New Brunswick must stop dragging its feet on affordable housing

By ADITYA RAO

A rally for affordable housing and tenant rights occurred outside the city of Fredericton’s public engagement session on developing the NBEX lands on October 1, 2020. Rally participants, including people with precarious housing, demanded that the space be used for affordable housing.

Photo by Simon Ouellette.

There is a housing crisis in New Brunswick. Just ask the mayors of its towns and cities.

Earlier this year, the Times & Transcript reported that more than 40 per cent of people in Moncton were spending more than what is considered affordable on housing costs. In addition, some 290 people experiencing homelessness were counted in that city this summer.

In response to this crisis, community leaders proposed a significant project: a $12 million non-profit initiative called Rising Tide that would buy and operate 125 housing units by 2023. The city of Moncton agreed to foot $6 million for the project months ago, challenging the province to step up for the rest of the money. But the province has yet to commit.

The situation is not that much different in Saint John. The region, home to some of the country’s wealthiest families, has a child poverty rate higher than the Canadian average of 18.6% with nearly a third of the children living in poverty. In 2018, there were over 1,500 people on the waitlist for affordable housing. Even with the innovative community-funded $2 million Victoria Commons project that would create 14 new affordable units, there remains a serious gap between housing need and housing supply.

Fredericton, too, is struggling. It was reported in August of this year that some 30 people in a Fredericton rooming house were facing evictions, some of whom had lived in that building for nearly two decades. Active cases on the “by-name” list in Fredericton – the list used by the Fredericton Homeless Shelters to allocate spaces to those who are the most vulnerable – is currently at about 80 people.

With the proposed redevelopment of the 31-acre city-owned New Brunswick Exhibition Grounds in Fredericton, community groups have mobilized to make their voice heard against what they fear might become a giveaway to for-profit developers. Activists organized a rally on October 1 demanding public investment in not-for-profit affordable housing, and supported calls from Indigenous leaders who have demanded that their free, prior and informed consent be obtained before any plans take shape.

Fredericton Mayor Mike O’Brien is no doubt paying close attention. But is Premier Blaine Higgs?

As of November of last year, there were over 5,200 people on the waitlist for public housing in the province, but the provincial housing strategy aims to build only 1,262 new units over ten years. In addition, apartment vacancy rates are at historic lows across New Brunswick. In cities and towns across the province, the vacancy rates are at or below one per cent. The province announced last year that while it would spend $12 million on upgrading existing housing stock, it would only spend $629,000 on building new housing this year.

The thing is, with low vacancy rates, the power imbalance between tenants and landlords is stark. New Brunswick being one of the only jurisdictions in Canada without rent controls, it is a landlord’s market when tenants have nowhere else to go. New Brunswickers are faced with rising rents in the order of hundreds of dollars a year as a result, with the province apparently turning a blind eye.

Housing precarity is made even worse by the fact that tenants in New Brunswick have fewer rights than those in most other parts of Canada. Tenants have no right to maintain occupancy of their unit at the end of a lease agreement in New Brunswick. Stories of discrimination against tenants who have children are not uncommon, and-renovictions—the practice of evicting tenants in order to ostensibly renovate or repair a rental unit—occur often.

Moreover, the province continues to permit evictions despite the pandemic. While cities and towns across New Brunswick are at the frontlines of the housing crisis, the province is dragging its feet.

The provincial election may be over but the pandemic is not. Housing is a social determinant of public health. Simply put: people cannot stay home without a home to stay in.

Tackling this crisis requires immediate investments in public housing and not-for-profit housing, including a targeted expansion of cooperative housing. There are hundreds of millions of dollars in federal money waiting to be allocated for this purpose, much of which must flow through the province.

This is a question not of money, but of priorities. And if housing is not near the top of this government’s to-do list during the pandemic, the health and safety of those experiencing homelessness and housing precarity, as well as that of New Brunswickers as a whole, is at risk.

The good news is that communities are ready to lead. But is the Premier?

For more grassroots news, visit: nbmediacoop.org

Peace, friendship and fishing in Mi’km’aki

By HANNAH MARTIN

On October 8, I found myself seated by the sacred fire, once again in reflection, as vehicles rolled past down the dirt road at Saulnierville Wharf to observe Treaty Day. It was a beautiful day for celebration and reflection.

During these past few days, I have been thinking so much about the voices who came before me; how resilient and strong they had to be, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically, to thrive on the land in the elements, survive the constant and colourless political decisions that now impact my generation today.

The Peace and Friendship Treaties, signed between 1725–1779, were the agreements my Mi’km’aki ancestors signed with British settlers to ensure our inherent rights to the lands, territories and natural resources were respected and forever protected.

Through these Treaties, our lands, territories and natural resources were never ceded, nor surrendered to the British or any other colonial power.

Yet, like every other treaty in Canada, attempts by settler governments and colonial branches alike continue to be made to place limits on our rights and undermine our self-determination and sovereignty.

The specific right under scrutiny at this time, in this place, is the right to a “moderate livelihood,” which is an inherent right protected by the Peace and Friendship Treaties and the legal basis for the ongoing Mi’km’aki fishing activity in Saulnierville.

Peace and Friendship?

While the Treaty of 1752 is well known for its “Truck House” clause and its role in protecting the Shubenacadie River from Alton Gas, it was the Treaties of 1760-61 that were cited in the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) in 1959 through R v. Marshall to affirm that Donald Marshall Jr. had the inherent right to sell the eels he had caught and sold to earn a moderate livelihood.

On September 17, the same day as Donald Marshall’s historic victory 21 years earlier, the Mi’km’aki band of Sipekne’katik launched the first regulated “moderate livelihood fishery” in Mi’km’aki. Sipekne’katik distributed seven licenses, with a limit of 50 traps per license.

But in the hours and days that followed, the Mi’km’aki fleet was met with confrontation. At times in the escalating and ongoing dispute, more than 100 commercial boats attempted to block Mi’km’aki access to the water. The evening of September 17th, one boat was shot at by flares. Trap lines have been cut, gear stolen, and local goods and services such as fishing gear, bait, and accommodations denied. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans presence and reactions were severely underwhelming during the height of the conflict.

It left me wondering, whose responsibility is it to ensure an accessible and safe environment for legal fisheries, free of violence and harassment?

While most of the protesting commercial fisheries maintained that their displeasure in the Mi’km’aki moderate livelihood fishery was not an issue of race but rather one of conservation, race evidently played a role. In live videos, fishers were shown attempting to block Sipekne’katik vessels and drummers during a standoff on Saulnierville Wharf.

“Our rights are not up for debate”

It is important to emphasize the fact that this fishery is as legal as the commercial fishery that currently exists in the Province of Nova Scotia. And while these rights are protected by Treaties and reaffirmed by the SCC, they ultimately stem from the inherent right that the Mi’km’aki have to the

Wolastoq Grand Council Chief spas aquikt pos襐on (Ron Tremblay) addressing a crowd of about 200 people at a rally in solidarity with the Mi’km’aki lobster fishers at the New Brunswick Legislature on October 22, 2020. Photo by Tracy Glynn.
End nursing home privatization: Nurses' union

By BRIAN BEATON

The New Brunswick Nurses Union (NBNU) has released a potentially game-changing report on October 15 calling for the immediate halt to further privatization of nursing homes in the province.

The report, “The Forgotten Generation: An Urgent Call For Reform In New Brunswick’s Long-Term Care Sector,” is based on extensive research and analysis that looks at the past 10 years of reform in the long-term care system since privatization began in 2008. The report’s first page describes New Brunswick’s nursing home system as “in desperate need of reform.” It states: “The seniors who built and contributed to the prosperity of our province deserve better. We can’t risk losing yet another generation.”

The report describes how the level of care provided in New Brunswick nursing homes has fallen to unacceptable levels. Since the 2008 privatization of nursing homes, there has been “a devastating erosion of regulated staff over a number of years, resulting in poor care; quality of life; and staff wellbeing.”

According to the NBNU’s analysis, other research has shown that “for-profit nursing homes are less effective than their nonprofit counterparts in virtually every significant category — including value-for-money.”

When Premier Shawn Graham’s Liberal government signed the first contract with the private-sector Shannex nursing home in 2008, “it was expected that the change would provide a cost-cutting solution to the province’s long-term care problem.”

The report notes that “New Brunswick’s provincial government has been slow to implement changes.” It states: “The report’s recommendations by the fall of 2023. They hope this legislation will have been passed.”

In its analysis, the NBNU has also been critical of the government’s response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The report states that “since COVID-19, the provincial government has worsened the health and safety of residents, staff, and public.”

The report also highlights the ongoing crisis of staff shortages, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The NBNU has called for the government to “immediately hire more nurses and nursing aides.”

The report concludes: “It is time for the provincial government to take urgent action to protect the rights and dignity of all residents in long-term care.”

What drought? The worst drought New Brunswick has seen in decades

By DREW GILBERT

Did you notice the colours of the leaves changing earlier than usual this year? Did you know that even in these dry conditions, forest fires have been burning across the province? This is a common thread this season; they came earlier as well. The reason? Not frost, but one of the worst droughts on record. May to July saw a tenth of the average rainfall, summer has been long, and the water tables have dropped, which is ironic that while we have been dealing with the effects of much higher temperatures, we are also facing the challenges of a water crisis.

I look at the world a little differently because I studied geography, glaciology, and hydrology. Maybe you never noticed the changes in the water tables, but those that do know that the water tables have dropped, which is ironic that while we are dealing with the effects of much higher temperatures, we are also facing the challenges of a water crisis.

We have a responsibility to be a part of the solution to a centuries-long problem of what has been a failed partnership for far too long. We have a responsibility to protect our water, our resource. We need to understand that there is a scientific and a moral imperative to protect the water tables, the trees, the air, and the land.

It has been three weeks since the first protest against our unclean water, a protest that was organized by the Nbisi Nation, a self-governing people. The protesters are asking for access, we already have access. Our rights are substantive. This is hard work that we all must endure, and it is not easy, but it is the right thing to do, and we can all begin by asking ourselves important questions.

How do we understand our identities as Treaty people? How do we understand our relationship with the water? How do we understand our connection to our land? How do we understand our connection to our ancestors?

I am an enthusiast in renewable energy. I look at the world a little differently because I studied geography, glaciology, and hydrology. Maybe you never noticed the changes in the water tables, but those that do know that the water tables have dropped, which is ironic that while we have been dealing with the effects of much higher temperatures, we are also facing the challenges of a water crisis.

As a young Mi’kma’k woman, I understand this work to be an integral component of our daily lives. It is part of our culture, a lifetime commitment, and a commitment to be a part of the solution to a centuries-long problem of what has been a failed partnership for far too long. We have a responsibility to protect our water, our resource. We need to understand that there is a scientific and a moral imperative to protect the water tables, the trees, the air, and the land.

It has been three weeks since the first protest against our unclean water, a protest that was organized by the Nbisi Nation, a self-governing people. The protesters are asking for access, we already have access. Our rights are substantive. This is hard work that we all must endure, and it is not easy, but it is the right thing to do, and we can all begin by asking ourselves important questions.

How do we understand our identities as Treaty people? How do we understand our relationship with the water? How do we understand our connection to our land? How do we understand our connection to our ancestors?

I am an enthusiast in renewable energy. I look at the world a little differently because I studied geography, glaciology, and hydrology. Maybe you never noticed the changes in the water tables, but those that do know that the water tables have dropped, which is ironic that while we have been dealing with the effects of much higher temperatures, we are also facing the challenges of a water crisis.

What can we do in New Brunswick?

Stop clearcutting. Forests breathe air and water through transpiration, which is a critical part of our carbon cycle without which we would not be here. Clearcutting and the monoculture forest policies in our province take water from all living creatures, be they ants, organisms, or ourselves.

Shade the watershed. In the Nashwaak Valley where I live, the river has been so low, the lowest that I have seen in 13 years, and the water levels are 30% of what they should be. Fish without food become more and more stressed, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The water levels are so low, fish cannot hide in the cooler, deeper waters. Salmon become stressed when the temperatures rise over 22 degrees Celsius. The future of salmon is at risk when water levels are as high as 27 degrees Celsius in salmon-bearing habitats were recorded at Durham Bridge this summer by the Nashwaak Watershed Association.

Don’t till the soil. The amount of carbon dioxide emissions caused by tillage is one of the leading causes of climate change. It is a major source of greenhouse gases, a major risk of erosion because of wind and heavy rains.

Manage your woodlot to create and maintain healthy riparian zones on the edges of rivers by planting trees and by reducing cattle grazing on them.

Take the opportunity to build momentum, to save forests, to grow the watershed, and to keep drought from becoming a permanent part of our lives.

Drew Gilbert lives in Taymouth, New Brunswick, where he is asking for access, we already have access. Our rights are substantive. This is hard work that we all must endure, and it is not easy, but it is the right thing to do, and we can all begin by asking ourselves important questions.

How do we understand our identities as Treaty people? How do we understand our relationship with the water? How do we understand our connection to our land? How do we understand our connection to our ancestors?

I am an enthusiast in renewable energy. I look at the world a little differently because I studied geography, glaciology, and hydrology. Maybe you never noticed the changes in the water tables, but those that do know that the water tables have dropped, which is ironic that while we have been dealing with the effects of much higher temperatures, we are also facing the challenges of a water crisis.

What can we do in New Brunswick?

Stop clearcutting. Forests breathe air and water through transpiration, which is a critical part of our carbon cycle without which we would not be here. Clearcutting and the monoculture forest policies in our province take water from all living creatures, be they ants, organisms, or ourselves.

Shade the watershed. In the Nashwaak Valley where I live, the river has been so low, the lowest that I have seen in 13 years, and the water levels are 30% of what they should be. Fish without food become more and more stressed, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The water levels are so low, fish cannot hide in the cooler, deeper waters. Salmon become stressed when the temperatures rise over 22 degrees Celsius. The future of salmon is at risk when water levels are as high as 27 degrees Celsius in salmon-bearing habitats were recorded at Durham Bridge this summer by the Nashwaak Watershed Association.

Don’t till the soil. The amount of carbon dioxide emissions caused by tillage is one of the leading causes of climate change. It is a major source of greenhouse gases, a major risk of erosion because of wind and heavy rains.

Manage your woodlot to create and maintain healthy riparian zones on the edges of rivers by planting trees and by reducing cattle grazing on them.

Take the opportunity to build momentum, to save forests, to grow the watershed, and to keep drought from becoming a permanent part of our lives.

Drew Gilbert lives in Taymouth, New Brunswick, where he is asking for access, we already have access. Our rights are substantive. This is hard work that we all must endure, and it is not easy, but it is the right thing to do, and we can all begin by asking ourselves important questions.

How do we understand our identities as Treaty people? How do we understand our relationship with the water? How do we understand our connection to our land? How do we understand our connection to our ancestors?

I am an enthusiast in renewable energy. I look at the world a little differently because I studied geography, glaciology, and hydrology. Maybe you never noticed the changes in the water tables, but those that do know that the water tables have dropped, which is ironic that while we have been dealing with the effects of much higher temperatures, we are also facing the challenges of a water crisis.