



## REPORT

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TO: Vancouver City Council

FROM: General Manager of Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability & General  
Manager of Engineering Services

SUBJECT: Places for People: Downtown Public Space Strategy

### **RECOMMENDATION**

- A. THAT Council approve the *Downtown Public Space Strategy*, as outlined in this report and attached in Appendix A.
- B. THAT staff be directed to apply the principles of the Downtown Public Space Strategy to public life and local business COVID-19 pandemic recovery initiatives, and related policy and planning initiatives.
- C. THAT staff be directed to adapt the Strategic Directions to input into city-wide policy, including the Vancouver Plan and community and area plans.

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

This report provides an overview of the Downtown Public Space Strategy (the Strategy) (attached in Appendix A), which sets out a vision for a public realm that puts people first and supports a vibrant, equitable, safe, healthy and well-connected Downtown. The Strategy includes the Vision, Principles, Strategic Directions and Framework (i.e. spatial concept) that will guide the implementation of the Strategy and prioritization of enhancements for consideration in future development and Capital Budget processes. Summaries of the Downtown Public Life Study and community engagement process are provided in Appendices B and C respectively.

## ***Prologue: Public Space Use during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

While this policy was developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Downtown Public Space Strategy takes on new relevance and urgency in this period of crisis and the period of recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the importance of public space in our communities and to the function of our city, including the intrinsic links to economic development, civic engagement, community resiliency, and the health and well-being of all residents.

While many Vancouverites have been largely confined to their homes – where many do not have access to a backyard or private green spaces – City staff and community leaders are supporting residents to maintain their strong sense of community and social ties, and to spend time outdoors with safe physical distancing. In addition to ensuring access to outdoor space for the larger community, the City's response efforts have prioritized interventions that enable access to essential services and support the most vulnerable members of society, including those in the Downtown Eastside, and those working on the front lines.

Recent Council motions have provided direction to transform street right-of-way to allow for physical distancing, while walking, exercising, queuing, dining, socialising, gathering and accessing essential services – reallocating at least 11% of existing road space for people-friendly public spaces. These motions on street reallocation and patios have also provided direction to support the safe reopening of restaurants and businesses, providing the necessary space to operate, while still allowing physical distancing, as the City transitions into a recovery phase.

These interim measures also present an opportunity to partner with businesses and neighbourhoods to innovate and demonstrate potential longer term transformation of the City's public realm and the road network, which will be explored further in conjunction with the planning and consultation process for the ongoing Vancouver Plan.

Through the ongoing recovery phase, it will be critical for the City to remain active in the planning, design and creative re-purposing of public space, working across departments and with public health professionals, to rebuild a healthy community, strong social connections, and a vibrant local economy and public life. The principles outlined in the Strategy provide a basis for this recovery work, and will be applied to public life and local business recovery initiatives during the phased recovery period following the COVID-19 state of emergency.

## ***Downtown Public Space Strategy***

The Downtown Public Space Strategy addresses a significant policy gap in the Downtown - which has neither a public realm plan nor a public space inventory - by establishing a framework for a holistic public space network. The Strategic Directions set clear, qualitative objectives and measures for public space initiatives over the next 30 years, so that the City's planning work and capital investments will all build towards this public realm vision.

In 2017 Council directed staff to prepare a Downtown Public Space Strategy to provide a more coordinated approach to delivering public space initiatives in the Downtown. To respond to this direction, staff created the *Places for People* program, an interdepartmental initiative that supports a new, made-in-Vancouver approach to public space planning. The Downtown Strategy is the first policy created through this program, created through a two-year collaboration between Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability, Engineering Services, Park

Board and other City departments. The development of the Strategy also included extensive community outreach, engagement and analysis, including a volunteer-driven Public Space and Public Life Study.

Building on the momentum of this Strategy, the *Places for People* program will continue to support public realm-related initiatives city-wide, including the Vancouver Plan, community and area plans, and public space capital projects.

The Downtown Public Space Strategy supports the implementation of key City of Vancouver goals which, together, will build a more equitable, affordable, sustainable and resilient future including the *Climate Emergency Response*, *Rain City Strategy*, *Resilient Vancouver Strategy*, *Culture Shift*, *Women's Equity Strategy*, *VIVA Vancouver* initiatives, and other existing public space policies and guidelines. The Strategy also supports the development of the *Vancouver Plan*, and the direction set in the Parks Board approved *VanPlay: Parks and Recreation Services Masterplan*.

### **COUNCIL AUTHORITY/PREVIOUS DECISIONS**

On March 20, 2017, Council directed staff to prepare a Downtown Public Space Strategy.

The following are prior decisions by Council that directly influence public space design and delivery in the Downtown:

- Vancouver Plan – Planning and Engagement Process (2019 - ongoing)
- Climate Emergency Response (2019)
- Rain City Strategy (2019)
- Resilient Vancouver Strategy (2019)
- Culture Shift (2019)
- Women's Equity Strategy (2018)
- Complete Streets Policy Framework (2017)
- Healthy City Strategy Action Plan (2015)
- Framework for City of Reconciliation (2014)
- West End Plan (2013)
- Transportation 2040 (2012)
- Vancouver Economic Action Strategy (2011)
- Council motion directing staff to prepare a Downtown Public Space Plan (2010)
- Downtown South Guidelines (Excluding Granville Street) (1991; last amended 2004)
- Downtown (Except Downtown South) Design Guidelines (1975; last amended 1993)
- Plaza Design Guidelines (1992)
- Central Area Plan (1991)

Council Motions:

- Safe and Inclusive Streets: Support for Community Crisis Management Through Understanding and De-escalation (2019)
- Ramping up Vancouver's Climate Action in Response to the Climate Emergency (2019)
- Shore to Core: Vancouver's Watershed Revival Plan (2019)
- Safer Slower Streets: 30km/h Residential Street Pilot (2019)
- Formalize the False Creek to the Fraser River Blueways (2019)

- Comprehensive strategy for realizing the full potential of the night time economy (2019)
- Expanding Downtown Eastside Greenspace and Waterfront Access (Vancouver Fraser Port Authority engaged to identify opportunities for green spaces and cultural centres) (2019)
- Back to basics – prioritizing public realm maintenance and cleanliness in Vancouver (2019)
- A Collaborative and New Approach to Oppenheimer Park and Other Public Spaces (2019)
- Flexible, Innovative and Expedited Patio Permitting (2020)
- Reallocation of Road Space to Support Shared Use During Pandemic (2020)

### ***CITY MANAGER'S/GENERAL MANAGER'S COMMENTS***

The General Manager of Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability and the General Manager of Engineering Services RECOMMEND approval of the recommendations of this report. The Downtown Public Space Strategy will guide the positive transformation of the Downtown public realm for a generation, help to coordinate and integrate the public space-related work of several departments, and provide a valuable input for city-wide public space policy.

### ***REPORT***

#### ***Overview***

##### Places for People

Vancouver's public spaces — the plazas, squares, streets, laneways, pathways, parks and waterfront — are where *public life* happens. For Vancouverites, these are places of daily interaction, play, rest, work, exploration and social connection.

The *Places for People* program is a made-in-Vancouver approach to public space planning that puts people at the forefront. This approach uses an evidence-based understanding of how people use and feel about public spaces as the foundation for public space planning, design and stewardship. It involves the direct participation of residents in the study of public spaces in their neighbourhoods. By using community-driven public life data to inform public space decision-making and investments, the City can be more effective in creating and supporting communities for all.

As the first *Places for People* project, the Downtown Public Space Strategy demonstrates how this approach helps us to prioritize, coordinate and amplify the impacts of our public space investments.

##### Downtown Public Space Strategy

Downtown Vancouver is the heart of the city, and features much of what attracts residents and visitors to our growing West Coast metropolis – vibrant and culturally diverse neighbourhoods, deep social and environmental values, a dynamic economy, and a stunning natural backdrop. Downtown is also home to our most popular public spaces, including ʂxʷłənəq Xwtl'e7énk Square, Granville and Robson Streets, English Bay Beach, the Seawall and Stanley Park.

Yet increasing pressures on the Downtown - including a growing population and changing demographics, the challenges of climate change and sea level rise, the homelessness and housing affordability crisis, and impacts of new technologies on local economies and modes of transportation – require a new response to public space planning. The public space network must play a greater role for city dwellers, as we trend toward living in more compact spaces, and public spaces become the collective backyards, family playrooms, living rooms, and workspaces for many residents.

The Downtown Public Space Strategy sets a framework to achieve a holistic public space network over the next 30 years. The key objectives of the Strategy are to:

- Establish clear **Vision and Values** for the public space network;
- Provide **Strategic Directions** for the planning, creation, use and stewardship of public space;
- Establish a **Public Space Framework** that outlines the short and near-term capital projects and planning initiatives that will help to deliver the Strategy and accelerate the transformation of the public realm.

While its primary purpose is to guide future work, including the Waterfront Parks Master Plan, Robson Village Public Realm Improvements, Bute Greenway, and the Granville Bridge Connector, the Strategy builds off of a legacy of public space initiatives, including improvements to 800 Robson and ƧxʷĀēnēq Xwtl'e7énĳ Square, the creation of Jim Deva Plaza, the Parks Board led VanPlay master planning initiative, and ongoing public life and public space programs such as VIVA Vancouver and pavement to plaza projects.

Although this first Strategy applies to the Downtown Peninsula, the Strategic Directions are intended to inform policy for the public realm city-wide, including the development of the Vancouver Plan and major public realm plans and projects. Staff have identified the DTES as one of the next priority areas for the Places for People program, which would build on the recent, extensive community planning process that resulted in its robust Community Plan.

## ***Background/Context***

### **1. Public Space and Public Life**

The high quality of life in Vancouver is very much connected to its public realm. Successful public spaces foster mental and physical health, advance sustainability, support local business, promote social engagement and connect people to their local communities. Encouraging everyday activity in these spaces, and ensuring that they are well maintained, safe, and welcoming, makes the city an attractive place in which to live, work and play.

As the city continues to grow and residents are living in more compact homes and neighbourhoods, the need for a high quality public realm also increases, as it provides vital outdoor living space for Vancouverites. These spaces need to support a wide range of activities that are free to enjoy, including places to rest and socialize. Public spaces also need to adapt to meet the changing needs of our diverse population, offering new experiences and providing an equitable and accessible provision of public space throughout all neighbourhoods. This can be achieved through co-creation and meaningful participation in the planning, design, and stewardship of public space.

## 2. Downtown Context

The Strategy focuses on the Downtown Peninsula and its neighbourhoods. This 7.1 sq km<sup>1</sup> peninsula is the most densely populated area of Vancouver and home to over 137,000 people, 150,000 jobs, and a growing number of visitors.

The forecasted population and job growth in the Downtown will put pressure on existing public spaces, and increase the need for additional public realm assets. Achieving adequate provisions of open space is challenging in the Downtown, where it is exceptionally difficult to acquire new spaces. The Strategy explores a range of creative approaches and tools to build and maintain a high quality supply of open spaces, and leverage them to their full advantage.

## 3. Developing the Strategy

### Public Engagement

The Strategy was informed by deep engagement with stakeholders and the public, a robust analysis of the current and emerging conditions in the Downtown, and a public space and public study (PSPL, see Appendix C). Since June 2017 the planning process engaged over 15,000 people, over these four phases:

- Phase 1 - Vision, Values and Favourite Places (July-August 2017)
- Phase 2 - Public Space and Public Life Study (September 2017 – June 2018)
- Phase 3 - Testing Ideas and Directions (July 2018)
- Phase 4 - Confirming Directions (September 2019)

The City of Vancouver has been working to strengthen relationships with the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. This ongoing relationship building has helped inform the Strategy and will continue to shape future public space initiatives. Staff have a commitment to work with the Nations and urban Indigenous communities to advance public space initiatives that increase the presence and visibility of Indigenous Peoples, foster more inclusive spaces, and support the Framework for the City of Reconciliation (2014).

### Public Space and Public Life Study (Phase 2)

The Public Space and Public Life Study (PSPL) Study, an innovative methodological approach and emerging leading practice in public realm research, was a key input for the Strategy (see Appendix B). As a survey of the physical and social elements of a place, the PSPL combines several forms of data, including: asset inventories of the physical environmental (street furniture, lighting, façade quality), observational studies of people's use of public spaces, and intercept surveys and interviews.

Over 500 volunteers counted and observed people gathering, walking, on wheels, of different ages and genders, engaged in different activities. They also surveyed people to gather their perspectives on public space. The Study took place over a weekday and weekend day during the summer and winter seasons at more than 115 locations across the Downtown.

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding Stanley Park (which is ~3.7 sq.km.) from the total.

The PSPL Study helps to describe how public life unfolds in the city today, and suggests what design, programming or policy changes might most improve public life in the future. The Study also provides a useful benchmark against other cities that have undergone comparable studies, including New York City, San Francisco, Seattle, Copenhagen and Melbourne.

#### **4. Strategy Outline**

The key sections of the Strategy include:

##### **Strategic Directions**

These six Strategic Directions establishes core principles and characteristics to guide all major public space projects and initiatives in the Downtown, so that they best contribute to a holistic public realm, and a more vibrant and inclusive public life. The Directions address all aspects of place-making, from engaging communities in public space co-creation and stewardship, to physical planning and design.

##### **1. *For All, by All***

Provide public spaces that are inclusive, welcoming, and safe for people of all ages, genders, backgrounds and abilities. Encourage people to create, activate and be stewards of public space.

##### **2. *The “Right” Supply***

Set targets to match the supply of public space to the needs of each neighbourhood, and achieve an equitable and appropriate distribution of public spaces.

##### **3. *Design for People***

Provide well designed public spaces to support a rich range of experiences.

##### **4. *Day-long, Year-long***

Provide opportunities to enjoy public spaces throughout the year, both day and night.

##### **5. *Nature and Resilience***

Consider the natural environment, urban hydrology, disaster response and climate emergency when planning and designing public spaces.

##### **6. *Connecting People and Places***

Ensure that the public space network is well connected and easy to navigate for people walking, rolling and cycling.

#### **Downtown Public Space Framework**

This section illustrates how the Strategy will be implemented over the near and mid-term. The Downtown Public Space Framework map outlines funded capital projects and planning areas that can be positively shaped by the Strategic Directions, as well as opportunity areas that merit special consideration and study.

## ***DISCUSSION***

### **Why We Need a Downtown Public Space Strategy**

The Downtown Public Space Strategy envisions a compelling, multi-faceted public realm that connects Downtown neighbourhoods and communities. To achieve this vision, the Strategy provides a framework to: 1) leverage current and future public space projects and programs to deliver a holistic public realm; 2) integrate and inform current and upcoming public space-related policies; 3) improve engagement with communities in public space planning, creation and stewardship; and 4) ensure that upcoming public space initiatives more effectively deliver City priorities, including the Climate Emergency Response and the Equity Framework.

#### **1. Leverage Public Space Initiatives to Deliver a Public Realm Vision**

The *'Strategic Directions'* provide clear objectives and measures to help shape public space projects and programs, to ensure that these investments best contribute to and align with the 30-year public realm vision. The *'Downtown Public Space Framework'* illustrates the implementation of the Strategy, by providing a map of near and mid-term capital projects and opportunity areas. The Strategy will be partially implemented through the approved and future capital plans.

The *'Strategic Directions'* also provide direction to expand on our existing public space-related programs and activities, to further advance a community-based approach to public space creation, programming and stewardship. These programs rely on partnerships with Business Improvement Associations (BIAs), community and non-profit organizations, property and business owners, and members of the public, to deliver public spaces that are tailored to the interests of local communities, while achieving broad public benefit:

- Pavement-to-plaza, parklets and patios programs
- VIVA Vancouver program
- Plaza Stewardship
- BIA Partnership program
- Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) policy

#### **2. Integrate and Inform Public Space Policy**

The *'Strategic Directions'* in the Strategy are intended to be developed and adapted as city-wide public realm policy, and provide a key input into:

- Vancouver Plan
- Community and area plans, such as Broadway Plan and Jericho Lands

The Strategy also builds on existing public space policies, including the West End Plan and related design guidelines, and provides updated policy direction for the Downtown, including:

- Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS)
- Solar access and shadowing on public spaces

#### **3. Improve Engagement with Communities**

The Strategy supports the empowerment of communities by setting clear objectives for engaging people and organizations as active participants in public space planning, creation and stewardship. Building on the success of the Places for People and VIVA Vancouver programs,



the City will expand our practices of direct public engagement and community-driven place-making. In particular, the Strategy provides direction to further reduce barriers to participation for all Vancouverites, including the most vulnerable groups and individuals.

The Strategy also commits to ongoing communication and working with the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh* (Squamish), and *səlilwətał* (Tseil-Waututh) Nations and urban Indigenous communities on the creation, design and programming of public spaces.

#### 4. Deliver on City Priorities

The Downtown Public Space Strategy supports the implementation of a number of key city-wide strategies and goals which, together, will build a more equitable, affordable, sustainable and resilient future:

- **Housing Affordability and Livability**  
A growing need to provide a high quality of life in more compact housing and a denser urban environment; as public spaces are now playing a larger role as the collective living rooms and backyards, they are more directly connected to residents' wellbeing.
- **Climate Adaptation and Resiliency**  
Ecological functions, habitat protection, rainwater management, heat island mitigation and disaster response hubs must be integrated into public space planning and design, to ensure a healthy and resilient urban environment. A well-designed public realm also promotes the conversion of vehicle trips to active transportation.
- **Equity and Accessibility**  
The strategy provides direction for residents to become active participants, stewards and co-creators of public spaces. This includes improving how we collaborate with the Musqueam, Squamish and Tseil-Waututh Nations to support their expression and celebration of their cultures, histories and landscapes in the public realm. It also provides direction to further advance universal accessibility guidelines (in process) and develop an equity framework to apply a gender-based lens to public realm projects.
- **Local Economy**  
The Strategy provides direction for animated high streets, a strong patio culture and entertainment districts, and low-barrier commercial opportunities, such as food, buskers, subsistence vendors, and maintenance services by social enterprises.
- **Culture and Recreation**  
The public realm plays an important role in supporting cultural and recreational activities, including leveraging public spaces as *de facto* event venues.

#### ***Environmental Implications***

Fostering a network of successful, vibrant public spaces will enhance the walkability of the Downtown and support cycling and transit use. This will further reinforce sustainable transportation modes as the preferred ways of getting in and around the Downtown, which will reduce GHG emissions, increase health, and have a positive effect on the environment. The Strategy also seeks to better integrate ecological functions, habitat protection, rainwater

management, heat island mitigation and disaster response hubs into public space planning and design, to ensure a healthy resilient urban environment.

### ***Financial Implications***

There are no direct financial implications of the Strategy. The Strategy supports the implementation of existing funded capital projects and study areas, and provides direction to best leverage these initiatives to deliver on a broad range of Council priorities. Going forward, the Strategy will be integrated into the City's 10-year Capital Strategic Outlook, 4-year Capital Plan and annual Capital Budget for prioritization and funding consideration on a city-wide basis.

### ***CONCLUSION***

The *Downtown Public Space Strategy* (attached in Appendix A), provides a framework to shape a holistic public space network in the Downtown over the next 30 years. The preparation of the Strategy has included significant community outreach and engagement (summary attached in Appendix C), as well as a Public Space and Public Life Study (Appendix B). The strategy aligns with and advances Council policies, including *Climate Action*, *Culture Shift*, *Transportation 2040*, *Healthy City Strategy Action Plan*, and the *West End Plan*. There are several major near- and mid-term public space projects and ongoing programs that will be informed by the Strategy, to achieve significant transformations and improvements in the Downtown public realm.

This report seeks Council's approval of the Downtown Public Space Strategy.

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