

REPORT

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council **Date:** June 26, 2023

From: Lisa Spitale, Chief Administrative Officer **File:** 05.1035.10
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Item #: 2023-456

Subject: Downtown Livability Update

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council receive this report for information.

PURPOSE

To provide an update on the continued implementation of the Downtown Livability Strategy.

SUMMARY

In October 2021, the Downtown Livability Strategy was approved, and a subsequent update and financial accounting was provided on December 12, 2022. Staff continue to implement the tactics outlined in the Strategy on an ongoing basis and continue to find ways to support the goals of the strategy. Having said that, it is becoming increasingly challenging to keep up with the goals of the strategy, and to balance the needs of the range of community members. This report will focus on the successes and challenges related to the areas of focus previously identified: cleanliness and 24-hour public toilets, homeless outreach and added emergency shelter capacity, opioid epidemic and illicit drug response, business support and outreach, and community mental health issues.

BACKGROUND

In September 2021, Council passed the following motion:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That staff review strategies and regulatory tools available to Council to support the rapid revitalization of underperforming, derelict, and vacant properties on Columbia Street in the historic Downtown, including but not limited to powers under the New Westminster Redevelopment Act (1989), and

That Staff provide recommendations for rapid and medium-term actions to support the vibrancy of business, the activation of the streets, and improving the amenity value of the historic Downtown for all residents of New Westminster.

In response, staff developed a Downtown Livability Strategy that included immediate and short-term actions, endorsed by Council on October 18, 2021. The approach is interdepartmental and includes input from Engineering, Police, Fire, Economic Development, Social Planning, and Integrated Services. It is based on the City's vision that New Westminster is a vibrant, compassionate, resilient city where everyone can thrive. A subsequent update was provided to Council on December 12, 2022, which included a detailed description of the financial implications associated with the strategy.

DISCUSSION

Detailed below are the latest updates with regards to the five key focus areas.

Cleanliness and 24-Hour Public Toilets

The City has contracted the services of a specialized waste removal company to perform targeted sweeps across the Downtown, and to respond to complaints about human waste and drug-related waste. The Engineering department has also added resources to their team to provide additional services above and beyond the biohazardous sweeps. These services remove drug, human, and dog waste from streets, sidewalks, and planters. Under certain conditions, the crew may also check alcoves and doorways on private property.

In addition, City Livability Coordinators (Bylaw Officers) are proactively conducting daily patrols across the City to identify areas that require garbage removal, as well as connect with businesses for cross-education purposes, and encourage unsheltered and street entrenched people to seek supportive programs.

The City has installed a temporary toilet at the east end of Front Street, in the parking lot of the former Army and Navy, which is staffed with a security guard 24-hours per day. Funding for the facility came from a combination of grants and existing budgets. The facility is open to everyone. The toilet continues to be a target for vandalism, and requires frequent repair and maintenance.

Additional City-provided public washrooms are available during operating hours at many locations throughout the City, and 24-hours at the police station. Washrooms located in parks are managed somewhat differently than in other City facilities as some washrooms

in parks are seasonal, and none of them are open 24 hours. Signage has been installed Downtown to inform the public of the location of public washrooms.

Homeless Outreach and Added Emergency Shelter Capacity

The nightly shelter with 50-bed capacity continues to operate in Downtown New Westminster. The City was successful in receiving a grant through the Social Planning and Research Council fund in order to assist Purpose Society with ongoing operating costs. Further grant opportunities through the Strengthening Communities fund are being explored.

Opioid Epidemic and Illicit Drug Response

The Health Contact Centre, operated by Purpose Society and funded by Fraser Health, continues to provide a number of wrap-around services, such as harm reduction supplies, supervised consumption, peer employment opportunities, education on safer drug use, and regular needle sweeps of the surrounding area. The City is currently investigating whether there is an opportunity to extend opening hours for the Health Contact Centre. It is anticipated that extended hours will reduce public drug use and the amount of drug paraphernalia that is being discarded in public areas.

Fraser Health is currently providing a number of outreach services. City staff are currently working in conjunction with Fraser Health to ensure those who require such services receive the necessary referrals.

Business Support and Outreach

The City is currently investigating potential improvements and/or repurposing of vacant properties throughout the Downtown. As part of this initiative the City is exploring possible locations to relocate the off-leash dog park currently located on Agnes Street. A number of potential lots have been identified and discussions are ongoing regarding short-term opportunities. Staff continue to work with business stakeholders in the area to address issues and provide opportunities for cross-education.

Mental Health Response

Fraser Health is currently providing a number of outreach programs to address mental health concerns within the community. City staff and the New Westminster Police Department are currently working in conjunction with Fraser Health to ensure those who require such services receive the necessary referrals.

NEXT STEPS

Detailed below are the next steps and what is currently being planned with regards to the five key focus areas.

Cleanliness and 24-Hour Public Toilets

A permanent 24-hour public washroom is planned for the Downtown. The design team and supplier have both been engaged. An in-depth analysis of the most appropriate location for the washroom is currently ongoing. It is anticipated that the construction for the washroom will commence before the end of 2023.

Discussions are also ongoing with BC Housing regarding the feasibility of installing a sanitation trailer along Front Street, exact location still to be determined. The sanitation trailer would be supported by attendant services and would offer bathrooms and showers for unsheltered individuals. More information will be provided on this potential initiative as details are finalized.

More broadly speaking, the City has engaged the services of a Downtown Livability Strategy Project Manager whose responsibilities include developing a public toilet and biohazardous waste management work plan. The focus of the plan is to specifically address the issue of biohazardous waste on public property in a more coordinated and cost-effective way. Key objectives include:

- To ensure that everyone – including the unsheltered, seniors, families and people with disabilities – has access to clean, accessible and safe public toilets 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- To ensure that City streets and other civic property are free of human waste and that waste is cleaned up and disposed of in a safe and healthy manner; and
- To ensure that City staff have the Standard Operating Procedures and training needed to clean up and dispose of human waste appropriately.

Homeless Outreach and Added Emergency Shelter Capacity

It is anticipated that the nightly shelter will close in November 2025, and will continue to operate only at night until that time, and so interim measures are currently being investigated in order to meet the daytime needs of the shelter residents. Potential partnerships are currently being explored with Fraser Health.

Location options for a more permanent 24/7 shelter, supportive housing and associated support services are currently being explored. A draft case for support is underway and a development proposal outlining potential operational requirements, potential locations as well as partnerships and funding opportunities is being prepared.

Opioid Epidemic and Illicit Drug Response

Discussions are currently ongoing with Fraser Health regarding additional outreach services in response to the opioid epidemic and toxic drug supply. A case for support is currently under development to address opportunities to provide expanded supervised services as well as increased and expanded needle sweeps to ensure the safe disposal of drug paraphernalia.

Business Support and Outreach

Implementation of the Fourth Street Stairs replacement project is underway; a Project Manager has been engaged to support the implementation of the project.

The Parks and Recreation department is currently reviewing opportunities for planned activations within the Downtown core and a potential extended footprint. A program coordinator has been appointed to facilitate activations and explore potential partnerships with local businesses.

The *Invest New West* newsletter continues to be sent monthly to local businesses who have opted in to receive it, with over 1100 subscribers. Staff have also developed a general resource for businesses called the Business Licence Holder Resource Guide that contains answers to questions businesses operators may have that includes contact information to City divisions.

Mental Health Response

The Canadian Mental Health Association is planning a roundtable this fall in order to provide an opportunity for further education and discussion around the topic. Further details regarding the event will be shared when they are available.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

On December 12, 2022, the financial accounting supporting the Downtown Livability Strategy was presented to council, categorized by funding segments. With consideration to the strategy presented and the approved 2023 budget, finance has provided an update on each funding segment below.

\$1.06M: Secured Funding

During the 2023 budget process, a total of \$1.06M was identified as secured funding through city funds and 3rd party grants. This funding was specifically designated for various purposes, including portable toilets, temporary cleaning attendants, permanent toilets, and garbage receptacles. As of March 31st, approximately \$245K has been spent towards the Supportive Housing Project Manager, temporary toilets with cleaning attendants and the early stage costs of designing the permanent toilet.

\$572K: 2023 Operational Service Enhancement

In the 2023 budget, there were approved service enhancements totaling \$572K aimed at improving downtown livability. These enhancements included hiring a street cleaning crew person, covering operating costs for a new permanent toilet facility, hiring a senior development planner and a downtown livability coordinator. As noted above, the construction of the permanent toilet is in progress, with the design team and supplier engaged and advancing work. The expected completion date for the facility is the end of

2023, indicating that the operating costs for this new asset are not expected to be incurred in 2023. As at March 31, 2023, of the three position proposed one of the position was posted and currently shortlisting candidates while the other two positions were pending posting.

\$225K: 2023 Capital Funding

The 2023 capital growth is being allocated to support two temporary positions, the Affordable Housing Planning Analyst and the Affordable Housing Building Coordinator. The Analyst position was posted as at March 31st and the Coordinator position was still pending final posting.

\$2,640M: Unsecured Pending Grants

The Downtown Livability Strategy outlined several initiatives that were contingent upon receiving grant funding. As at March 31st, the City was able to secure approximately \$2M in grant funding.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The Downtown Livability Strategy continues to be moved forward by staff in a number of divisions including Climate Action Planning and Development, Engineering, Economic Development, New Westminster Fire and Rescue Services, and New Westminster Police.

APPROVALS

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