

Ottawa Inuit plan their own apartment complex

Charitable group now seeks -construction money

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By 2011 Inuit living in Ottawa may be able to rent affordable apartments in an all-Inuit apartment complex designed to meet their cultural, economic and spiritual needs.

The 45-unit block, dubbed Inuksuk House due to the stylized inuksuk planned for its façade, is slated for a lot owned by St. Margaret's Anglican Church on Montreal Rd. in Vanier.

For years, the Anglican diocese of Ottawa pondered what to do with the property.

But Bill Prentice of the Anglican diocese of Ottawa said the presence of many Inuit parishioners at St. Margaret's Church showed them the way.

"We began to realize that the need was there for housing and to develop a spiritual community. Eight in 10 Inuit are Anglicans," said Prentice, who is also the vice-president of the charitable group called "Maison Inuksuk House."

For the past three years, this group, which includes members of Ottawa's Inuit community, St. Margaret's Church, and the diocese, has worked on getting the project off the ground.

To become reality, Inuksuk House is looking for money from the federal Aboriginal Off-Reserve Housing Trust fund.

Money from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corp. paid for architects from the CSV architectural company to come up with drawings and for re-zoning applications for the land that surrounds the 130-year-old church.

As envisaged now, a five- or six-storey building would offer a combination of one and two bedroom units, with common spaces for food preparation, gatherings, and a possible country food and crafts store.

A small portion of the property would also include a garden and a meeting area that might include an igloo-shaped enclosure.

To pay for construction of the Inuksuk House complex, the promoters will need to raise about \$4 million.

At least 1,500 Inuit from all Arctic regions live in Ottawa, and low-cost housing for them is in short supply.

Arguments in favour of building more affordable housing for Inuit in Ottawa include research showing that the average Inuit family in Ottawa pays 15 to 20 per cent more of their income for lodging than the average non-Inuit family.

Although the vacancy rate in Ottawa is rising, the cost of rental accommodation has not decreased.

And, as the cost of housing relative to income rises for low-income earners, less money is available for other necessities such as food, notes a 2004 report on homelessness in Ottawa.

The Inuit Non-Profit Housing Corporation offers 63 rent-geared-to-income housing units for Inuit families and singles living in the Ottawa area. But not everyone qualifies for public -housing.