

# Housing industry has 'special responsibility': CEO

## TAKE 5

By Cassandra Kyle

*Alan Thomarat is used to wearing a lot of hats.*

*Not only is he the CEO of the Saskatoon and Region Home Builders' Association, he also serves as the CEO of the Canadian Home Builders' Association — Saskatchewan and as the board chair of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology.*

*The local industry advocate will even don a real hat — a hard hat, to be specific — to visit home construction sites around the city.*

*StarPhoenix business reporter Cassandra Kyle asked Thomarat five questions on Wednesday about Saskatoon's residential construction industry.*

**SP:** What is the current state of the residential construction industry in Saskatoon?

**AT:** Well, I think the industry is strong. We've been working very hard with municipal governments in Saskatoon and around Saskatoon to work in partnership to make sure we're addressing housing needs and market needs.

Certainly we recognize there's always a concern, as we're a growing city and a growing province, that we've got appropriate and obtainable housing for young people moving

here and staying here and people coming to Saskatoon to make this their home.

We're always mindful that decisions that we make as an industry and decisions that we make with our municipal governments may have good or bad impacts on affordability of housing.

**SP:** How much of the local economy is based on residential construction?

**AT:** Residential construction here for Saskatchewan is very important. I think what we have to realize is that whether we're talking about housing or mining or agri-food processing or health sciences, our ability to be able to satisfy labour market needs in those other industries is predicated on the ability to deliver affordable and appropriate housing across many segments of the marketplace.

Our ability to grow the mining industry based on the investment intentions of some mining entities or

the need to make sure that we've got more nurses or more first responders or people in the critical areas of HR infrastructure such as teachers is all going to be dependent on housing.

So I think that the housing industry has a special responsibility that's not really seen in many other industries. Our core infrastructure, our core HR capacity that's needed to provide basic services in our communities, will depend on the availability of housing across all the many segments of the marketplace.

**SP:** You've long been calling for more affordable housing in the city. What are your concerns?

**AT:** Well, I think the concern is that we do have a changing demographic, certainly, at the one end. . . . We are seeing that there are more retirements in the marketplace and we need to be concerned that people, as they retire, are able to still have a quality of life and enjoyment in their own homes or, if they make lifestyle changes to smaller housing, that we will have that housing stock available.

But also, Saskatoon has continued to grow and now we're retaining our population. As well, a lot of that is at the point in the marketplace where you have people starting their careers and we need to be concerned



Thomarat

that they have the ability to access homeownership.

Certainly there are people on fixed incomes that have pressures with respect to income that are going to need some support and are going to need some availability of an entry-level market housing product so that they are going to have an appropriate place to live.

**SP:** Have you seen any movement toward more affordable housing units in the city?

**AT:** Absolutely. There's an organization called the Saskatoon Housing Initiative Partnership (SHIP), which is working very hard to assist people that are housing providers — some of the church groups and some of the marketplace builders — who want to assist in making sure that the housing need is addressed.

What SHIP has started to do is actually provide development services and partnerships with the home builders' association and the financial services sector and we're pleased to see that Sask. Housing Corporation is now bringing in programs that are focused on obtainability of market housing for people at lower income levels that otherwise wouldn't be there.

**SP:** What area of the city needs more housing?

**AT:** I think all areas of the city need to be focused on mixed-use housing. We don't want to see circumstances where we're stigmatizing a neighbourhood by focusing what was sometimes considered social housing projects into one area of the city.

I think a healthy city is where you have all communities growing and people have choices and access to housing in all areas of the city regardless of their income levels.

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