

## Co-op housing project beats the odds

By LARA BRADLEY, THE SUDBURY STAR

Barb Millsap became emotional as she recounted some of the hurdles in realizing a 14-year dream.

"At points I didn't ever think we were going to do it," said Millsap, the president of the board of the Raiffeisen Cooperative Homes (Phase I) and soon-to-be-open Raiffeisen Phase 2.

"Last summer, when we couldn't find a lender. We weren't expecting that."

It wasn't easy leveraging almost \$12 million for Sudbury's first affordable housing project since 1994 -- even with \$3.3 million from the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program and \$1.3 million in financial incentives from the city.

Actually, the project marks another first -- the first time in a decade all three levels of government have contributed toward building affordable housing.

Sudbury MPP Rick Bartolucci and Mayor John Rodriguez spoke about the importance of working together at the press conference.

"In difficult times, it is always good news when the Canadian community rallies together to put together solid projects that will help citizens achieve a greater quality of life and living," said Rodriguez.

"We are proud to support initiatives such as this, which will provide long-term affordable housing for vulnerable persons in Sudbury," said Bartolucci.

On Tuesday, drills whirled and a giant spool of cable whined as workers pulled wire into the frame of an 80-unit affordable housing apartment for low-income individuals and families.

Of those units, eight will be set aside for clients of the Canadian Mental Health Association and 12 will be for people with physical challenges. However, the complex is still searching for funding to make those 12 apartments into supportive housing units, which ICAN would look after.

"These 12 units will free up desperately needed hospital and extended care beds in the community," Millsap said.

Two years ago, Millsap brought an idea she had been dreaming of since the 1990s -- of building an apartment complex providing affordable housing next existing the Raiffeisen Co-operative -- to the board. While she suspects some board members thought she was "dreaming in technicolour," they gave her the green light to pursue it.

"But I think many had thought it was futile since no new non-profit housing had been built in the city since 1994 when the province cancelled the last project," she said.

After a few snags, by 2008 it appeared viable and confidently they began to move ahead.

Yes, there were frustrations. "Because the three levels of government had not been doing new development in over a decade, rules and requirements were often a moving target," she said.

One problem they weren't expecting was finding a lender. One bank after another showed initial interest, only to back out at the last minute.

"I didn't dare tell Sam (Biasucci, the builder) because he was already into the project by a million bucks," she said.

Millsap went through many sleepless nights in July and August of 2008 looking for a lender, "even though we had all this money coming in and a 100% guarantee from CMHC," she said.

Finally, People's Trust of Canada agreed to take the project on at the end of August, offering it a 35-year mortgage.

Much of the work has already been done. Builder Sam Biasucci, owner of Saldan, reported that the project is one week ahead of schedule for opening Nov. 1.

"Construction is always a challenge. We worked for Barb before. She's probably the hardest working woman I've ever met. When she starts something, she doesn't give up," he said.

"She brings your enthusiasm along with her's. Once you start, you know you will go all the way to the end ... It's what we do for a living. We wouldn't do it if we didn't enjoy it. We wanted to make sure it looked as good as the rest of the houses."

Biasucci lives just up the street in one of Saldan's brand new houses in the Sunrise Ridge Estate development off Mount Adam. His company built Raiffeisen Co-operative (phase 1), which is next door to this new apartment building.

"It's going to have exciting colours. Stay tuned for that," Biasucci said.

To inquire about the units available, contact the Raiffeisen Co-operative Homes office, at 151 Mount Adam, or call 674-6818. The board is still sorting through applications, but expects it will be full before it opens.