

Bike-a-thon to raise money for Elmira housing

Martin Buhr, the first executive of MennoHomes, now Beyond Housing, is getting on his bike one last time



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Martin Buhr, 87, is ready to ride in this year's Out-Spok'n Bike-a-Thon this Saturday at Elmira Mennonite Church. [Andrea Eymann]

Beyond Housing's annual bike-a-thon fundraiser is set for Saturday in Elmira, with proceeds going to support an affordable-housing project in town.

Participating in this year's Out-Spok'n Bike-a-thon is Beyond Housing's first executive director, Martin Buhr, who is making this his last ride.

The 87-year-old, who recently underwent a “miraculous valve implantation,” said he is set to complete the 30-km ride, which starts at the Elmira Mennonite Church and goes to the Kissing Bridge Trailway up to Wallenstein and then back to the town.



“I’ve been prepping,” he told The Observer, noting that he normally cycles 20 kilometres as a minimum, adding he already completed a 30K earlier this spring.

As of Wednesday, Buhr has raised around \$114,000, surpassing his target for this year, as he strives to reach a lifetime goal of half a million dollars.

“It gives me unspeakable joy, because many of them (donors), when they make their donation on

my Canada Helps pages, they add a little statement of encouragement and affirmation, so it's been quite a wonderful interchange," he said, noting he is winding down his cycling activities to help reduce stress on his body as he ages.

Buhr said taking part in the event is something akin to sweat equity, noting he takes part "in memory and in recognition of all the sacrifices others have made and are making to contribute to the bike-a-thon and to the overall capital fundraising of Beyond Housing."

This year, the Elmira-based organization is set to build a 30-unit, four-storey building that will include accessible units for people with mobility issues, said Beth Bohnert, the spokesperson for Beyond Housing.

The bike-a-thon will help them do the preliminary planning and architectural drawings, she added.

Last year, the funding helped build a 20-unit townhouse complex in Kitchener, where half of those units helped clients from the Women's Crisis Services who were moving past domestic violence.

"There's a huge gap. There are over 10,000 households waiting for affordable housing just in

Waterloo Region, and the group we serve are folks who might not have other options,” said Bohnert, noting many of their clients are on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

The organization’s current project is planned for the site of the former Kiwanis House at 28 South St. in Elmira.

Rents will range from the low level in line with the ODSP shelter allowance up to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s average market rate.

The approximately half-acre plot is currently owned by the Township of Woolwich. The two organizations are currently finalizing a purchase agreement to transfer ownership to Beyond Housing.

The overall project budget is \$13 million.

“When we did our first bike-a-thon in 2009, the local socioeconomic conditions had changed somewhat, especially in the housing sector, not just for the low income, but for all sectors, low, modest and moderate income,” Buhr noted.

“They’re all struggling to find affordable rent that they can cover with their sources of income, and

that has become significantly and evidently visible in the last few years.”

He noted that a single person on Ontario Works receives about \$700 a month but still needs to cover rent of about \$1,500.

“Shelter or housing is the bedrock on which people build their successes. They need the stability and the security of reliable, affordable, safe housing to do that, and this connects to their health conditions, their education aspirations, their training, their employment and even their family harmony,” Buhr said, adding it all depends on safe, secure and affordable housing.

He worked at House of Friendship from 1978 to 1998, and in the early 2000s, he formed MennoHomes, which later became Beyond Housing.

“One of the greatest thrills in my whole life was being part of starting MennoHomes Inc. in 2001 because it was a grassroots organization with absolutely no money in the bank, starting from zero resource base to grow to 258 units as of today,” Buhr said.

The Out-Spok’n Bike-a-thon is set for June 13,

starting at Elmira Mennonite Church at 9 a.m. More information and options to donate can be found at www.canadahelps.org or www.beyondhousing.ca.