

REPORT

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

To: Mayor Cote and Members of Council **Date:** May 30, 2022

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

Item #: 2022-378

Subject: **Downtown Livability Strategy - Update**

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council receive this report for information.

PURPOSE

To provide an update on the continued implementation of the Downtown Livability Strategy, previously presented January 10, 2022.

SUMMARY

In October 2021, the Downtown Livability Strategy was approved. 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. 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 engagement, and work with Fraser Health to address mental health issues.

Council will note that another Open report was on the May 9th agenda. That report addresses strategies and tactics planned that encourage vibrancy and visitation in the downtown neighbourhood as we approach the summer months.

BACKGROUND

In September 2021, Council passed a motion called the Downtown Livability Strategy.

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, sustainable city that includes everyone.

DISCUSSION

While efforts are underway to increase vibrancy and encourage visitation to the downtown area through a number of people-focused tactics such as events, festivals, street beautification and business supports, there have been a number of challenges with the continued and ongoing implementation of the tactics. The following provides a discussion of these successes and challenges, broken down by area of focus:

Business support and engagement:

Business disengagement and exhaustion is at an all-time high due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic. The opioid educational event, previously scheduled for April 6, was shifted to a recorded version due to low enrolment so that businesses could watch as their capacity allowed. In less than a month, the video has had 28 views. This provided a compassionate approach to business owner's capacity and still allowed for the information to be shared. Economic Development will continue to work with businesses to provide them with support and information as needed, in a way they are able to accept it and will continue to work closely with the Downtown Business Improvement Association to address any concerns.

Street cleanliness and 24-hour public toilets

Engineering Operations continues to prioritize street cleaning in the Downtown, including adding an additional two-person shift for the street cleaning crew in the evening to provide coverage until midnight, and starting earlier in the morning to support litter pick up prior to start of business each weekday. The later shift has been very

challenging to staff due to staff shortages and competing priorities, so it has not been possible to achieve as consistent a service as desired.

In addition to addressing litter and other street cleaning duties, the street cleaning crew had also been tasked with monitoring and responding to needs associated with the portable rental toilet in Hyack Square.

The average monthly costs incurred by Engineering Operations has been over \$19,000, including extra staff to oversee cleanliness in the Downtown as well as cleaning and oversight of the portable toilet, and rental cost for the toilet. There have been numerous ongoing challenges with the toilet, including:

- Near-constant damage from vandalism, graffiti, and ultimately, the unit being burned to the ground. The supplier has since refused to replace the unit, and we have been unable to secure a replacement.
- Washroom being used for purposes other than its intention, often rendering it unavailable to the public.
- Difficulties in hiring and retaining staff for night shift and weekend street cleaning.

The City had applied for grant funding to cover the cost of a free-standing, pre-fabricated toilet, which was estimated at about \$200,000, but the funder deemed it as an ineligible expense as it was not seen as a temporary measure to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The City has since applied for funding to cover portable toilet rental and attendant fees for the period from August 1, 2022 to February 28, 2023. The total amount being requested is \$161,000.

Work continues to design and procure a free-standing, pre-fabricated toilet:

- Procurement is underway to pre-qualify a preferred supplier for the pre-fabricated unit.
- Site selection is underway, in consultation with stakeholders.
- The unit is scheduled to be complete and operational by Q1 of 2023.

It is anticipated that many of the challenges experienced with the portable rental toilet will be experienced with the permanent one as well, so staff are also working on an operational plan that builds on recent experience. It is anticipated that a budget enhancement will be required to address monitoring, maintenance and repair, and this will be included in the 2023 Budget process.

Realization of Foundation and Senior Government Grants to Respond to the Needs of the Unsheltered and to Address the Impacts Associated with Homelessness

The City, through the Reaching Home Program, the Strengthening Communities Services Program and the Vancouver Foundation, has realized about \$875,000 in funding to date with another about \$586,000 pending. This funding responds to the

needs of the precariously housed and unsheltered, and addresses the impacts associated with homelessness. Funded initiatives include establishing five food security and resource hubs; enhancing drop-in and outreach services; expanding a micro-street cleaning program which offers supported employment; facilitating care planning; hosting laundry and shower programs; installing portable toilets; and launching an identification bank. With regard to the latest round of funding, the City is proposing to use the funding towards covering the cost of portable toilet rental and attendant fees; to offset the lease cost of two sanitation trailers - bathroom and shower facilities - in support of a new 24/7 shelter; and to continue to support previously funded initiatives as they work towards financial sustainability.

Development of Resource Information, including a Food Resources Calendar and a Survival Guide

The City, as part of the COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force, has developed resource information related to a variety of topics, including a Food Resources Calendar and a Survival Guide. The two cited documents are frequently updated and are circulated to faith-based and non-profit organizations, and provide essential information to those who are food insecure, precariously housed or unsheltered. Given that the pandemic is in a more managed state, plans are underway to disband the task force; however, the two cited documents will continue to be updated.

- [Food Resources Calendar](#)
- [Survival Resource Guide](#)

Expanded Homeless Outreach, Referral and Advocacy Services

The City, in response to two funding requests from the COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force, allocated \$90,000 in 2021/22 and \$90,000 in 2022 for expanded homeless outreach, referral and advocacy services. Based on a request for proposals and a subsequent evaluation, Lookout Housing and Health Society was the successful proponent. More specifically, they have been contracted to provide two homeless outreach workers whose primary responsibility is to work with the Police and Integrated Services (Bylaw Enforcement) in addressing issues related to homelessness, including making referrals to community services and emergency shelter. The two workers have shifts which incorporate evening and weekend hours, and the City is exploring senior government funding opportunities to continue their work beyond the end of 2022.

Expanded Hours of Service for Integrated Services (Bylaw Enforcement)

The City, in response to business and resident concerns related to responsiveness outside of City Hall hours, is retaining the services of two Bylaw Enforcement Officers who will have shifts which incorporate evening and weekend hours. Given existing staffing challenges within Integrated Services (Bylaw Enforcement), it will take several months to train and deploy the new Officers, who will be in place for one-year, with the

possibility of extending their term. This service, in combination with expanded homeless outreach and the recently established Fraser Health Integrated Response Team, which operates seven days per week and addresses the mental health needs of the sheltered and unsheltered, should make a significant difference in addressing issues associated with homelessness.

Development of a New 24/7 Emergency Response Centre Shelter

The City and BC Housing are working towards a new 24/7 Emergency Response Centre (ERC) shelter, which offers meals and support services, on the lower floor of the former Army and Navy Department Store at 502 Columbia Street. Currently, this space accommodates an Extreme Weather Response Program shelter which operates from November 1 to March 31, and is activated during extreme weather events. To facilitate a 24/7 ERC shelter, there is a need for building upgrades and additional sanitation services. To this end, BC Housing has engaged a Code Consultant and is willing to cover the majority of the costs associated with two sanitation trailers, each containing three sinks and toilets, and two showers, whose maintenance will be the responsibility of the shelter operator. The building owner is also evaluating the extent of the necessary building upgrades.

The 24/7 ERC shelter, if operationalized, will be in place for one-year and will provide 50 beds. Anticipated occupancy is September 2022, with the possibility of a nightly shelter (i.e., 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m.) operating in the interim. The 24/7 ERC shelter will address the increased numbers of unsheltered, with much of this increase attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, until new supportive housing is developed at 60 to 68 Sixth Street.

Development of New Supportive Housing at 60 to 68 Street

BC Housing is moving towards a model of supportive housing, which provides affordable and secure housing for an extended period of time, thus enabling occupants to address issues which may be contributing to their homelessness. To this end, the City and BC Housing have collaborated on 52 units of supportive housing at 60 to 68 Sixth Street. Council has approved the Official Community Plan amendment and Rezoning to permit this housing, with site development work soon to be underway, and occupancy anticipated in 14 to 16 months. Managed by a non-profit agency, preference will be given to the locally unsheltered, with City staff and homeless outreach workers contributing to such decisions.

Preparation of New Homelessness Action Strategy

The Homelessness Action Strategy, which will be forwarded to Council for endorsement in principle in July or August 2022, provides a five-year vision and plan for addressing homelessness in New Westminster. More specifically, it incorporates a vision of a desired future where all residents can locate affordable and secure housing; where there is an adequate income and opportunities for employment, including supported, to

maintain this housing; and where there are services and supports to address underlying issues which may jeopardize this housing. It reinforces the sentiment that “everyone needs a home and everyone needs to belong.”

The action plan builds on this vision, and the three components addressed within it. In total, it incorporates about 40 actions, from immediate- and short-term ones that can be achieved with minimal resources and build traction and momentum, to longer-term ones that require significant resources, and necessitate collaboration and partnership with the senior levels of government. Collectively, the actions are intended to meet the diverse needs of the unsheltered; ensuring that facilities, programs, services and supports are responsive to those needs, and that barriers to access are eliminated or significantly reduced.

Peer Assisted Crisis Team (PACT) Pilot Project

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and the City have received Provincial funding to enable the PACT Pilot Project to be operational with a response team in the summer of 2022. This civilian response team will be comprised of a mental health worker and a peer with lived or living experience to respond to residents experiencing a mental health crisis. The City has hired a project coordinator who is scheduled to begin in May 2022. They will be responsible to conduct resource mapping for the community mental health supports.

The PACT Pilot Project is working toward crisis lines that are integrated with 911 to assess mental health needs and to dispatch supports accordingly, as well as crisis receiving and stabilization facilities that provide a safe place for people to recover and access ongoing supports.

The Provincial Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act released their report last week with key recommendations supporting the direction of the PACT Program. CMHA and the City are currently working with community stakeholders to develop the New Westminster Implementation Plan. A “Provincial Systems Table” has been established which includes several Provincial ministries, Fraser Health, BC Ambulance, Police, E-Comm and others. The team is in place to ensure systems are aligned to implement the PACT Implementation Plans in New Westminster and Victoria, as well as act on gaps in resources required in the community to serve mental health, housing and opioid crisis demands.

Other current actions include:

- A workshop for the Downtown Business Improvement Association, Tourism New West and the Chamber of Commerce is scheduled for May to obtain their feedback on the PACT Program.
- CMHA has developed a training workshop for local businesses (in Victoria) to provide support for staff to de-escalate customers and community members that are experiencing a mental health crisis.

- Planning is underway to create “mental health warming centres” in the city to support the PACT Pilot Project. The location for care will provide an alternative to the emergency room or jail and will provide a safe, supported location for de-escalation and wrap around services. There is also possibility of a mobile “mental health warming centre” as is best practice from Sweden.
- CMHA and the City are currently working with Indigenous led organizations to ensure that services are developed that are led by and meet the needs of First Nations and Indigenous peoples.
- CMHA, the City, and other stakeholders (including youth) are developing programs that will serve the unique needs of youth in crisis. More information will be available in the coming weeks.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Work to progress the Downtown Livability Strategy is funded through existing operational and capital budgets and grants from various funding levels. While it is anticipated that there may be financial implications for future initiatives to support the strategy, there are no additional requests at this time.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

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

OPTIONS

Two options are presented for Council’s consideration,

1. THAT Council receive this report for information.
2. THAT Council provide staff with alternate direction.

Staff recommend option 1.

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:

Jen Arbo, Economic Development Coordinator

Gabe Beliveau, Manager, Engineering Operations

John Stark, Supervisor of Community Planning, Climate Action, Planning and Development

Brad Davie, Assistant Deputy Chief, Fire and Rescue Services

Tobi May, Manager, Civic Buildings and Properties

Denise Tambellini, Intergovernmental and Community Relations Manager

This report was reviewed by:

Emilie K. Adin, Director, Climate Action, Planning and Development

Lisa Leblanc, Director, Engineering

Blair Fryer, Manager, Economic Development and Communications

This report was approved by:

Lisa Spitale, Chief Administrative Officer