

Ottawa, provinces huddle to get housing cash spent

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The federal Conservative government does not think of itself as being in the social housing business.

But, having committed \$5-billion over the next five years to provide shelter to the needy, much of it as part of a massive package designed to stimulate the economy, Ottawa wants to know how provinces think the money should be spent.

Provincial and territorial housing ministers met with Human Resources Minister Diane Finley yesterday morning to talk about the best ways of delivering the cash for social housing which, so far, has merely trickled out the door.

There was no discussion about the national housing initiative that some provinces had requested. But Mrs. Finley did offer flexibility in the way money from her government is delivered.

For instance, Ottawa has said that the money from the stimulus package must be spent by 2011. But provinces and territories that cannot use the funds they have been allotted - something that might happen because they are required to put up matching amounts - may now pass along the excess to another province. The swapping must take place before Dec. 14 and it will be up to the provinces to decide what will be given in return.

Jim Watson, Ontario's Housing Minister, is excited about being able to negotiate extra money from his provincial counterparts. "We can trade with them and get the money into our province," he said coming out of the meeting.

"I think that kind of flexibility is welcome."

Mr. Watson is among those who believe there should be a federal housing initiative and said he was discouraged by an interview that Mrs. Finley gave to The Canadian Press this week in which she said: "By no means are we getting back into the housing business."

But yesterday's meeting - the first of its kind in four years - was very positive, Mr. Watson said, particularly because Mrs. Finley assured her provincial and territorial colleagues that her government remained committed to spending the billions of dollars it had promised.

She did ask them, however, to come up with ideas to improve spending on housing and to report back to her in January.

Yvonne Fritz, Alberta's Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs, said she was pleased that the federal government is willing to be part of the dialogue. "It's really about the collaboration and the communication and the working together."

Advocates for social housing have been deeply disappointed with Ottawa's apparent lack of urgency on the file and with the slow pace of progress at all levels of government.

But some groups expressed optimism after yesterday's meeting.

Nicholas Gazzard, the executive director of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, said he was encouraged that the federal minister had agreed to sit down with her provincial counterparts and that the ministers came out of their meeting stressing the need for more housing for low-income Canadians.

The test, Mr. Gazzard said, will be whether both levels of government deliver on their commitments in the months ahead.