

# "Answering the unanswerable"

Imagine you are standing in front of a public meeting. You have been giving good, factual answers to the questions about your development. And then suddenly you are confronted with an "unanswerable question" – and you realize you need to offer some human rights education with your answer.

Here are some of the questions we have heard at public meetings, and the types of responses that might protect your own dignity, and the dignity of the people you serve.

**Q:** *"Our neighbourhood already has more than its fair share of problem people. Why don't you go somewhere else."*

**A:** This is a neighbourhood our tenants want to live in – it's close to transit, it's got good, affordable shops . . . and it's a neighbourhood we can afford. That's why we're here.

To me, the real issue is, how do we work together to enhance things we all love about this area?

**Q:** *"You aren't from this neighbourhood. Where do you live? And if you think this project is so great, why don't you put it on your street?"*

**A:** I live right across the street from supportive housing, and I have other social housing down the block. And not one single bad thing has happened in the seven years I've lived there. I would be proud to have this project on my street, but it just so happens that the site that is available is **here**.

**Q:** *"Lucky for us we heard about your plans to sneak this project under the radar. When had you planned to actually get around to telling us you were putting ex-psychs into the neighbourhood?"*

**A:** You know, when I bought my house I didn't leaflet the neighbourhood. I didn't knock on doors and ask my neighbours whether it was OK. I just did it – and no-one accused me of sneaking in under the radar. Maybe you did the same when you moved in. The truth is our tenants have the same rights as you and me.

This building happens to need a Committee of Adjustment approval, and there's a public consultation process for that. This meeting is part of that process. But whether the people who live in the building have a disability or not is irrelevant.

**Q:** *"I bust my gut to save enough money to buy my house. Why should my taxes buy this so-called affordable housing for a bunch of welfare bums?"*

**A:** Our city has been lobbying for years for more funding for affordable housing because they know it's needed for a healthy city. We also know that when people don't have a decent place to live, they use emergency rooms, hospitals, and other services more. We pay for those costs with our taxes. They pay with their lives. For all our sakes, I can't think of a better use of public funds.

**Q:** *"I'm a social worker. And I can tell you that the form of housing you propose is just not appropriate."*

**A:** We really value professional opinion, and so we're glad that all three levels of government and many studies have endorsed precisely the form of housing we propose. But to tell the truth, we value the opinions of our tenants even more. We have been consulting with them all through the design process. They think this is going to be a great building, and I do too.

*Continued...*

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**Q:** *“The only way we’d feel comfortable with you being in this neighbourhood is if we could have a rep on your tenant screening committee.”*

**A:** Actually, we don’t have a tenant screening committee. Staff screen tenants, using the criteria set by our funders. We find this is the best way to protect the privacy of our tenants – as we are legally required to do.

But just to reassure you, we will not take anyone who needs more support than we can offer. We do that for their sake, and also for the sake of our other tenants.

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**Q:** *“I notice you never put this housing in Rosedale (or Leaside, or on the Bridle Path).”*

**A:** You’re right. We look for sites we can afford – just like everyone else. We can’t afford to bring this housing into high-priced neighbourhoods. And would you really want taxpayers to pay \$1 Million per unit subsidies – or whatever it would cost – to put these homes into the most costly parts of the city?

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**Q:** *What if we end up with pan-handlers on the street? Or shoplifters? What do we do then?*

**A:** If I see a panhandler I smile, say hello, and then give money or not, as I choose. If I see a shoplifter I alert the store staff. I suggest dealing with it the same way you do now.

**Q:** *“I’m not worried about the men when they’re inside the shelter. But how are you going to control them when they go out?”*

**A:** We don’t control the men who stay in the shelter. We offer them a service.

We strive to provide the best service possible – just as your doctor may strive to give you good care, or your landlord may strive to give you good housing – but they are not responsible for your actions.

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**Q:** *“You want to put these criminals, drug addicts, bums and pedophiles right next door to my house? Are you insane?”*

**A:** I know you’re scared. But I also know this: that the unknown is more frightening than the reality.

In my experience the people who stay in shelters are not that different from everyone else. Some are kind, generous, smart, funny – some not so much. But they all have the right to be here.

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**Q:** *“Don’t you get it? This is a democracy – majority rules. There is not a single person in this room who wants you here. When are you going to do the right thing and cancel this project?”*

**A:** Outside of this room are a whole bunch of people who in fact want to be here. They are our waiting list. Their right to live where they choose is protected by the Ontario Human Rights Code – the same law that protects the rights of all minorities, whether they are wanted or not. That’s what I call democracy!