



## COUNCIL REPORT

Report Date: January 24, 2023  
Contact: Celine Mauboules, Rob Renning and Saul Schwebs  
Contact No.: 604.873.7670  
604.665.6066  
604.873.7040  
RTS No.: 15419  
VanRIMS No.: 08-2000-20  
Meeting Date: January 31, 2023  
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TO: Vancouver City Council

FROM: General Manager of Arts Culture and Community Services, Fire Chief and General Manager of Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services, and General Manager of Development, Buildings and Licensing, and Fire Chief

SUBJECT: Improving Life Safety in SROs: Updates and Grant to SRO-Collaborative

### Recommendations

- A. THAT Council authorize a grant totaling \$110,000 to the Downtown Eastside SRO Collaborative Society to fund the *SRO Fire Safety Preparedness and Response in SROs* pilot project outlined in Appendix A. Source of funding is the 2023 City of Vancouver's Operating Budget.
- B. THAT Council delegate its authority to the City's General Manager of Arts, Culture, and Community Services (or their designate) to negotiate and execute legal agreements disbursing the grants described in Recommendation A and containing the terms and conditions described in this Report and any other terms and conditions that the City's General Manager of Arts, Culture, and Community Services and its Director of Legal Services deems necessary.
- C. THAT no legal rights or obligations will arise or be created by Council's adoption of Recommendations A through B unless and until all legal documentation has been executed and delivered by the respective parties.

*Approval of Recommendation A constitutes a grant and requires an affirmative vote of at least two-thirds of all of Council pursuant to Section 206(1) of the Vancouver Charter.*

### Purpose and Executive Summary

The following report is a joint effort between Arts, Culture and Community Services (ACCS), Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services (VFRS), and Development, Buildings and Licensing (DBL). Over the past two years, there has been an increased number of significant fire incidents in Vancouver's Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings. This report seeks Council's approval

of a Grant valued at \$110,000 to the SRO-Collaborative to implement a tenant-led fire safety pilot program in 18 SRO buildings, reaching approximately 740 tenants. The report also outlines fire safety education and prevention work currently underway to decrease fire risks in SROs.

### **Council Authority/Previous Decisions**

*Resilient Vancouver Strategy:* In April 2019, Council approved the Resilient Vancouver Strategy which outlines holistic steps to identify and address shocks and stresses faced by Vancouver, and cultivate Thriving and Prepared Neighbourhoods, Proactive and Collaborative City Government, and Safe and Adaptive Buildings and Infrastructure.

*Housing Vancouver Strategy:* In 2017, Council approved the Strategy including endorsing the SRO Revitalization Action Plan as part of Housing Vancouver, which includes actions to improve the liveability of SRO rooms and buildings for existing residents while working to accelerate replacement of SRO rooms with new, self-contained shelter rate social housing units inside and outside the Downtown Eastside (DTES).

### **City Manager's Comments**

The City Manager recommends approval of the foregoing.

### **Context and Background**

#### Overview of the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Housing Stock

For many of the City's very low-income residents, SRO rooms in 100-year old hotels and rooming houses provide a necessary housing of last resort. Located primarily in the Downtown Eastside, approximately 7,200 residents make their homes in this congregate-style housing, usually sharing bathrooms and cooking facilities.

As of December 2022, there were 154 open SRO buildings containing approximately 7,200 rooms. Fifty-two percent of SROs are privately owned while 48% are considered non-market owned, meaning they are owned by Government (municipal or provincial), non-profits, or Chinese Benevolent Societies. See below for a breakdown of open SRO rooms by ownership type. An additional 13 SRO buildings (778 rooms) are currently closed. SRO rooms (both open and closed) make up approximately 7% of the entire rental stock.

*Table 1: Open SRO Stock by Ownership Type*

<b>Owner</b>	<b># SRO Buildings</b>	<b># SRO Rooms</b>
Private	91	3,724
BCH Housing	34	2,232
City of Vancouver	7	419
Non-Profit	13	660
Chinese Benevolent Society	9	155
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>7,190</b>

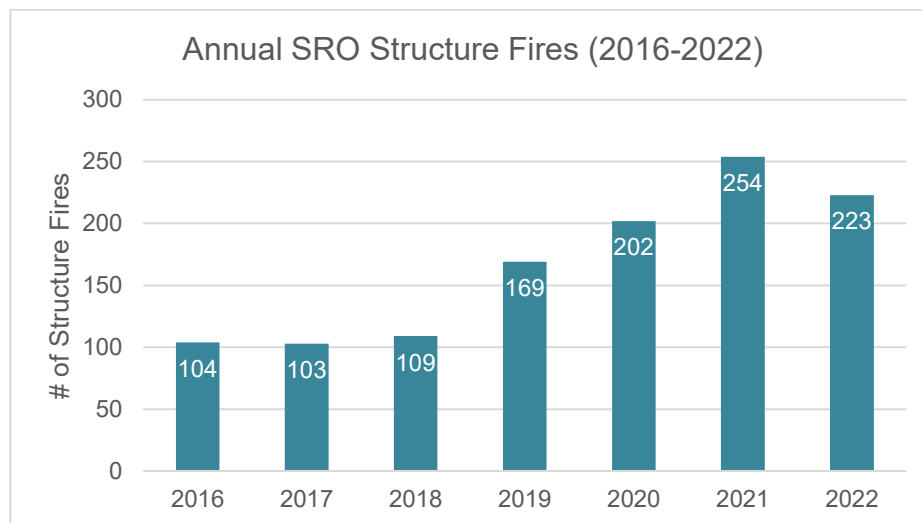
## Overview of Recent Fire Incidents and Alarms in SROs

SROs are at increased risk of fires due to their ageing infrastructure, including electrical systems that may be overloaded, sprinkler systems designed to an older standard, and older alarm systems that require constant maintenance or repair. In buildings with poor heating systems, tenants may resort to other methods to keep warm that increase fire risks. Furthermore, many SRO tenants use electric bicycles for transportation, which they store in their rooms, putting them and their buildings at risk of lithium battery explosions.

SRO tenants are also at increased risk of fire-related harm due to factors such as a lack of proper ventilation and the limited means of egress in congregate housing. Tenants with health challenges and/or older age, mobility difficulties, or disabilities (e.g., deafness) are particularly vulnerable to fire-related harm, as are tenants who may be impaired by the use of opioids, other drugs, or alcohol, as well as tenants with heavily cluttered rooms.

Over the last few years, there has been a significant increase in fire incidents in SRO buildings. Data from Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services (VFRS) indicates that the number of structure fires in SROs increased by 114% between 2016 and 2022 (104 structure fires in 2016 compared to 223 in 2022, as shown in Figure 1). In 2022, there were 380 fire incidents<sup>1</sup> in SROs, defined as any fire related response that VFRS may have responded to, with or without reportable fire damage. Of these fire incidents, 70% were caused by smoking materials and the mishandling of lighters, candles and matches, 5% were electrical and battery-related, and 9% were kitchen related. In 2022, fires in SROs accounted for 11% of all fires citywide, compared to 7% in 2016.

Figure 1: Number of Structure Fires in SROs (2016 – 2022)\*



\*Data collected by Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services

The fire at the Winters Hotel (located at 102 Water Street) on April 11, 2022 was the largest and deadliest SRO fire in Vancouver in recent years, causing two deaths and the permanent displacement of all 71 tenants. Due to extensive damage, the Chief Building Officer subsequently issued an emergency demolition order for the building. An additional six significant fires occurred in SROs in 2022, resulting in the temporary or permanent displacement of over 400 residents, as listed in Table 2.

Table 2: 2022 SRO Building Fires Resulting In the Temporary or Permanent Displacement of Tenants

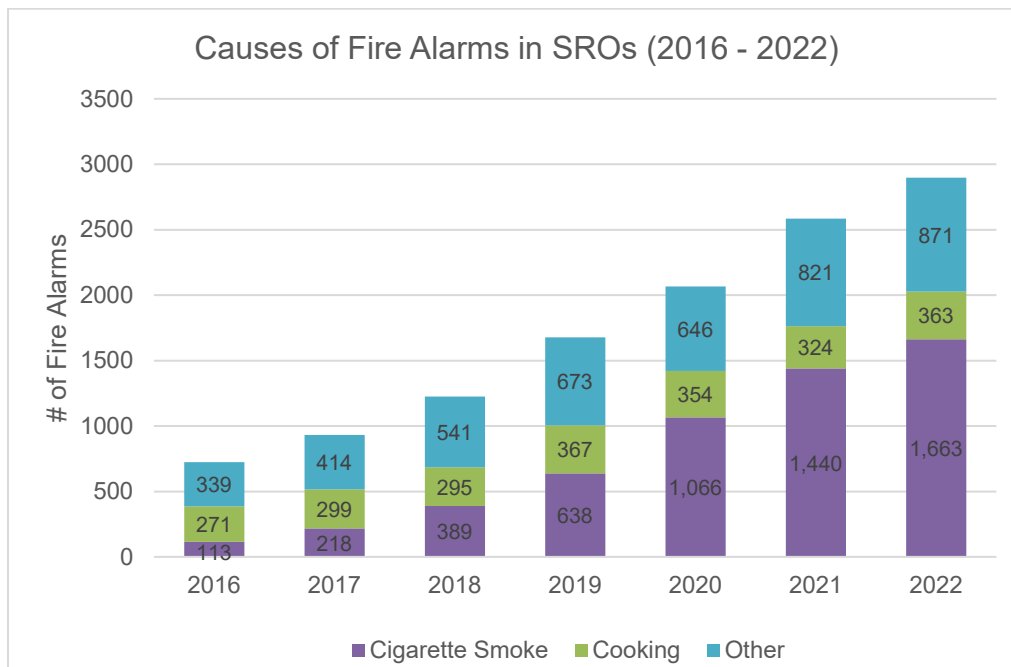
<sup>1</sup> Fire incident is categorized as any fire related response that VFRS may have responded to, with or without reportable fire damage. This can include interior and exterior fires, and illegal burning of combustibles controlled or not.

Building Name	Address	Date of Fire	Number of Tenants Displaced*
Winters Hotel	102 Water St	April 11, 2022	71
Gastown Hotel	112 Water St	April 11, 2022	90
Princess Rooms	212 Princess Ave.	August 22, 2022	38
Hampton Rooms	568 Powell St	August 22, 2022	25
Keefer Rooms	727 Keefer St	September 9, 2022	39
Sereena’s Place	143 Dunlevy Ave	September 24, 2022	54
Hazelwood Hotel	344 E Hastings St.	September 29, 2022	100
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>417</b>

\*Tenants were displaced for up to two weeks or longer, or in some cases tenants were permanently displaced due to significant fire damage (i.e. Winters Hotel)

VFRS data also highlights the increasing over-representation of SROs in regards to alarm responses compared to other buildings over the same time period. Fire alarms in SROs requiring VFRS response made up 22% of all alarms in Vancouver in 2022, a rise from 16% in 2019. Fire alarms in SROs averaged at nearly 8 per day in 2022, compared to 2 per day in 2016. Figure 2 shows that fire alarm responses in SROs are increasingly being triggered by the detection of smoking material, often in the common areas such as hallways.

Figure 2: Causes of Fire Alarms in SROs (2016 – 2022)\*



\*Data collected by Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services

In addition to the potential life safety impact indicative of this high number of fire alarms, there is also a significant financial and resource impact on VFRS, as the department is required to respond to all alarm activations. For fire alarms in SROs, a typical VFRS response requires two apparatus (i.e. firetruck), and eight VFRS staff.

## Current City-led Initiatives to Address Life Safety in SROs

The overall goal of City staff is to maintain and improve living standards for tenants living in SROs. Staff from various inspections departments including Property Use, Building and Trades, and Vancouver Fire, work with SRO building operators and owners to promote by-law compliance. The City proactively inspects all SRO properties through an annual inspection process to ensure compliance with all City by-laws, including the SRA By-Law, the Fire By-Law, and the Standards of Maintenance By-Law. In addition to the proactive inspection, City staff also investigate all complaints received concerning SROs. During the inspection process, inspectors identify life safety and non-life safety issues for follow up. Should a violation be noted during an inspection, enforcement action is taken to bring the property into compliance. The enforcement escalation process may include a Municipal Ticket Information (VFRS), enforcement letter and/or a legal order. If there is continued non-compliance following the expiry of an order, the City may refer the file to prosecution, proceed to injunctions and/or place a notice on title.

In addition to the individual department's inspection and enforcement processes, the City has a Tactical Team, which includes representatives from Proactive Enforcement, Buildings, Property Use, Legal Services, VFRS, VPD, and Affordable Housing. This team meets monthly on cross departmental items to review, discuss and identify actions for SROs that are at higher risk of non-compliance with various municipal by-laws. A dedicated Property Compliance Inspector, under the Proactive Enforcement branch, coordinates reviewing all outstanding violations, complaints, VPD and VFRS data to prioritize the groups' actions on SRO buildings through a coordinated, integrated approach.

In response to the rapidly increasing number of fire incidents and alarms in SROs over the last few years, VFRS initiated a fire prevention education program for SRO building owners and operators in the summer of 2022. The program, led by VFRS' Community Safety and Risk Reduction team, includes individual on-site training, fire safety walk-throughs with building owners and operators, and a review of fire safety procedures. VFRS has been reaching out to all SRO buildings to encourage participation in this free training program. As of December 2022, 175 building operator staff in 28 SRO buildings (including 16 non-market SROs and 12 private SROs) have attended this training.

VFRS have also met with BC Housing to discuss the impacts of fires and alarms in their buildings and have worked on strategies to address this, including ensuring that all staff working in BCH-owned SROs have the opportunity to receive fire safety training. Staff from VFRS are also working on implementing a data sharing agreement with BC Housing to assist in identifying and addressing buildings that are most impacted by fire/alarm responses.

## **Discussion**

### Grant Proposal: SRO Fire Safety Preparedness and Response

Staff are seeking Council's approval of a grant totalling \$110,000 to enable the Downtown Eastside SRO Collaborative Society (SRO-C), a registered charity with Canada Revenue Agency, to improve fire safety preparedness and response through a tenant-centred approach. This one-year pilot project (March 2023 – March 2024) will operate in 18 SROs, including eight privately-owned buildings and ten Chinese Benevolent Society buildings, reaching approximately 740 tenants in total. The SRO-C has established a strong foundation with tenants and landlords for tenant-led initiatives in these buildings, which is a key factor for the successful implementation of this pilot. This relational foundation was strengthened through the supports the SRO-C provided to tenants during the summer of 2022 as part of the City-funded *Preparing for Extreme Heat in SROs* pilot project.

The grant will enable SRO-C to hire an SRO Fire Safety Coordinator and the development and implementation of fire safety materials and training in 18 SRO buildings. Key components of the pilot include:

- Development and delivery of three workshops for 18 lead tenants (one per building) in partnership with VFRS on fire prevention, safety and response, including training on conducting weekly fire safety checks in common areas in buildings and proactively flagging fire safety issues with SRO-C staff.
- Distribution of multilingual fire safety pamphlets to 2,000 SRO rooms.
- Coordination of fire safety surveys among tenants to collect baseline data on fire preparedness and specific supports needed in the event of a fire.
- Creation of building maps for each building with the support of the SRO Fire Safety Coordinator that highlight fire risk factors, escape routes, and information on tenants with pets or additional assistance needs in the event of a fire.
- Organization of annual fire drill by the SRO Fire Safety Coordinator and 18 lead tenants
- Development of a systemic fire safety checklist for the SRO-C's BOLTS (Building Operations Led by Tenants in SROs) to incorporate into their regular maintenance routine.

The complete grant proposal submitted by the SRO-C is available in Appendix A, including the list of buildings, a detailed work plan, and a budget breakdown for the requested grant amount.

Staff from both ACCS and VFRS are supportive of the grant as a strategic investment in supporting ongoing efforts to address an alarming increase in fire incidents and fire alarms in SRO buildings. The pilot project will build on current City-led fire prevention and education initiatives implemented by VFRS in the SRO stock, filling a gap by reaching and educating tenants directly. Through previous and current initiatives, including the *Emergency COVID-19 Response* and the *Tenant Overdose Response Organizer (TORO)* program, the SRO-C has demonstrated its extensive experience in implementing tenant-based initiatives that educate, mobilize and empower SRO tenants to improve health and safety conditions in their buildings.

#### Ongoing Actions to Address Life Safety in SROs

The magnitude of the challenges associated with ageing SROs that house tenants with multiple, complex challenges requires significant investment across all levels of government to ultimately replace this outdated stock with self-contained, dignified, and deeply affordable housing. Staff are currently working with CMHC, the Ministry of Housing and BC Housing on an SRO Investment Strategy to evaluate and identify SRO buildings for renovation, redevelopment, or replacement off site. In the interim, other City actions are being explored to address habitability and life safety in SROs.

In response to a Council motion in February, 2022, Staff in VFRS, DBL, ACCS and Legal services are undertaking a review to improve effectiveness of City By-Laws that protect the life and safety of occupying residents, especially those living in SROs. The review is focused on the Standards of Maintenance By-law, but amendments to other by-laws including the Vancouver Building By-law, Fire By-law and the Single Room Accommodation By-law may be considered. Areas of review include maintenance monitoring and reporting, enforcement tools and incentives to encourage compliance, education for tenants and landlords, cooling and heating requirements, pest control, and fire safety systems and related requirements. Staff expect to report back to Council with recommendations in November 2023.

Emergency preparedness, particularly around fires and extreme temperatures, is an urgent priority in SROs, most of which are over 100 years old and house tenants with multiple, complex challenges. This report seeks Council's approval of an SRO Grant valued at \$110,000 to the SRO-Collaborative to implement a tenant-led fire safety pilot program in 18 SRO buildings, reaching approximately 740 tenants. Approval of this grant will increase SRO tenants' fire safety awareness and preparedness as part of larger efforts to reduce fire alarms and fire incidents in the already deteriorating SRO stock, reduce the financial and resource impacts on VFRS and, most importantly, help protect the safety and lives of SRO tenants.

### **Financial Implications**

Funding for the Grant included in Recommendation A will be provided through the 2023 City of Vancouver's Operating Budget.

Funds will be released in two payments, with release of the second payment conditional on receipt of a report to the satisfaction of the Managing Director, Housing and Homelessness Services.

### **Legal Implications**

Once the City and the grant recipient have executed the grant agreements contemplated in the Recommendations, the City must disperse the grant described in Appendix A to the grant recipient.

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