

Neighbourhood Liveability and Safety in Vancouver

Recommendations from
the Mayor's Forum

January 26, 2004

MAYOR LARRY W. CAMPBELL



CITY OF VANCOUVER

Executive Summary

On October 7, 2003, in the wake of public concern about aggressive panhandling and tent encampments of homeless people in City parks, Vancouver City Council voted unanimously to ask me to convene a Mayor's Forum. The forum was intended "to receive input from citizens, neighbourhood groups and businesses" on actions the City can take to improve neighbourhood liveability and safety.

Council further directed that the forum should "examine the causes behind activities and behaviours that negatively impact on neighbourhood liveability and safety and the impact they have on people living in poverty." Finally, Council asked for suggestions to mitigate root causes of the problem, in particular the changes to Provincial Income Assistance planned for April 2004.

Recommendations from this consultation are to be forwarded to a proposed Vancouver Caucus of all civic, provincial and federal elected officials from the city of Vancouver.

After conducting meetings with a wide range of community organizations, I released an interim report as the basis for discussion at a public forum held January 10 at the Roundhouse Community Centre.

Following are my recommendations for action arising from the consultation process:

I. Recommendations for Civic action

Recommendation 1: That City Council ask the City Manager to report back on the cost and earliest possible implementation timelines for a pilot project, building on the City's Neighbourhood Integrated Service Team approach, to achieve improvements in neighbourhood liveability and safety that reflect the following elements:

- *An initial focus on one or two communities, possibly the West End/Downtown Peninsula and another neighbourhood on the east side, to develop a short list of priority actions to tackle street-level problems in a manner that reflects each neighbourhood's specific needs;*

- *Direct community involvement in planning and implementation, through participation of business improvement associations, community organizations, service providers and other groups;*
- *Increased criminal code and bylaw enforcement as required;*
- *Integration of provincial service providers as required to enhance access to youth, criminal justice, mental health and housing services;*
- *Improved police presence at the community level, including direct participation on the project team; and*
- *A progress report to City Council within six months to evaluate the pilot project and assess the prospects for its extension to other neighbourhoods.*

Recommendation 2: *That City Council ask the City Manager, in consultation with the Chief of Police, to report on the cost and time required to restore the Vancouver Police Department to the number of sworn officers that was authorized at May 1, 2003, and then to raise the force to the national average of officers on a per capita basis, keeping in mind the time required to recruit and train new officers, and the need to protect other City services while holding taxes as low as possible.*

II. Recommendations for Provincial action

Recommendation 3: *That the City of Vancouver restate its opposition to the Province's proposed April 1 changes to Income Assistance, as set out in the Council resolution of November 6, 2003, and call on the Province both to eliminate the two-year eligibility limit for income assistance while raising income assistance for a single person to \$675 a month from \$500, including a shelter allowance of \$375.*

Recommendation 4: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Provincial Government to increase resources available for mental health, youth and drug and alcohol treatment services as outlined in the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority's Operational Addictions Plan.*

Recommendation 5: *That the City of Vancouver urge the Solicitor General to convene a multisectoral meeting or summit of enforcement agencies, municipalities, Federal Government departments, the BC College of Pharmacists and the business community to consider both local measures to control precursors and co-operative ways of tackling the issue of crystal meth production at the local level.*

Recommendation 6: *That the City of Vancouver, in line with the Council motion of Sept. 16, 2003, call on the Province of BC to restore the Homes BC program to allow the construction of desperately needed affordable housing in the city of Vancouver and surrounding municipalities.*

Recommendation 7: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Province of BC to deliver on the Premier's election commitment to return all traffic fine money to municipalities to provide the City with additional resources to improve neighbourhood liveability and safety.*

III. Recommendations for Federal action

Recommendation 8: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Federal Government to implement all possible measures to control the manufacturing, importation, distribution and possession of precursor substances required for the manufacture of crystal methamphetamine and ensure that an adequate level of inspection and enforcement resources are in place to monitor these measures.*

Recommendation 9: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Federal Government to work with the Province of BC and the City of Vancouver to ensure a significant increase in the stock of affordable housing, with particular emphasis on youth aged 16 to 19, young adults, people with dual diagnoses of addiction and mental illness, and aboriginal people.*

Recommendation 10: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Federal Government to support the City's Four Pillar Drug strategy through the Vancouver Agreement by funding increased Prevention, Treatment and Harm Reduction services for Vancouver through the National Drug Strategy.*

Recommendation 11: *That the City of Vancouver commend Prime Minister Paul Martin for his proposal to share revenue with Canadian municipalities and urge him to implement this important change as quickly as possible.*

I. Introduction

Public consultations on issues as complex as neighbourhood liveability and safety always risk oversimplification.

Symptoms of neighbourhood decline can be as dramatic as boarded-up buildings or as low-key as a young person sleeping in a dry doorway at dawn.

A citizen's sense of security and safety can be undermined in a host of ways: an encounter with an aggressive panhandler, a break-in at home, the sudden appearance of a tent city in a park . . . or the loss of a home and the minimum income that most of us take for granted.

Despite the short time available for this consultation, since it was mandated by City Council last October, I found many areas of agreement. These problems are not new, nor is the willingness of many in our city to contribute to solutions. Mayor Philip Owen's Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment built an understanding across Vancouver of the clear links between drug addiction, property crime and some aspects of street disorder. The Four Pillars Strategy emerged.

Now, as the Four Pillars Strategy moves from planning to implementation, it may be time to take stock. Are there steps we can take in Vancouver to make change faster at the street level to improve life in our neighbourhoods? Certainly, there is a hunger for more information and communication. Many citizens realize that some panhandlers are homeless, others are not. Some may suffer from mental illness, others from addiction and some may have been diagnosed with both. It's important to know exactly what the problem is before we jump to quick conclusions about the right answer.

Is there a sense of insecurity in the city? I put the question to the men who gathered for my first meeting at United We Can, where "binners" and dumpster divers gave me their perspective. "Absolutely," said one. "You can see the fear in people's eyes when they find us looking for bottles in their garbage. They just have to remember: we're people, too, performing a service."

Community organizations tell a similar story. Property crime, driven to a large extent by the drug trade, provides the backdrop to a sense of unease that grows as the city densifies, putting more people in close contact with each other in a small area. "People say they're not safe," said one community representative, "but dig deeper and it's the person on the corner, the person sleeping in the park, people of different socioeconomic class."

The visible signs of a deteriorating social safety net - aggressive panhandling, homeless people living in parks, open drug dealing in city neighbourhoods - are undermining our city's quality of life, both for residents and for tourists, as my office mail attests.

It was clear, both in my meetings and in the forum, that Vancouver citizens want to change that reality. Community-level engagement, communication and leadership will be the key to any success.

Many participants referred to the City's Four Pillars Strategy as a model for how to proceed. In many respects, I see this consultation as an extension of the Four Pillars Strategy, which was preceded by extensive consultation. In September, we celebrated the opening of *Insite*, North America's first supervised injection site. This initiative, led by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, is near capacity. In November, the City sponsored a groundbreaking conference on substance misuse prevention, which will lead to a prevention strategy for the city. We now need to highlight the treatment and enforcement pillars, the other key pillars in the strategy. Vancouverites believe their city can be even better than it is, and are prepared to do what it takes to achieve that goal.

I believe there is consensus in four important areas:

1. Safety concerns: There is increasing concern about safety in the city, although most citizens are careful to distinguish between ordinary street activity and aggressive street behaviour. Most link aggressive behaviour to increasing poverty, substance abuse and addiction, the emergence of crystal meth and the utter inadequacy of mental health treatment. In spite of the City's best efforts so far, young people are most at risk. There is little fear of violent crime but growing impatience with property crime.

2. Affordable housing and services to low income residents: An adequate supply of secure, affordable housing is a pre-condition of any successful strategy for neighbourhood liveability and safety, with appropriate options for addicted and non-addicted clients, including youth, families and people suffering from mental illness. Service providers and many citizens cite

cuts to income assistance and other social programs as a root cause. Service organizations are very apprehensive about the consequences of additional changes to Provincial income assistance scheduled for April 1. Again, young people 16 to 19 are the most vulnerable and the least supported. Single parent families also face tremendous pressure. Access to training and jobs are essential.

3. Policing and enforcement issues: While acknowledging the complex causes of community disorder, citizens are looking to a stronger response from the City and the Vancouver Police Department. They believe the police require more resources and a stronger presence on the street and in neighbourhoods. At the same time, participants understand the constraints facing the police when it comes to bylaw enforcement and the limits on court time imposed by the Province. A successful policing strategy will require that the community take its share of responsibility. It will also require integration with new resources for affordable housing and mental health treatment.

4. Concerted action by all three levels of government: Clearly, it will take concerted action by all three levels of government, in partnership with the community, to produce the improvement the quality of life our citizens are demanding. I believe citizens are becoming increasingly frustrated, in spite of the work done through the Vancouver Agreement, with the lack of co-ordination and co-operative action on these and other issues.

II. The Consultation Process

In preparation for the Mayor's Forum, I held a series of meetings with business and tourism organizations, community organizations, community service providers, legal and civil liberties specialists and with community policing associations. United We Can and Dusk to Dawn sponsored discussions for me with participants in their programs.

An interim report based on those discussions was circulated to the participants in advance of the January 10 public forum at the Roundhouse Community Centre. Nearly 300 people registered for that meeting, which broke into discussion groups to propose solutions for all three levels of government.

Working groups at the January 10 forum were invited to answer three questions. First, what should the City do to improve neighbourhood liveability and safety? Second, what action should the City recommend to Victoria and to Ottawa? And third, what steps can our community take?

Almost every working group urged the City to continue working at the neighbourhood level to encourage education and action.

There is a strong demand for increased police presence on the street on foot or by bicycle rather than by car. The anticipated dispersal of the drug trade from the Downtown Eastside now needs to be tackled in the rest of the city. Several groups urged stepped-up bylaw enforcement. Many called for closer ties between police and the community. One group called for more use of restorative justice, in which offenders could perform community service as part of the sentencing process. Taxes are relatively low, one group said: perhaps an increase is in order to fund more community safety initiatives. There is a widespread agreement that recent reductions in the size of the Vancouver Police Force, triggered by changes to the Provincial police pension plan, need to be reversed.

There was no suggestion, formally or informally, that more laws are necessary at the City level to improve enforcement. There is wide agreement that the existing bylaws should be adequate, combined with the criminal code, to handle aggressive panhandling. All those I consulted agreed that panhandling, in and of itself, is not illegal. In fact, anyone has a free speech right to ask another person for money. When that request becomes persistent, or aggressive, other remedies are available. Bylaw enforcement officers and police then must ask whether or not the behaviour is criminal or a consequence of mental illness.

A second, and equally important question, is what priority to attach to this issue, given the huge demand for service from both organizations. Finally, it is doubtful that Crown Prosecutors would be prepared to allocate significant court time to these offences in the absence of meaningful links to social services and mental services that could resolve the source of the problem. No one is arguing that jail time or fines will provide a meaningful deterrent in most cases.

A second common theme was housing. There is an urgent need for housing of every sort. All agree it is vital to protect the City's stock of single-room accommodation housing. Council has already taken steps through the SRA bylaw to achieve this goal. Although some SRA buildings are poorly managed, the City has another group welcomes the City's proposed legalization of secondary suites. Others questioned whether or not the City's Property Endowment Fund could be used to increase affordable housing stock.

Finally, there was strong agreement that more access to mental health services, housing and social services will be essential for any strategy to succeed. Businesses should assist, where possible, in finding employment opportunities for street people. Many downtown business leaders have already volunteered to do so.

The background document and the interim report prepared as part of this process are included in the appendices, along with a tabulated summary of comments from the working groups at the January 10 forum. The detailed records of the group discussions are also available for review in my office.

This report will be submitted to Council for consideration and referral to staff for further action as appropriate. Recommendations for the two senior levels of government will be forwarded to the Vancouver Caucus after review by Council.

III. Recommendations for Civic Action

In my opinion, the public demand for community involvement and integration of policing with city and other social services requires a special approach. One working group had the same view, recommending some version of the City's existing Neighbourhood Integrated Service Team approach. The NIST model, now in place in many parts of the city, has won a United Nations award for the way it weaves street-level community concerns with City resources across departments and agencies.

Until now, however, City employees have participated in NIST teams as part of their other duties. The NIST process has been limited to matters purely within the City's area of responsibility and jurisdiction. In my opinion, a more concentrated effort will be required to achieve gains in neighbourhood liveability and safety. It will be necessary for community leaders to define, in clear, pragmatic terms, their priority actions. In addition, it will be essential to engage Provincial authorities responsible for drug treatment, youth services, criminal justice, mental health and affordable housing. This has already occurred during resolution of the tent cities or squats in 2003.

To test the viability of this approach, I believe the City should conduct a pilot project, using one or two neighbourhoods. For its part, the City would have to allocate some staff time to provide focused leadership to the project. Some resources would be necessary for community outreach and education. The solutions should come, however, from the community, working with City departments, police and the relevant Provincial agencies. I do not believe it is appropriate to allocate any new resources to community organizations involved. The goal is to achieve more effective use of what we have.

The City has little ability to deal directly with some of the issues we know will arise. We should seek Victoria's assistance to test new bylaw enforcement approaches that mesh appropriately with youth, mental health and court services. We may also need Ottawa and Victoria to come to the table with new resources for affordable housing for youth.

I believe the pilot project should set clear, practical near-term goals. Based on what I have been told at the forums, the project would include targeted outreach to the homeless, particularly young adults, in the affected area, with appropriate services. New employment opportunities must be identified, but some business leaders have already indicated privately their determination to help. A third element could be an improved bylaw and criminal code enforcement program, developed in consultation with the VPD and Provincial authorities.

In my recommendations, I propose selecting the West End/Downtown area and Grandview Woodlands for this pilot project for several reasons:

- Each community has well-established community organizations with experienced leadership;
- Each has expressed concern about deteriorating liveability and safety, particularly in the past 12 months;
- Each is well-served by community service agencies;
- Each has business improvement associations and other community groups in a position to offer input;
- Each has community organizations with a commitment to community policing.

I do not imply, by any means, that other communities are necessarily in better shape or less deserving of assistance. These two, however, seem a logical place to begin.

Recommendation 1: That City Council ask the City Manager to report back on the cost and earliest possible implementation timelines for a pilot project, building on the City's Neighbourhood Integrated Service Team approach, to achieve improvements in neighbourhood liveability and safety that reflect the following elements:

- *An initial focus on one or two communities, possibly the West End/Downtown Peninsula and another neighbourhood on the east side, to develop a short list of priority actions to tackle street-level problems in a manner that reflects each neighbourhood's specific needs;*
- *Direct community involvement in planning and implementation, through participation of business improvement associations, community organizations, service providers and other groups;*
- *Increased criminal code and bylaw enforcement as required;*
- *Integration of provincial service providers as required to enhance access to youth, criminal justice, mental health and housing services;*
- *Improved police presence at the community level, including direct participation on the project team; and*
- *A progress report to City Council within six months to evaluate the pilot project and assess the prospects for its extension to other neighbourhoods.*

Such a pilot project will require City financial support. In my view, this support should be used exclusively to support the NIST team, not to hire additional staff, nor to provide additional funding to community organizations outside of the normal granting process. City expenditures would be limited to direct administrative costs, community outreach and public education.

Some leading community organizations believe the answer lies, at least in part, in hiring more police. As we know, it will be impossible to show a net increase in the number of sworn officers for some time because of the losses this year and the time required to recruit and train new officers. In the meantime, the VPD is reliant on overtime to meet service demand,

an unsustainable policy for the City financially and for the officers who are asked to work excessive hours.

The City of Vancouver must develop a realistic plan to restore the force to appropriate strength, reducing or eliminating the reliance on overtime as much as possible. The City must also urge the Vancouver Police Board and the VPD to do whatever possible to respond to citizen demand for an increased street presence by police and an improved response to petty crime.

Recommendation 2: That City Council ask the City Manager, in consultation with the Chief of Police, to report on the cost and time required to restore the Vancouver Police Department to the number of sworn officers that was authorized at May 1, 2003, and then to raise the force to the national average of officers on a per capita basis, keeping in mind the time required to recruit and train new officers, and the need to protect other City services while holding taxes as low as possible.

IV. Recommendations for Provincial Action

While forum participants offered fewer suggestions for Provincial and Federal action, the initiatives our citizens did propose were sweeping in scope and would make a dramatic difference in the life of our city.

The City of Vancouver has already gone on record opposing the changes to Income Assistance the Province will implement April 1. These are very serious changes which are likely to have a major impact on Vancouver. A recent media report quotes a GVRD official stating that the homeless population of the region has doubled since 1999 to between 2,500 and 3,000 people. About 1,200 of those seek out an existence in the city, where the number has doubled in the last year. The GVRD noted that gaps in some municipalities' services mean that Surrey's homeless are turning to Vancouver to find shelter.

The GVRD found more First Nations people and young adults on the street, predominantly in other municipalities. This increase is directly related to reductions in disability benefits, elimination of Provincial investments in new affordable housing and changes to income assistance.

The changes effective April 1 will cut an unknown number of people off income assistance. Some observers say the number will range into the thousands, but even an increase of a few hundred homeless people is an unacceptable offloading to the City of Vancouver. Of equal concern are the changes that will result in benefits for one-parent families being reduced by \$100 a month and two-parent families by \$200 a month. Many of these citizens will be faced with the choice of feeding the kids or paying the rent. These changes will be compounded by cuts to the Inner City Schools program.

As Ken Lyotier, of United We Can, told the January 10 forum, the Province must rethink the whole idea of defining anyone as “unemployable.” Every member of our society should be considered a useful member with a contribution to make. But, as all service providers told us, policies now in place to restrict or reduce resources to young people, mental health services and drug treatment are effectively writing off hundreds of our citizens.

Most troubling of all was the disaster facing youth 16 to 19 who are effectively denied Provincial support through the elimination support for this age group. Frequently on the run from dysfunctional families, these young people are on a treadmill, struggling to survive on the street through panhandling, unable to seek a job, unqualified to hold one if they did. Vulnerable to drug abuse and the sex trade, they must be a priority for action before it's too late.

Recommendation 3: That the City of Vancouver restate its opposition to the Province's proposed April 1 changes to Income Assistance, as set out in the Council resolution of November 6, 2003, and call on the Province both to eliminate the two-year eligibility limit for income assistance while raising income assistance for a single person to \$675 a month from \$500, including a shelter allowance of \$375.

Recommendation 4: That the City of Vancouver call on the Provincial Government to increase resources available for mental health, youth and drug and alcohol treatment services as outlined in the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority's Operational Addictions Plan.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this consultation was the level of concern I heard from service providers and youth workers about the impact of crystal meth. This drug, which can be manufactured relatively easily from materials that can be legally obtained in many places, is extremely destructive. The health consequences for those who consume it are devastatingly and exceedingly difficult - perhaps impossible - to treat. Canada passed regulations in the past year which address the importation, exportation, production and distribution of precursors, the materials required to make the drug. Health Canada has advised industry that it will regulate two key ingredients, red and white phosphorous, in the near future.

The Vancouver Coastal Health Authority chairs the Methamphetamine Response Committee (MARC) Treatment and Prevention Task Team, which is working to implement the recommendations of a summit meeting held in Vancouver in November 2002. I believe that all three levels of government can and should do more to give impetus to the MARC process and any other measures to curb the use of crystal meth.

Recommendation 5: That the City of Vancouver urge the Solicitor General to convene a multisectoral meeting or summit of enforcement agencies, municipalities, federal government departments, the BC College of Pharmacists and the business community to consider both local measures to control precursors and co-operative ways of tackling the issue of crystal meth production at the local level.

During the past year, the City has made strenuous efforts to expand the supply on affordable housing and protect the stock that exists. The purchase of Woodward's included a Provincial commitment of 100 units of affordable housing. This initiative, the purchase of the Stanley New Fountain Hotel and the opening of units previously approved meant the City was able to maintain its recent annual average of 400 new units opened or committed in 2003. We have no prospect of repeating that feat this year.

Faced with this reality, Council has taken two important steps to safeguard and improve the stock of existing affordable housing, including:

- Implementation of a bylaw to protect single-room accommodation units, which still number about 6,000, averting the likely loss of several hundred rooms in the next few years; and
- Consideration of legalization of illegal suites, which are a key source of housing for students, immigrants and lower-income families but have never been regulated to minimum safety standards.

Despite a red-hot housing market, the private sector does not have the ability to provide housing affordable to those most vulnerable. The housing supplement paid to income assistance recipients has not increased for ten years. Provincial and Federal action is imperative on this front.

Recommendation 6 That the City of Vancouver, in line with the Council motion of Sept. 16, 2003, call on the Province of BC to restore the Homes BC program to allow the construction of desperately needed affordable housing in the city of Vancouver and surrounding municipalities.

As the Province seeks to reduce its expenditures in key areas, the City is being forced to take up some of the slack. Apart from these costs - which represent services formerly funded by the Province which the City now must support, the City of Vancouver has been forced to intervene in other ways. The \$2 million expenditure to purchase the Stanley New Fountain Hotel, for example, made about 100 units of affordable single-room accommodation available in the city.

These units had been part of Homes BC until Victoria cancelled the program, stranding them just before completion. It would be very difficult to quantify the staff time consumed to resolve the homeless squats that occurred in 2003 by providing housing and other support, but the sum would be substantial.

The impact of this offloading could be mitigated if the province lived up to the Premier's election pledge to return all traffic fine money to municipalities. This suggestion was made by several forum participants and it's a good one.

Recommendation 7: That the City of Vancouver call on the Province of BC to deliver on the Premier's election commitment to return all traffic fine money to municipalities to provide the City with additional resources to improve neighbourhood liveability and safety.

V. Recommendations for Federal Action

While forum participants had the fewest recommendations for Federal action, they match the Provincial issues for scope and impact. They can be summarized very easily:

Recommendation 8: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Federal Government to implement all possible measures to control the manufacturing, importation, distribution and possession of precursor substances required for the manufacture of crystal methamphetamine and ensure that an adequate level of inspection and enforcement resources are in place to monitor these measures.*

Recommendation 9: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Federal Government to work with the Province of BC and the City of Vancouver to ensure a significant increase in the stock of affordable housing, with particular emphasis on youth aged 16 to 19, young adults and aboriginal people.*

Recommendation 10: *That the City of Vancouver call on the Federal Government to support the City's Four Pillar Drug strategy through the Vancouver Agreement by funding increased Prevention, Treatment and Harm Reduction services for Vancouver through the National Drug Strategy.*

Recommendation 11: *That the City of Vancouver commend Prime Minister Paul Martin for his proposal to share revenue with Canadian municipalities and urge him to implement this important change as quickly as possible.*

VI. Conclusion

I will be taking this report before Council at the earliest possible opportunity for discussion and action.

In December it appeared likely that a Vancouver Caucus could be scheduled as early as January 21. Unfortunately, this date proved impossible for some Provincial and Federal representatives. Although no new date has emerged, my office has written formally to Premier Gordon Campbell and to Minister Stephen Owen asking to have the Vancouver Caucus convened soon.

This forum was the sixth I have conducted since my election. Although all have been valuable, this drew the largest attendance and most detailed recommendations. The success

of these forums depends to great extent on the involvement of the community. There was great interest and engagement in this process and I would like to thank all of those who participated in the preliminary meetings and in the forum itself.

In particular, I want to thank our four panelists on January 10: Vancouver Police Chief Jamie Graham; Nancy Keough, of the Kettle Friendship Society; Kathi Thompson, of the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association and Ken Lyotier, of United We Can.

I would also like to acknowledge the work and support of the many City employees, particularly Jacquie Forbes-Roberts and her staff, and Vancouver Police Department Inspectors Axel Hovbrender and Val Harrison for their suggestions and advice.

All of which is respectfully submitted,

Larry W. Campbell,
MAYOR

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Appendices:

Interim Report - "Mayor's Forum on Neighbourhood Safety and Liveability –
Interim Report Pre-Forum Consultations – December 17, 2003"

Background Report - "Mayor's Forum on Neighbourhood Safety and Liveability –
Background Information for Participants – November 2003"