

Better Every Day



▲ Nolan and Tandi

Better Every Day is a publication of The City of Calgary—we're Calgarians serving the city we live in, the city we love, making life better every day.

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Located on the ancestral and traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, and homeland to the Métis Nation Battle River Territory (District 5 and 6), we are situated on land where the Bow and Elbow Rivers meet. The traditional names for this place we know as Calgary are *Moh-kins-tsis* (Blackfoot), *Wicispa Oyade* (Stoney Nakoda), *Otos-kwunee* (Métis) and *Guts-ists-i* (Tsuut'ina)

CALGARY INCORPORATED
AS A TOWN IN **1884**

POPULATION ESTIMATE 2022:
1,343,500

Lowest cost of living
of Canadian cities.

MERCER, 2023

Seventh most liveable
city in the world.

THE ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT, 2023

Friendliest city
in the world. CONDÉ NAST 2023
READERS CHOICE
AWARDS



MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

It's no secret that Calgary is experiencing a housing crisis. One in five Calgary households are unable to afford where they currently live. That's over 84,600 households who are spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing.

Housing choice and affordability are foundational to Calgary's competitive advantage as one of the world's most livable cities. To address the housing crisis and keep pace with rapid population growth, we had to get creative. In September 2023, City Council approved [Home is Here: The City of Calgary's Housing Strategy](#) to address the crisis, and The City has begun implementing the plan with its 98 actions. We need more homes in all shapes and sizes in all neighbourhoods to help support Calgary's prosperity now and for future generations.

Housing is deeply personal, as you will hear from the Calgarians featured in this edition of Better Every Day. Our home is our safety and security, our place to rest and recharge. It's where we spend time and create memories with our families and loved ones, cook the food that nourishes us, and store the keepsakes we care about. Our home gifts us with a sense of pride and dignity. It's a place to cool down in the summer months and warm up during winter. Where our home is located impacts how we interact with and experience our great city. Home truly is "where the heart is."

In this edition, we explore the incredible impacts of different housing forms in Calgary, from office conversions to backyard suites to Indigenous housing and other nonmarket housing programs. Read on for the personal stories of amazing Calgarians living in different places and situations and what home means to them. These stories certainly have inspired me to reflect on what home means to me, and I hope they inspire you to do the same.



David Duckworth, P. Eng, MBA

Backyard Bliss

HOME SUITE HOME



DID YOU KNOW?

- Backyard suites are sometimes referred to as laneway houses, carriage houses, garden suites, or garage suites.
- Calgary currently has nearly **200 backyard suites**.
- The City is seeing **25 per cent more applications** for backyard suites this year than in 2023.

Backyard suites are becoming increasingly popular across Canada due to the social, environmental, and economic benefits to owners, renters, and the city as a whole. A backyard suite is a second residence located behind or beside the primary residence on the same lot.

Karen and her husband Mike have lived in their bungalow home on a Crescent in Killarney for nearly three decades. It's the kind of neighbourhood where neighbours chat on their front porches, watch each other's kids run around in the park across the street, know to which house a loose dog belongs, and share birthday cake with everyone on the block.

In 2016, Karen and Mike had an 850 square foot, two-bedroom backyard suite built on top of a two-car garage. Originally, the suite was intended as a new home for Mike's parents, but when circumstances changed, the couple found another tenant — Mike's cousin's former partner Shirley.

Shirley lived on the same block since 1988 and is close with the couple. Following her separation, Shirley moved into the suite.

"I watched the suite being built and came to see it when it was finished," says Shirley. "The location is central and convenient. I could just see myself in it."

Moving into the suite allowed Shirley to stay in the neighbourhood she loves, close to her workplace at a hospital and close to her family doctor and dentist. Shirley lived there without a car for over two years, instead opting for cycling, transit, and Uber to get around. She has now resided in the suite for over six years.

Karen and Shirley rave about the benefits of their living situation. Shirley hems Karen's clothes. Mike brings Shirley his famous fresh baked bread and desserts. Shirley helps maintain the garden in the backyard and watches Karen and Mike's dog Crunchie when they are away.

Shirley adds, "When my mom went into care, I had my mom's dog. Mike and Karen were kind enough to let the dog age here in my suite, which was lovely."

Shirley also has lots to say about the benefits of living in a smaller place.

"I don't want to be doing too much house and yard work anymore. I'd rather be doing the hobbies I enjoy," she says. "It's also true that the bigger your place, you will find more and more stuff to fill it. We moved my mom and dad from a house they lived in for 50 years, and the stuff they accumulated was overwhelming. I don't want to do that to my son. This place is practical. It's more than enough space."

Karen echoes Shirley's sentiments. Her love of small homes was one of the reasons they built the suite.

"I've got a whole bunch of little books on smaller homes, I'm intrigued by small, and we always talked about keeping things small," says Karen.



Karen and Mike ▲

A neighbour down and across the alley built a backyard suite, and, for Karen, that was another catalyst for the idea to build one in their yard. Karen doesn't have all fond memories of going through the land change process, but it's a process that will become simpler and not require Council approval if citywide rezoning is adopted.

"We went to Council in 2015 for approval to develop the suite," says Karen. "Some neighbours were in support and some neighbours were against the idea."

In the end, approval for the land change was granted, followed by development permit and building permit approvals. Karen had design features included to alleviate neighbour concerns across the alley, such as mylar film on some of the windows to create more privacy.

"It actually brought us more in line with the rest of the block in terms of height," says Karen, noting that over the years, the neighbourhood changed, and mostly two-story structures replaced many of the bungalows. "Once it was built, nobody had an issue."

The design, originally intended for Mike's aging parents, included a wide staircase and the power setup necessary to add a chairlift (if ever needed), a shower instead of a bathtub for ease of access, and door frames that could accommodate a wheelchair (if ever needed). It also features a skylight and a balcony, so its tenants have access to the outdoors without having to go downstairs.

Karen and Mike's daughter Veronica has intentions of moving back into her childhood home to raise her family if she has children with her partner in the future. Shirley plans to stay until that happens, and then the backyard suite would transition to Karen and Mike.

Karen and Mike are fond of their community and look forward to the idea of "aging in place" with their daughter, son-in-law and possible future grandchildren just steps away - and Shirley hopefully somewhere close by in the neighbourhood!

"Veronica's memories are here. She loved growing up on this Crescent, and she loves this house," says Karen. "So, we said we will make it work."

In November 2023, Council approved City funding for the Secondary Suite Incentive Program to encourage more homeowners to build backyard and basement homes. Funding support is also being provided through the [Housing Accelerator Fund](#). The program team continues to develop the program. 

If interested in learning more, visit calgary.ca/SecondarySuites or [sign up](#) for our email list for updates on the program.



Shirley ▼

An Indigenous Housing Story

HOME FIRE



▲ Nolan at home

Home Fire is an Indigenous **Housing First** program for youth ages 16 to 24 who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness. With a focus on **harm reduction** and reconnection with culture, this scattered-site housing program offered by **Trellis Society** (Trellis) aims to house youth in the community of their choice.

The Orion building in Beltline, owned by HomeSpace Society and operated by Trellis, offers 11 homes out of its 32 units as part of the Home Fire program.

Nolan, 23, and his younger brother, have been residents of Orion in the Home Fire program since October 2023.

Nolan was born and raised in Edmonton. He lived in a townhouse in the suburbs with his mother, stepfather and eight siblings. He describes his childhood as “terrible” having experienced family violence and mental health issues throughout the years and bullying at school.

After high school, Nolan worked in the food industry, making Bannock burgers for an Indigenous-owned food service company. He and his brother shared an apartment with a roommate but were evicted after their roommate stopped contributing to the monthly rent.

“Every month, me and my brother were on top of paying our rent, paying for groceries, and paying bills,” says Nolan. “We were trying to be responsible. We didn’t know [our roommate] wasn’t paying his share until we got the eviction notice. Housing is expensive, you know. It sucked.”

Without a place to call home in the city, Nolan and his brother spent a year with some of their family on a reserve before they were referred to the housing program through a triage system managed by the Calgary Homeless Foundation.

Tandi Purych is Program Manager for Trellis’ Home Fire program. Tandi and all her employees are Indigenous, which is core to the program’s success.

“Our biggest goal right now is to implement programming where we are really being ‘hands on’ with the kids,” says Tandi. “We are teaching them the skills to be a good tenant, to be a good neighbour, to use Rent Faster and Indeed and all those pieces. But we go deeper with healing.”



“My grandma went to residential school,”Tandi continues. “My staff and I all resonate with that intergenerational trauma piece and the healing that needs to happen. We’re not a surface level housing program.”

Many of the youths in the program came from foster care. Many are not aware of their Indigenous background and do not have connections to their communities.

“We recognize where these kids come from. There’s a level of understanding that we walk with but also makes this work a lot harder,” adds Tandi. “You have to be a certain amount of healed to do this work.”

As part of the program, elders come to the building to facilitate sharing circles and teach Indigenous youth about their history and cultures.

“It is great to have elders come here and teach us, because a lot of that history gets lost,” says Nolan. “We need to get back to our roots and remember. It’s part of our healing. They also bring us places. I recently went to a sweat lodge. I’m still going through mental health issues, so it was great to be able to get back to that spirituality again, sweat it out, get all that negative energy out and come back feeling like a whole new person.”

The program also enables the youths to work on their goals. Nolan’s experiences with bullying and other issues during high school robbed him of his ability to focus on his grades at the time. Now while living at Orion, Nolan is hard at work upgrading his high school diploma to gain the prerequisites to achieve his goal of getting into an Information Technology (IT) program at either Bow Valley College or SAIT Polytechnic.

“I love the idea of getting an education because I notice most families that I know don’t have a long-term plan for themselves, so they end up getting stuck in this loop,” says Nolan. “They will have a job but it’s not enough to build a life for their kids. If I ever have kids, I want to make sure I have something for them. I’m trying to break that cycle and build wealth for future generations.”

When Nolan isn’t focusing on school, he enjoys drawing and making art. A Japanese-inspired painting by Nolan hangs in Tandi’s office. He explained the three meanings behind it:

“The Yin Yang is the balance of life. There’s good and bad, then there’s good in the bad, and bad in the good. Everything requires balance. And then the red sun is very significant because every day we wake up to the sun, and it’s a new day, a fresh start, new hope. And then with the Koi fish, there’s a fable about these fish swimming up the waterfall. It’s hard because the pressure of the water is bringing them down, but they kept going anyway and eventually when they reach to the top, they became dragons and fly out from the top of the waterfall. No matter how hard life is, you just keep going. One day you’ll get there, and you’ll evolve, you’ll become the dragon. That’s why I painted that because it’s very inspirational and the meanings behind it are very important.”



Nolan went on to liken Trellis to the story of the fish overcoming the waterfall.

“That’s what Trellis is about - growing into something better than what you might have been,” says Nolan. “That’s what they (the program staff) want. They want us to grow from the little seed that they brought us from into like a full-on plant when we leave this program. This is just temporary, and we will graduate to become a whole new person and better than before. So, Trellis is very symbolic too.”

In October 2023, three non-profit affordable housing providers, including Trellis, were awarded parcels of City-owned land to create an estimated 100 new affordable homes for Calgarians, as part of The City’s third non-profit land sale. Land acquired in Bowness will enable Trellis to expand their housing programming. 

Home Fire From an Indigenous perspective, the concept for the program name symbolizes the heart of community, embodying notions of home, family, culture, and identity. It signifies coming home to a physical home but also coming home to culture.

Housing First A recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that centers on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into housing and then providing additional supports and services as needed.

Harm Reduction An approach or strategy aimed at reducing the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual and the community.

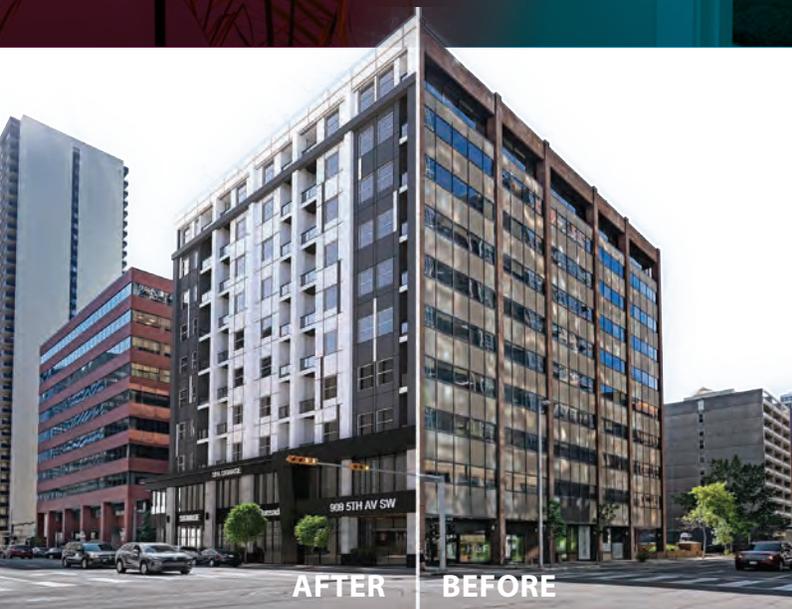
Trellis A structure used to support trees or climbing plants as they grow

WELCOME

From Offices to Homes:

CONSTRUCTING THE CORNERSTONE CONVERSION

◀ Pavlo



DID YOU KNOW?

- An office-to-residential conversion is a process of converting an existing office building into a residential property, such as condos or apartments.
- There are **17 approved** and in review office conversion projects in The City's pipeline that will create over **2,300 homes for Calgarians** and remove more than 2.3 million sq. ft. of vacant downtown office space from the market.

Downtown is the economic and cultural heart of Calgary, yet its office vacancy rate still sits above 30 per cent.

In 2021, The City introduced new initiatives and investments as part of [Calgary's Greater Downtown Plan](#) to revitalize our downtown and start to lower office vacancy, improve vibrancy, and create more homes in the core. Financial incentives for downtown office-to-residential conversions were launched as part of the strategy.

The Cornerstone is an office-to-residential conversion offering 112 suites at the corner of 5th Ave and 8th St downtown. The project is the first to be completed through the incentive program.

Frey, who works as a marketing and graphic design specialist, and Pavlo, who manages a local restaurant, will be two of The Cornerstone's first tenants.

Frey plans to move into his new home with a roommate, a cost-sharing strategy he says lots of his family and friends are doing in this current economy. Pavlo, who is living with two roommates in Beltline, is excited to live alone in his new apartment.

When asked what navigating Calgary's rental market was like, Pavlo answered "It's crazy!"

Frey expressed that the experience has been "brutal" and joked, "I wouldn't wish that on any of my enemies looking to find a place right now."

Downtown living may not be for everyone, but Frey and Pavlo wouldn't have it any other way.

"I've worked and lived downtown my entire adult life. It really is the place for me," says Frey. "What do they say in real estate? Location, location, location! The Cornerstone is two blocks away from Prince's Island Park, two blocks away from the C-train, two blocks from my favourite restaurant, and a few minutes away from Kensington. I love being in the center of it all!"

Pavlo echoes that sentiment.

"The position here is amazing. I'm biking so I have to stay close to everything. I also love walking. My favourite place to walk is along the Bow, two minutes away. The C-train goes in all directions from here. I like the style of life here with a lot of movement, a lot of energy."

The renovated building features finishings inspired by luxury hotels. The first floor includes retail space for tenants and for

the neighbourhood, and the second floor will be dedicated to a salon coworking space. Floors three through 10 are dedicated to two-and three-bedroom apartments. Each unit also has a balcony, a feature added during reconstruction.

Office-to-residential conversions are no easy task. Astra Group/ PeopleFirst Developments led by Managing Director Maxim Olshevsky decided to take on the challenge after the introduction of The City's incentive program.

Maxim was also personally inspired to do this work downtown. His family moved to Calgary from Ukraine when he was 13, and they lived in Downtown West.

"I remember passing by this building, and I remember how this neighborhood changed from being vibrant to what it was not long ago," says Maxim. "For us, it was aligning all of our values and all of our resources and capabilities to executing these projects. The incentive that was established actually made us pull all of our resources from BC, Saskatchewan, and northern Alberta here to the West end of downtown."

Maxim's group of companies are also working on a number of other conversion projects downtown including Petro Fina, a heritage building conversion that will yield over 100 new homes for Calgarians planned to be completed by 2025.

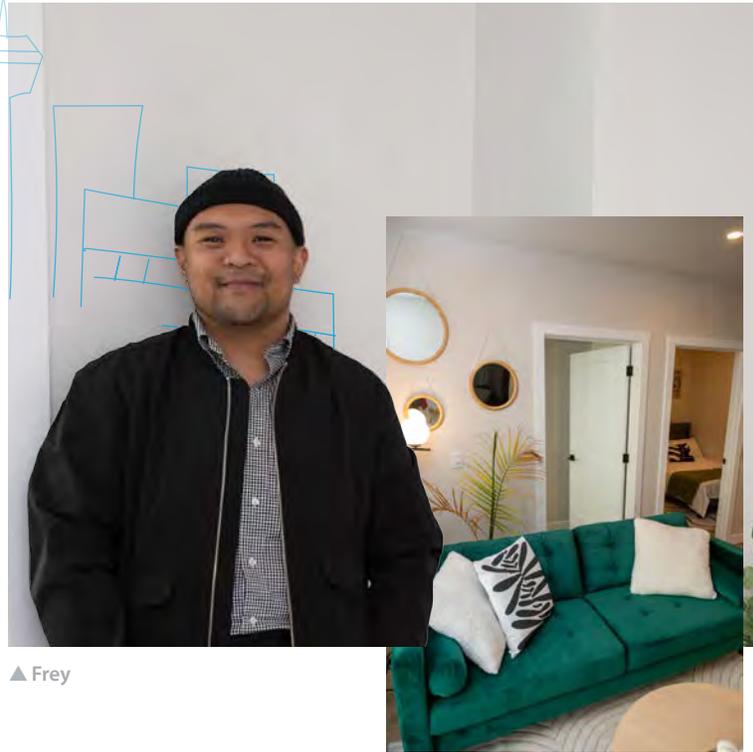
"I think the impact of these projects is quite significant and multi-faceted," says Maxim. "When we take an empty office tower and we turn it into something that's more valuable, not only are we improving vibrancy, we will also help small businesses in the neighborhood. The more people we have

here, the more businesses will open up. It really creates a lot of benefits that everybody enjoys, and then downtown can become a destination and not a ghost town after 5 p.m."

In addition to market units, The Cornerstone includes some affordable homes. Approximately 40 per cent of the units were offered at 20 per cent below market rents. A program called The Pathway also gives nonprofit partner organizations the ability to secure units at The Cornerstone at an affordable rate for individuals who they support and who have lower incomes.

"I put tears and blood into this building. I hope the tenants really enjoy it," says Maxim. "It took a whole army to pull this off and I'm very grateful for everybody who was involved and very grateful for The City. I'm really happy to contribute back to the community that I grew up in and to play our small part in solving an issue that so many cities face."

Frey and Pavlo are scheduled to move into their new suites at The Cornerstone in April 2024.



▲ Frey



▲ Maxim during construction

"Home is the place where the soul can rest," says Pavlo. "Every one of us is fighting for a better future to achieve our dreams, goals and everything else. Home is where you can just switch off the world and concentrate with yourself, be within your mind to listen to your heart, which is very important."



Once the move is over, Pavlo's goal is to open his own restaurant downtown. 🍴

Interviews for this article took place in March 2024 prior to building occupancy beginning April 2024.



Partner Feature:

NO PLACE LIKE HOMESPACE



HomeSpace Society is a nonprofit housing developer, owner and operator, with nearly 900 housing units serving vulnerable populations throughout the city. We sat down with HomeSpace's CEO Bernadette Majdell to chat about some of their recent and current projects and the impact of affordable housing in Calgary.

Q&A with Bernadette Majdell of HomeSpace Society

Q: Tell us how Neoma came to life in Calgary's Downtown.

A: We were in the middle of the pandemic and the federal government launched the Rapid Housing Initiative, which was funding targeted towards conversion or modular. We haven't really done a lot of modular, so we were looking at conversions.

The easiest conversion at the time would have been hotels. Many were vacant because of COVID. Many hotel owners were trying to sell, and that led to, in my opinion, an untenable situation where nonprofits were competing and bidding up the costs. The other thing that was happening in Calgary was our office vacancy rate downtown was over 30 per cent. As an organization, we took a step back and said 'What's the right thing to do, not only for the people we serve but also the city we live in?' so we started looking at office conversions.

Sierra Place (as the office building was called at the time) was in a prime location close to the C-train and had been sitting vacant for a couple years. It was the perfect storm where all these amazing elements came together. It so happened that some of the pre-work had already been done on the building, so we went to our board and said 'This is what we want to do. We don't yet have the money, but it's the right thing to do and we feel like we can get the money' and the board approved it.

Q: And you found financial support for the project?

A: The City of Calgary was first in, in terms of money to the project. This was even before The City's Downtown Strategy was approved. The City demonstrated its commitment to doing the right thing for downtown, and from there we got the federal government, the provincial government, and we partnered with Inn from the Cold as our anchor tenant. That allowed us the ability to fundraise the difference after and gave us a product that was mortgage-free, which enables Neoma to be very deeply subsidized. We're about 40 per cent below market for the rents in that building.

Q: Do you have an example of a resident success story from Neoma that you can share?

A: The best stories are really when residents move in. We had this one lady with her two kids, and when we showed them the apartment, she burst into tears and her kids were crying as well. They were a family from Ukraine and after going through trauma and moving to Canada, they didn't believe that they'd get to live in a beautiful place that they could afford. I'm proud of Neoma in terms of how beautiful it is. When you have people who've experienced trauma see where they'll be living, to me, that's one of the biggest immediate impacts of housing.



▲ Bernadette

Neoma: An office-to-residential conversion project in Calgary's Downtown. HomeSpace transformed the vacant office building into more than 80 units of affordable housing, as well as a childcare center, family shelter, and programming space, in partnership with Inn from the Cold. The renovated building opened in Fall 2022.

Modular: a type of construction where the home is built inside a home-building factory. Once complete, the modules (or components of these homes) are transported to a permanent location and assembled.

Rapid Housing Initiative: A federal government initiative that provides funding to support the rapid development of permanent, new affordable housing units.

Downtown Safety Leadership

Table: Established in September 2023 by Mayor Gondok, a representative group of downtown leaders convened to identify barriers, opportunities, solutions, and strategies to address real and perceived safety issues in downtown Calgary.

Permanent Supportive

Housing: a model that combines low-barrier affordable housing with social service supports to assist individuals in achieving housing stability.



DID YOU KNOW?

Neoma features Alberta's largest outdoor mural on the west side of the building!

Once people are safely and securely housed, then their life can start to change. If they're not safely housed, if they're afraid, if they're worried, if they don't know where their kids are going to sleep, then nothing can begin to change. Housing improves their lives, absolutely. And we have some residents who have now moved on to different locations.

Q: HomeSpace was selected to develop [two family housing sites with City-owned land](#). Can you share some details about those two projects?

A: [When Council passed the Housing Strategy last September], there was an amendment made that focused two projects for emergency family housing. An open bid went out for all housing providers in the nonprofit sector to bid on. We are uniquely positioned because we are a specialized developer in affordable housing. One of the things that was a non-negotiable for The City was timeline. From signing the agreements to completion, we were looking at an 18-month timeline, which is tight. We put our best foot forward to be able to win these two projects because we think we're best suited to deliver them on time and on budget in a market that desperately needs family housing.

Q: Neoma and those two developments focus on families experiencing homelessness. What other types of housing does HomeSpace provide in terms of different demographics?

A: HomeSpace was created to be able to serve the most vulnerable. That really ranges through the city, and it changes. When we did the community consultation for one of the family sites in February, one of the questions was "Can you tell me exactly who's going to live here?" I said no because the families who are most in need today may or may not be the families who are most in need in 18 months. A lot changes in 18 months. What makes HomeSpace unique is that our housing can serve a variety of populations based on the critical need in the moment. We serve those exiting or experiencing homelessness, ranging from youth, families, women, singles. Some of our buildings are for a higher complexity in terms of individuals struggling with mental health, addictions, and physical health.

Most recently, the Downtown Safety Leadership Table completed its report and one of its recommendations supports one of our goals in the coming year, and that's to find a site for high support, recovery-based, permanent supportive housing. That would be for our most visible unhoused in the Downtown core right now, who need incredible wraparound services and to be able to live with dignity. So that's our newest project.

Q: What would you say is the biggest barrier to getting more nonmarket housing built?

A: It's two-fold right now. One is money. Whenever we're talking about nonmarket housing, money has to come from somewhere, whether it's land, whether it's funding, whether it's donors. Especially in this environment with inflation and economic realities, we just can't make the numbers work if there's not money from somewhere.

The second barrier is community perception. With all of our community consultations, it comes down to not what product are we building, but who is living there. I've had some very difficult conversations, and we don't shy away from the hard conversations. I can tell you no community has thrown a party when they heard HomeSpace is moving next to them. But people don't understand who our residents are. They're just people, and nobody knows what journey brought them to HomeSpace. All we know is that they need safe, affordable housing, and we think everybody deserves safe, affordable housing.

Q: Why are you personally passionate about housing, and what does home mean for you?

A: I'm from the Maritimes and where I grew up there wasn't really visible homelessness. For us, when somebody fell on hard times, the community just rallied around them. That's a different place, different time. For me, home has always been a safe space. To think that there are kids, families, women, uncles, brothers, sisters who don't have a safe place to live because of what happened to them in their life signifies what's wrong with society today. I think that we need to take care of our most vulnerable and that's the part that I try to play in a small way at HomeSpace. 

LOOK AHEAD

This list is not exhaustive.

APRIL

[Roads Spring Clean-up](#)
watch for signs starting mid-Apr

[Earth Day](#)
Apr 22

[Parade of Wonders – Calgary Expo](#)
Apr 26

[CED Report to the Community](#)
Apr 17

[Day of Mourning](#)
Apr 28

MAY

[Asian Heritage Month](#)
May

[Speech and Hearing Awareness Month](#)
May

[Bike to Work Day](#)
May 3

[Sport Chek Mother's Day Run, Walk & Wheel](#)
May 12

[Inglewood Night Market](#)
May 12

[International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia](#)
May 17

[Global Accessibility Awareness Day](#)
May 19

[World Day for Cultural Diversity](#)
May 21

[International Day of Biological Diversity](#)
May 22

[Menstrual Hygiene Day](#)
May 28

[Calgary MS Walk](#)
May 28

JUNE

[Calgary Humane Society Dog Jog](#)
June 1

[4th Street Lilac Festival](#)
June 2

[Two Wheel Sunday](#)
June 2

[World Environment Day](#)
June 5

[Mayor's Environment Expo](#)
June 3 – 6

[Senior's Week](#)
June 3 – 9

[Inglewood Night Market](#)
June 7

[Betty's Run for ALS](#)
June 9

[Firefighter Stairclimb Challenge](#)
June 9

[Neighbour Day](#)
June 15

[Aboriginal Awareness Week](#)
June 17 – 23

[National Indigenous Peoples Day](#)
June 21

[Sled Island](#)
June 19 – 23

[Marda Loop Night Market](#)
June 21

ANYTIME

[Tree care and education](#)
Download reference guides and follow learning modules.

[Calgary AfterSchool programs calendar](#)
Fun, safe and low-cost after school programs for children and youth.

