

COUNCIL MEMBERS' MOTION

2. Expanding Free Public WiFi in the Downtown Eastside and Adjacent Neighbourhoods

Submitted by: Councillor Boyle

WHEREAS

1. Access to free public WiFi is an important tool in reducing the digital divide, expanding opportunities for people to connect with family and build stronger social supports, and improving equitable access to knowledge, skill development, employment and healthcare. As the world moves more and more online, those without connectivity are being left behind;
2. The City of Vancouver recognizes the significant role free WiFi plays in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. It offers a vital link to online resources, essential services, and a means to stay connected with loved ones;
3. Internet or cellular service is also required for people to access a continuum of services and resources including:
 - a) The City of Vancouver's shelter hotline
 - b) Telehealth for physician access
 - c) The 811 nurse hotline
 - d) A range of warning and alert systems, including drug toxicity alerts
 - e) Access Central, a telephone line that provides access to withdrawal management (detox) in the Vancouver Coastal Health region
 - f) Virtual support services such as the Lifeguard App and Brave App, which offer 24/7 support and supervision for people at risk of overdose and connections to local resources
 - g) The National Overdose Response Hotline, which provides 24/7 anonymous and confidential support over the phone through trained peer supporters
4. These programs save lives, connecting people to shelter, housing, healthcare and more. However their reach and impact relies on making them as accessible as possible to the people they are intended to serve, including through expanded access to cellular or internet connection;
5. Access to public WiFi also provides more opportunity for the city to communicate to community members during emergencies. During health outbreaks and extreme weather events it would strengthen the ability for the city and community organisations to reach residents with important information and updates;

6. Expanded free public WiFi also benefits tourism and small business, allowing locals and visitors to locate local businesses and attractions and stay connected while away from home. These benefits would strengthen economic and community development efforts in neighbourhoods including Gastown, Chinatown, Strathcona and Hastings Crossing; and
7. The City of Vancouver currently provides 521 free public WiFi locations across Vancouver, in partnership with Telus and Rogers, provided through a mix of private and public access buildings, such as community centres, branches of the Vancouver Public Library, City and Park Board buildings. This includes an established footprint of free WiFi in the DTES through city owned facilities as well as VanWiFi.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council direct staff to report back by the end of 2024 with a plan, timeline and budget for expanding free public WiFi in the Downtown Eastside. And that this work include but not be limited to:

- A. Engaging with community and social service organisations and local businesses about their capacity and interest in hosting public WiFi access points.
- B. Engaging with social housing partners and BC Housing to explore the possibilities of adding WiFi access points in BC Housing, non-profit and city owned social housing.
- C. Engaging with community organisations and BIAs in adjacent neighbourhoods about expanding free public WiFi access in Gastown, Chinatown, Strathcona and Hastings Crossing.

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