business is to go in and say, 'Wait, hang on a second. Everything is ready. Why don't we just approve these? Why has it been stuck for so long?'

"I know there are developers, private developers also wanting to do the same thing."

Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) president Richard Lyall said he had a good conversation with Chow on housing during a campaign tour of social housing sites and they found they had lots in common on the file.

“I don’t think we’re going to have a problem at all,” said Lyall. “One of the things that we didn’t do was endorse anybody in particular in this election, and we said the number one issue, housing, is not an ideological issue. It’s not a left or right issue. Housing is a need, in our view, and there’s a need right across the board for all different kinds of housing.”

Some of the proposals for social housing that have languished in the Housing Now program are “low-hanging fruit” for Chow to tackle right off the bat, Lyall said. During their conversation they compared notes on international best practices including the successful program in Hong Kong, Lyall said, and also about the need for multiple players to work in parallel.

Despite the fact she is generally on the left in broad political terms, he said, “She’s quite pragmatic and I think she’s going to want things to work. I don’t think she’s going to go off half-cocked on anything. She’ll approach it carefully.”

Toronto Construction Association vice-president of operations Suzana Fernandes commented that Chow’s message combined hope and affordability, and said expectations across most industries are high.

“We need to ensure that she is aware of the challenges our industry currently faces — removing red tape to support a faster development approvals process, addressing the high levels of development charges, and commit to additional spending required to fix existing infrastructure as well as build new transportation and other public infrastructure,” said Fernandes.

The Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD) said it has sent mayor-elect Chow a letter requesting an opportunity to meet at her earliest convenience to discuss housing supply and affordability.

“It is widely acknowledged that the housing affordability crisis in Toronto is the consequence of inadequate housing supply,” said BILD CEO Dave Wilkes. “This is a policy-driven problem and is therefore fixable. However, time is of the essence given the rate of population growth in the GTA.”

Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Contractors Association executive director Patrick McManus said the message Chow sent in her victory speech makes it clear she wants to work with all stakeholders to address Toronto’s problems.

“It’s going to be a tall task, but she is starting from the right spot,” he said.

McManus said his association hopes Chow will address the growing problem of how city contracts are managed, and in particular how it attempts to pass along too much risk to contractors. It has become an adversarial approach and many contractors are choosing not to bid on city work, he said.

“These problems are unique to the city but are eminently fixable,” McManus said.

Nadia Todorova, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, issued a statement urging the new mayor to “improve wait times and costly delays in the development approval process, address slow and inconsistent procurement practices, and embrace innovative concepts like electronic permitting and the use of recycled crushed aggregate in infrastructure projects.”

The Progressive Contractors Association of Canada called on Chow to introduce open tendering on city projects. Chow has previously said she will maintain existing collective agreements with 10 building trades unions.

“We look forward to the opportunity to explain how the open tendering of city projects could save the city \$347 million annually,” said Stephen Hamilton, the PCA’s director of public affairs for Ontario.

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