

REPORT

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

To: Mayor Cote and Members of Council **Date:** January 10, 2022

From: Lisa Spitale
Chief Administrative Officer **File:**

Item #: 2022-31

Subject: Update regarding Downtown Livability Strategy

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council endorse the actions underway.

PURPOSE

To provide an update on the status of the immediate and short term actions from the Downtown Livability Strategy, previously presented to Council on October 18, 2021.

SUMMARY

A number of issues such as fires, vacant properties, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased homelessness have impacted livability in New Westminister's downtown. On September 13, 2021, Council passed a motion to support livability, called the *Downtown Recovery Strategy*.

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 is based on the City's vision that New Westminister is a vibrant, compassionate, sustainable city that includes everyone.

This report provides an update on the immediate and short term actions outlined in that Strategy, as well as information on possible longer term actions that can be taken for the Downtown and in other neighbourhoods of the city.

BACKGROUND

On October 13, 2021, Council passed a motion called the Downtown Livability Strategy.

Whereas Downtown is the densest and most rapidly-growing residential neighbourhood of New Westminster, representing a commitment to regional Transit-Oriented Mixed-Use development goals concentrated in identified Regional City Centres; and

Whereas the initial revitalization since the 2010 Downtown Community Plan was developed has suffered a series of more recent setbacks, including the loss of several historic buildings to fires and the loss of a major anchor retailer, while a recent loss of park space and ongoing construction serve to challenge livability goals for the downtown community; and

Whereas despite robust growth, several properties in the key blocks of Columbia Street have been derelict or vacant for many years, impairing neighborhood revitalization efforts and challenging the impression of Columbia Street as a vibrant commercial district for both residents and existing businesses;

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 is based on the City's vision that New Westminster is a vibrant, compassionate, sustainable city that includes everyone.

Through an interdepartmental team that includes Engineering, Police, Fire, Economic Development, Social Planning and Integrated Services, five areas of focus for the immediate and short term actions were determined:

1. Cleanliness and 24-hour public toilets
2. Homeless outreach and added emergency shelter capacity
3. Opioid epidemic and illicit drug response
4. Business support and engagement
5. Work with Fraser Health to address mental health issues

ANALYSIS

Staff determined that there were five areas of focus for the immediate and short term actions and have been working to implement actions to address the issues.

Immediate and Short Term Tactics:

Many of the identified tactics have been implemented and are completed or in progress. The following table provides an update on those tactics.

Issue:

Need to improve general cleanliness and the provision for 24 hour, public toilets in the Downtown

Category	Action Identified in October 18th, 2021 Report	Notes:
Immediate	The Engineering Department has added larger garbage receptacles throughout the Downtown and increased collection frequency.	Waste receptacles installed.
	Expression of Interest has been developed for specialized waste management in the Downtown.	Services secured.
	The City is adding one portable toilet in Hyack Square.	This toilet was installed November 22.
Short Term	Investigate resource requirements to support late night garbage collection (refer to 2022 Budget process).	Two additional Auxiliary Labour staff working 4PM – 12:30AM, 7 days per week, beginning November 22nd.
	Continue work plan to provide 24/7 washrooms in City facilities, and report back to Council.	Work continues as staff coordinate internally on strategies for operations, maintenance, and public communications.

	Investigate with TransLink the provision of public washrooms at SkyTrain stations.	Initial conversations have occurred.
	Investigate additional fee for service with faith-based or non-profit service providers as washroom attendants/outreach service providers.	In the new year, a more fulsome discussion will occur as part of a larger discussion as part of the other public toilet initiatives.
	Prepare to purchase and install a prefabricated stand-alone public toilet in the Downtown and report back to Council (already identified in the 2022 Budget).	A project management consultant has been retained to forward this work.

Issue:**Homeless outreach and added emergency shelter capacity**

Category	Action Identified in October 18th, 2021 Report	Notes:
Immediate	Police, Bylaws, Engineering and Fire Departments are creating a coordinated multi-Departmental Team.	The team has been created, and protocols and procedures established. A second Vulnerable Persons Officer has been temporarily added.
	The multi-Departmental Team is working on a protocol to check the well-being of homeless individuals and attend to any safety or environmental hazards on a daily basis.	
Immediate	flu vaccines	Seasonal flu vaccines were provided to the vulnerable populations that attended the "Don't Go Hungry" Program in Queensborough.

Short Term	<p>In collaboration with the Lower Mainland Purpose Society, a temporary Warming Centre was established at 40 Begbie Street.</p>	<p>The City and the Lower Mainland Purpose Society operationalized a Warming Centre at the Health Contact Centre, located at 40 Begbie Street. The Warming Centre operated from 11:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. between December 26 and 30, 2021, and averaged about 15 unsheltered persons per night.</p> <p>With the opening of the Extreme Weather Response Program (EWRP) shelter on the lower floor of the former Army and Navy Department Store, which opened on December 30, 2021, the Warming Centre was decommissioned.</p> <p>City staff will be debriefing about the Warming Centre, and it could form one of the recommendations as contained in the City's Homelessness Action Strategy, which is under development.</p>
	<p>In collaboration with BC Housing and the Lower Mainland Purpose Society, up to 50 Extreme Weather Response Program beds were opened on the lower floor of the former Army and Navy Department Store.</p>	<p>New Westminster now has up to 65 Extreme Weather Response Program (EWRP) beds. Of this number, up to 50 are located on the lower floor of the former Army and Navy Department Store, located at 502 Columbia Street, and up to 15 are located on the lower floor of the Russell Housing Centre, located at 740 Carnarvon Street.</p> <p>The EWRP beds are activated during extreme weather events and are operational until March 31, 2022. Given the opening of the EWRP shelter at the former Army and Navy Department Store, the City is determining the status of and need for the EWRP shelter at the Russell Housing Centre.</p> <p>To date, the EWRP shelter at the former Army and Navy Department Store is averaging about 35 unsheltered persons per night, thus there is still some excess capacity. The City, with the Lower</p>

		<p>Mainland Purpose Society, are advocating for the EWRP shelter at the former Army and Navy Department Store to transition to a Winter Shelter, which would be operational on a nightly basis until March 31, 2022, and preferably a 24/7 shelter with support services, which would be operation for 14 or 18 months or until new supportive housing is ready for occupancy at 60 to 68 Sixth Street.</p>
	<p>City of New Westminster Inter-Departmental Working Group on Homelessness continues to meet in its efforts to address business and resident concerns related to homelessness and other social issues.</p>	<p>The inter-Departmental Working Group on Homelessness, which is mandated to address business and resident concerns related to homelessness and other social issues, and facilitate inter-Departmental communication and collaboration, continues to meet. The Working Group includes a standing agenda item related to the Downtown Livability Initiatives but is also focused on addressing concerns in other neighbourhoods of the city.</p> <p>Recently, it scheduled a walkabout with Downtown businesses to discuss their perspectives and to solicit their ideas for action; however, this walkabout had to be rescheduled due to inclement weather.</p>

Issue:**Opioid epidemic and illicit drug response**

Category	Action Identified in October 18 th , 2021 Report	Notes:
Immediate	Outreach and training between Fire and Police first responders, Bylaw staff and Social Planners	<p>Bylaw staff oriented Fire staff with a driving tour of areas that are frequented by people experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>Bylaw and Fire staff attended a virtual training session "Harm Reduction Training for Local Government" on Dec. 10, 2021 hosted by Opioid Emergency Response Center (OERC), Community Action Initiative (CAI) and the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC).</p> <p>Outreach training between New West Fire and Police has begun with introductory ride-alongs for fire personnel.</p>

Issue:**Business support and engagement**

Category	Action Identified in October 18 th , 2021 Report	Notes:
Immediate	Create a dashboard for Economic Development to understand the current situation from other divisions when businesses reach out with who to contact for further information.	<p>Although a dashboard has not been created, a communications pipeline has been established where staff report weekly to one person, who collects the information and puts public updates on newwestcity.ca/downtownlivability and develops an update for council on items that are confidential.</p> <p>A one page PDF was created early November 2021 to summarize the actions, and a follow up</p>

	Formalized plan and materials for business outreach that cohesively relays information coming from City Departments.	one page PDF will be created in early January. Additionally, business education training has been planned as a complement to the VENN program for non-profits, to provide education on overdose, homelessness, crime prevention, etc. These are being planned by Police, and Economic Development, with input from Bylaws, and Fire. The first one is tentatively scheduled for early February, and additional topics will be presented every second month.
	Targeted overdose awareness and education for trades, temporary labour, and construction companies by refocusing existing work with the BIA, WorkSafe and Purpose Society.	Planning has been started on this educational opportunity and it is tentatively scheduled for February 2022.

Issue:

Need to work with Fraser Health in addressing mental health issues which are contributing to increasing homelessness and illicit drug use

Category	Action Identified in October 18 th , 2021 Report	Notes:
Immediate	City staff will work closely with Fraser Health's new Integrated Response Team which will support sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons with mental health issues.	The Fraser Health Integrated Response Team will support sheltered and unsheltered vulnerable persons with mental health issues in New Westminster and the Tri-Cities. A new manager is being hired to operate the service, which will be comprised of a mix of nursing, allied health professionals, and clinical and peer support workers. The service will operate between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., seven days per week. Fraser Health funds the team.

	City staff will clarify the role of the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team, which includes the City's Mental Health Police Liaison Officer, and serves adults living with serious mental illness.	City staff will request that the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team make a presentation to Council. As part of this presentation, it will be requested to clarify its role and mandate, including related to the new Fraser Health Integrated Response Team; the number of clients it is serving, including in New Westminster and the Tri-Cities; and how it is working with City staff, including in Fire, Integrated Services and Police, and Homeless Outreach.
Short Term	The City to provide mental health education, information and training to staff on the front lines, including in Engineering Operations, Integrated Services, and Parks and Recreation.	Training is underway with staff in a variety of divisions.

Medium and Longer Term Tactics:

Some tactics identified in the motion and the plan require additional analysis and/or planning to implement them:

- Develop a work plan to reduce timelines for building permit applications and business license applications that require building permits
 - Staff are continuing to work to reduce permitting times through increased inter-departmental collaboration, implementation of enhanced electronic review, streamlining internal and inter-departmental processing procedures and additional staff training to increase technical capacity. We anticipate this will positively impact the workflow such that the backlog is reduced before the end of 2022. An additional challenge is provincial regulations, adopted in February 2021, requiring BOABC certification of plan reviewers and inspectors. This continues to impact staffing capacity throughout the province as demand far exceeds supply.
- *Sidewalk Café Bylaw (1997)* revisions based on learning from Temporary Patio Program
 - Staff have conducted analysis and are developing proposed changes informed by: the temporary patio program, the proposed changes by the Cannabis and Liquor Regulation Branch, and what other municipalities are doing. Council should expect a report in early 2022 with recommendations.

- *Streetscape improvements*
 - To support vibrancy and livability, streetscape improvements will be considered as budget allows, and to capitalize on opportunities as they come up.
- *Public washroom plan for new and existing permanent, accessible public washrooms under analysis*
 - A consultant has been retained to support potential procurement of a new, permanent, free-standing pre-fabricated washroom facility. Specific location has not been determined. It would be selected based on siting requirements and user preferences. Preliminary targeted community engagement is underway with additional planned for 2022. This work will also inform future to next steps.
 - The utilization of existing infrastructure is also being considered by staff working towards implementation.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

This is a high priority initiative. Several City departments are collaborating on the Downtown Livability Strategy.

OPTIONS

There are two options for Council's consideration; they are:

Option 1 – Council endorse the actions underway; or

Option 2 – Provide staff with alternate direction.

Staff recommend Option 1

This report was written by: Jen Arbo, Economic Development Coordinator, Office of the CAO with input from:

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This report was approved by:

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