

# REPORT

## *Development Services Department*

**To:** Mayor Côté and Members of Council      **Date:** September 13, 2021

**From:** Emilie K Adin, MCIP      **File:** 13.2630.09  
Director of Development Services

**Item #:** 2021-335

**Subject:** Homelessness Action Strategy – Proposed Plan

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### **RECOMMENDATION**

***THAT** Council direct staff to commence work on a new Homelessness Action Strategy, which will be completed in-house and with the assistance of the New Westminister Homelessness Coalition Society, the Community Action Network, and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning.*

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### **PURPOSE**

To seek Council direction to commence work on a new Homelessness Action Strategy, which will provide a vision and plan for addressing homelessness and related issues for the next five years.

### **SUMMARY**

It has been over a decade since the City of New Westminister (City) completed its Homelessness Action Strategy (2006). During this time period, there have been many accomplishments related to addressing homelessness, including the establishment of a Homelessness Coalition, the development of 28 emergency shelter beds and 165 supportive housing units, the formation of the New Westminister Rent Bank Program, and the implementation of business licensing regulations to discourage the practice of ‘renovictions.’

Despite these and many other accomplishments, which resulted in a 53% reduction in unsheltered homelessness in New Westminister between 2008 and 2014, new challenges

have emerged, including a housing affordability crisis, an overdose epidemic, and a global pandemic. These challenges originate externally to the city but are significantly impacting it. If future progress is to be made, there is evident need for a new strategy and partnerships, including with the senior levels of government.

The March 2020 Homeless Count enumerated 41 unsheltered and 82 sheltered homeless people in New Westminster, for a total of 123 homeless people. As with all homeless counts, this is likely a significant undercount of the true extent of homelessness. Since this count, there is evidence that the numbers of unsheltered homeless people have significantly increased as a result of the three above cited challenges, and others. This is taxing City resources, contributing to business and resident concerns, and leading to calls for coordinated action.

This report is seeking Council direction to commence a new Homelessness Action Strategy, which will provide a vision and plan for addressing homelessness and related issues for the next five years. The report recommends that the strategy be done in-house and with the assistance of:

- the Homelessness Coalition Society, which includes over 20 organizations with a mandate to address homelessness;
- the Community Action Network, which will utilize the expertise of people with lived and living experience of homelessness; and,
- the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, in which graduate level students will be conducting research, assisting with consultation activities, and proposing actions to address homelessness and correlated impacts.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Homelessness Action Strategy (2006) was a foundational document and one of the first plans to address this emerging issue, when homelessness was first becoming more commonplace in urban centres. The development of the strategy was a partnership between the City and the newly formed New Westminster Homelessness Coalition. The strategy had lofty ambitions, including ensuring that “all residents have access to safe and affordable housing and supports, and for nobody to be homeless.” While tremendous progress was made, including a 53% reduction in unsheltered homelessness in New Westminster between 2008 and 2014, homelessness still persists. In recent years, homelessness has even worsened as the result of compounding issues such as a housing affordability crisis, an overdose epidemic, and a global pandemic.

In 2012, the Homelessness Coalition (Coalition) became a society, and this enabled it to conduct fundraising and receive donations. It also undertook a number of activities to raise awareness about homelessness; to address the needs of the homeless, and to respond to business and resident concerns related to homelessness. Initiatives included Homelessness Action Week, Homelessness Connect Days, and the award winning ‘I’s on the Street’ micro-street cleaning initiative. The Coalition also developed several short-term action plans, and continued to work closely with the City. As such, this likely delayed the

need for a new Homelessness Action Strategy. Starting in 2019, there were signs of increasing homelessness, and the Coalition and the City engaged in discussions related to a new Homelessness Needs Assessment and Action Strategy.

In mid-2019, the City, with the assistance of the Coalition, commenced work on a new Homelessness Needs Assessment. This work included a survey of the Coalition membership, and initial consultation with people with lived and living experience of homelessness. In March 2020, and as a result of the Province declaring a Public Health Emergency related to COVID-19, staff were redeployed to address the pandemic needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations and this work was paused. In early-2021, staff resumed work on the Homelessness Needs Assessment, which is currently in draft form and will be presented to Council in October 2021. This document will inform the new Homelessness Action Strategy.

### **EXISTING POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The Council Strategic Plan (2019) includes the following strategic direction under 'Affordable Housing:'

- explore strategies to reduce homelessness, including developing opportunities for supportive housing.

The Official Community Plan (2017) states that the City should:

- facilitate the creation and maintenance of housing that offers options for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- develop a new Homelessness Needs Assessment and Action Strategy, in partnership with the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society;
- participate in Metro Vancouver homelessness and housing policy initiatives and be represented on associated committees; and,
- participate in and support the efforts of the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### ***Definition of Homelessness***

Although the traditional view of homelessness might be one of someone living in a tent or residing in a shelter, homelessness is more encompassing than this traditional view. According to the Homeless Hub: "homelessness is the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it." Therefore, this encompasses not just people who are on the street or in a shelter but also people in arrangements such as 'couch surfing' and living temporarily with family or friends.

## ***Extent of Homelessness***

The March 2020 Homeless Count enumerated 41 unsheltered and 82 sheltered homeless people in New Westminster, for a total of 123 homeless people. As with all homeless counts, this is likely a significant undercount of the true extent of homelessness. Since this count, there is evidence that the numbers of unsheltered homeless people has significantly increased as a result of the housing affordability crisis, the overdose epidemic, and the global pandemic.

## ***Impacts on the City and the Need for a Strategy***

The increase in homelessness, particularly over the past 18 months, is taxing City staff, facilities and services, including related to Community Planning, Engineering Operations, Fire and Rescue Services, Parks, and Police. There are also increasing business and resident concerns related to homelessness and other social issues, and calls for more coordinated and sustained action.

Based on over a decade of experience in addressing homelessness, the City has found that increased enforcement only shifts the issue from one area or neighbourhood to another but does not lead to any real resolution. The City identified that empathy-led support for at-risk and vulnerable populations, including connecting them with housing and services, led to better outcomes for the individuals, the neighbourhoods in which they reside, and for the City. Additionally, recent court cases and challenges limit the ability of both Police and Bylaw Enforcement to act in an enforcement capacity, particularly with regard to homelessness and other social issues.

As a result of the City's longstanding alternative approach to addressing the homelessness crisis, the City has established a COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force, which is mandated to address the pandemic related needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations, including those who are homeless. The task force has accessed \$874,323 in foundation and senior government funding.

The City has also established a City of New Westminster Inter-Department Working Group on Homelessness, which is mandated to provide a coordinated response to addressing business and resident concerns related to homelessness and other social issues.

While these initiatives are making a difference, particularly in the short-term, there is a need for a longer-term strategy; one that is based on the voices of people with lived and living experience of homelessness and involves the senior levels of government in taking proactive measures to address this pervasive issue, including enhanced housing and services, and additional income assistance. By itself, the City is limited, but with a vision, plan and partners in place, as well as regional cooperation, progress can again be made in addressing homelessness, and reversing the recent trend.

## **ANALYSIS**

### ***Proposed Approach***

Staff are seeking Council direction to commence work on a new Homelessness Action Strategy. As documented in the 'Discussion' section of this report, there is a need for a strategy, particularly given the increasing numbers of homeless individuals. There are also a number of opportunities, including related to the Community Action Network and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, that make it timely to undertake this work right away.

Staff are proposing that this work be completed in-house, which is possible given the recent retention of a two-year Affordable Housing Planning Analyst position, and the assistance of the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society, the Community Action Network, and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning. This will significantly reduce costs associated with retaining a consultant; facilitate staff learning opportunities; empower people with lived and living experience of homelessness; and forge lasting partnerships.

In recognition of the number of advisory committees and task forces, and the demands on staff time, a working group will be established, which will include a range of perspectives related to homelessness. The working group will meet a maximum number of five times. The Supervisor of Community Planning will oversee the larger project and the involvement of the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, and the Affordable Housing Planning Analyst will chair and coordinate the meetings of the working group, and facilitate the development of the strategy.

### ***Partnering Organizations***

The Coordinator of the Homelessness Coalition Society, and member organizations, will be involved in informing the strategy and its implementation. Of note, funding has been realized as part of a Strengthening Communities Services Program grant, to cover costs related to the involvement of the Coordinator.

The Community Action Network, through the involvement of their graduates with lived and living experience of homelessness, will participate in the working group and in assisting with consultation activities and strategy development. These participants will be seen as subject matter experts and will be compensated for their time and expenses incurred. Of note, \$10,000 in funding has been realized as part of a Strengthening Communities Services Program grant to cover these and other costs.

The UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, through the involvement of their graduate level students, will be conducting research, assisting with consultation activities, and proposing actions to address homelessness and correlated impacts. The students will also be involved in strategy development.

### ***Proposed Phases and Timelines***

Staff are recommending that the strategy be divided into the following three phases:

1. Phase 1: Information Gathering (October to December 2021)
  - Case study research of homelessness plans and strategies in other municipalities.
  - Engagement strategy preparation and implementation.
2. Phase 2: Policy and Strategy Development (January to March 2022)
  - Vision development.
  - Current and desired role, including for the City, the Coalition, its member organizations, and the senior levels of government.
  - Review of existing policies, actions and tools (as to their effectiveness).
  - Review of possible policies, actions and tools (and their applicability to New Westminster).
  - Recommended vision, policies, actions, tools, and indicators.
3. Phase 3: Monitoring and Evaluation (April 2022 onwards)
  - Desired indicators and implementation plan.
  - Ongoing monitoring and periodic reporting related to identified indicators.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The City will be completing the strategy in-house, which will significantly reduce costs associated with retaining a consultant. The City has received a Strengthening Communities Services Program grant, which will cover all of the costs associated with the Homelessness Coalition Society Coordinator and Community Action Network graduates. With regard to the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, the City, through its Partnership Agreement, will contribute \$3,000 per term for two terms, to defray some of the costs associated with the involvement of the graduate-level students and the studio work, including expenses related to materials, printing and travel. This expense, in the amount of \$6,000, has been included in the draft 2022 Development Services Department Operating Budget.

### **INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON**

The preparation of the strategy will involve staff from other Departments, including Engineering Operations, Fire and Rescue Services, Parks, and Police.

## **OPTIONS**

There are two options for Council's consideration:

1. That Council direct staff to commence work on a new Homelessness Action Strategy, which will be completed in-house and with the assistance of the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society, the Community Action Network, and UBC School of Community and Regional Planning
2. That Council provide staff with other direction.

Staff recommends Option 1.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment 1: SCARP Studio Project – Project Description and Request for Proposal

## **APPROVALS**

This report was prepared by:  
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