

# Through Fires and Floods:

## HOW HOUSING SOLUTIONS ARE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

by HOPE MOON

When the June wildfires raged through Nova Scotia, shortly followed by the July floods, both destroying communities and homes in their wake, the connection between the housing crisis and the climate crisis became undeniable. As people lost their homes, many wondered, “Where will they go?”

With historically low vacancy rates and even fewer affordable options, Nova Scotians are keenly aware of the province's housing crisis. Even once secured into a home, staying on top of growing and volatile expenses associated with heating and cooling is difficult. People are living precariously and have been made increasingly vulnerable to system-shocking events like natural disasters.

The climate crisis exposes weaknesses in our systems and tests the ability of communities to recover from devastating events. After the fires and floods, the number of people living in precarious housing situations has only increased. The one relief is that both crises can and should be addressed simultaneously.

### Less housing, lower resilience

Anyone with experience looking for a place to live will tell you that it's not only difficult to find a vacancy, but also increasingly expensive.

Nova Scotia's vacancy rates are historically low, with Halifax's rate at one per cent — below the Canadian average of 1.9 per cent. A recent report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives discovered that the rental wage in Nova Scotia, which is the hourly wage required to rent a one- or two-bedroom apartment, stands at \$21.38 and \$26.06, respectively. At the time of the report, minimum wage was \$13.60 per hour (currently it is \$14.50 per hour). Though the minimum wage is expected to increase to \$15 per hour in October, it is not nearly close enough to the rental wage in order for Nova Scotians to be secure in their housing.

Even those in secure housing will tell you that bills have gone up, too. The cost of home heating oil was 50 per cent higher in 2022 than it was in 2021, and the cost of electricity is set to rise by 14 per cent by the end of 2024. Altogether, low availability and affordability and high energy costs are tipping many households into financial insecurity across the province.

When people are forced to choose between rent, heating, food or medication, there is little wiggle room to deal with unpredictable costs or crises. Mental capacity to focus on anything beyond immediate needs or concerns becomes limited. This lowered capacity to think about the future or donate time and energy to a cause disengages people from collective, long-term climate action and adaptation plans. The housing crisis renders people vulnerable and stagnant when what we need is resilient and active communities.

Resilient communities are able to rise again after being knocked down. Nova Scotians have shown incredible resilience and strength in the past few years. However, with our warming climate, our communities are being knocked down more and more, with less and less time for recovery before the next blow. In the ten months between September 2022 and July 2023, we have dealt with a hurricane, devastating forest fires and unprecedented flooding, on top of a worsening housing crisis and rising inflation. With future heat waves, storms and other extreme weather, investment in secure, affordable and efficient housing will help us stand tall and lead us to the biggest solution — lowering our overall emissions.





Buildings in downtown Halifax.  
PHOTO: Simon Ryder-Burbidge

## Housing solutions are energy solutions

In 2019, residential energy use made up a quarter of the province’s energy demand, with two thirds coming from home heating oil alone. Programs and policies aiding the transition from oil- and gas-based heating systems towards electric heat pumps directly decarbonize home heating methods. Additionally, an efficiently built or retrofitted home can retain temperatures better, reducing excessive energy spent on heating or cooling — saving energy and costs.

The province has begun addressing energy use and affordability, offering free heat pumps for low-income households and accelerating the transition from oil heat. Coupled with their climate plan goal of “[banning] installations of oil-fired heating equipment in new buildings by 2025,” both new builds and existing households have the chance to decarbonize their heating sources. However, these programs are only available to those fortunate enough to own their own homes, leaving renters, students and apartment complex residents without many options to lower their costs and environmental footprint.

While the Nova Scotian 2022 Climate Plan lays out priorities to “support the construction and renovation of net-zero homes and multi-unit residential buildings, including net-zero affordable housing,” it lacks any concrete detail of what that support will look like — how many homes and buildings will they support? How much housing will be made affordable? The province has a history of supporting private housing developments under the guise of tackling the housing crisis, but these developments are environmentally destructive and ineffective. An example is the Sandy Lake-Sackville River development being sped up by the province along with nine other developments. This project would be ecologically destructive, probably unaffordable and is estimated to only add cars on the road and spread communities even more thinly between vital resources. With plans like this, the province’s climate plan rings hollow.

The case of Sandy Lake-Sackville River tells an important cautionary tale: attempting to solve one crisis by accelerating another is unsustainable and impractical.

## TAKE ACTION

Send a message about the Sandy Lake-Sackville River planned development to the provincial authorities who made this decision AND who have the power to reverse it: [ecologyaction.ca/SaveSandyLake](https://ecologyaction.ca/SaveSandyLake).

Get involved and support your local affordable housing organization, the Nova Scotia chapter of ACORN: [acorncanada.org/locations/nova-scotia-acorn/](https://acorncanada.org/locations/nova-scotia-acorn/).

## Moving forward

We are living through a poly-crisis. Climate change and the housing market are competing to make our world inhospitable. Without mitigation, these crises have only grown stronger and more wide-reaching. While we have overcome challenges in the past, our communities are struggling through the effects of these compounded crises.

Like most good solutions, there is no one silver bullet but a combination of strategies that will move us forward. Investments in affordable, net-zero housing through retrofit policies, grants and development regulations will naturally build strong and resilient communities that cannot only withstand climate disasters like this summer’s fires and floods, but actively work together to prevent them.

With the wealth of solutions available for addressing both housing and climate, the question is: what are we waiting for?

**Hope** (she/her) works to organize and empower people to take local climate action. She also loves to cook, go on hikes and catch up on the latest celebrity gossip.