



Position Paper on Local Issues Housing Unaffordability, Opioid Use, Mental Health, Homelessness, and Crime

ISSUES - OVERVIEW

The following issues have been increasing over the past few decades:

Housing Unaffordability

Access to housing has been a focus of City Council, BC Housing, and the Provincial government for many years. Lack of investment in affordable housing and rental supply generally, coupled with rapidly increasing house prices and stagnant wages, has left many BC communities with major issues with escalating rents. This is slowly improving with the BC Government's recent commitment to build 114,000 units of affordable market rental, non-profit, co-op, supported social housing, student housing and owner-purchase housing, which includes the recent announcement of two supportive housing developments in the Duncan area. The City's zoning bylaw also encourages the development of rental and below market priced units.

Opioid Use

Opioid use, and drug use in general, has been a decades old problem that for the most part has remained hidden in our community. However, the emergence of an increasingly stronger, cheaper, synthetic drug supply, such as fentanyl and other toxic drugs, has increased the visibility of the problem. Widespread overdose deaths, primarily in private homes, is becoming too commonplace across BC and Canada. Some people that were sufficiently functioning while using opioids are no longer able to sustain stability in their lives; more and more people are finding themselves out on the streets. People caught in the cycle of addiction are our neighbours, our family members, our brothers and sisters, our aunts and uncles, our children. We lack readily available detox beds and treatment centre options, which are often cost-prohibitive. There are also insufficient transitional and supportive housing options for people after undergoing treatment.

Mental Health

Since approximately 1987, the province began to shift away from institutionalized care facilities (due to complaints about patient treatment), and alternatively move toward expanded community services and smaller facilities spread around the province. The promised funding for community based mental health services never materialized in a meaningful way, while the provincial population has been increasing, including those that need mental health supports. The primary example is Riverview Hospital that had capacity of 1,306 beds, and after several decreases in capacity, ultimately closed in 2012 with insufficient transition options for people needing care. Leaving people with mental health issues without access to treatment and services means we are paying for mental illness in the most expensive way possible through policing and hospital use, while the individuals are not receiving the help they need.

Homelessness

There has been a significant increase in homelessness in virtually all larger centers across the Province, and the country due to numerous factors such as the lack of housing affordability and lack of supportive housing. Insufficient mental health supports and the prevalence of opioid use and the toxic drug supply, are often, but not always, contributing factors.

ISSUES – OVERVIEW CON'T

Crime

There has been a lack of investment for many years in court services to expeditiously prosecute repeat offenders. People who perpetrate property crimes are too often given a pass, or light sentencing, and the consequences are not sufficient to deter the behaviour. Lack of investment in additional capacity for appropriate corrections facilities province-wide causes additional strains. Population growth naturally means that without additional spending in these areas there will continue to be a negative impact on community members and businesses.

KEY FACTS

What can governments do about these issues?

Local Government - ALL of the above issues are outside the mandate of local governments to address (with the exception of encouraging affordable housing development). Local governments primary responsibilities are providing water, sewer, storm, local roads, recreation, and land use regulations. Land use regulation and road utilization result in local bylaw enforcement to “help people get along.” Enforcing parking rules, regulating dogs, addressing noise complaints, regulating commercial uses in residential areas; these are the types of issues that municipalities have the greatest control over. Relating to homelessness and drug use, local governments powers are limited to control over sidewalks, roadways, and parks, and have been restricted by various court cases in recent years. Bylaw enforcement can often move people along who are loitering, which the City does within its boundaries, but there are still no places to move people to. Municipalities have some limited influence over policing resources and priorities. However, policing operations and regulation, and court processes and decisions are well outside the control of local governments.

The City is doing what it can within the scope of the areas where we do have authority and advocating for assistance from other levels of government in the areas that are outside of our authority.

Provincial Government - In Canada, the provinces have the following responsibilities (among others):

- Education
- Healthcare
- Provincial highways and transportation
- Policing in rural areas (like Cobble Hill), and in municipalities with populations under 5,000
- Provincial judicial system
- Provincial economic development

Regardless whether we agree with each individual initiative or not, in recent years the Province has been working with local governments to address the issues of affordable housing, overdose deaths, and homelessness which have been underfunded and neglected for decades. However, it is not a quick overnight fix or one magic solution that will address the complexity of issues facing our community and others across the Province and Country.

Federal Government – In Canada, the Federal Government has the following responsibilities (among others):

- Defence
- Foreign trade
- Shipping and navigation
- Rail transport
- Air travel (aeronautics)
- Fisheries
- Welfare and Employment Insurance
- Federal Court and policing
- Regulations for drugs (Cannabis, opioids, prescription drugs, etc.)

In recent years, the Federal Government has been increasing spending on housing, limited decriminalization of drugs, and safer supply to address these growing and ongoing issues.

CITY ACTIONS

What is the City of Duncan doing to address these issues?

As noted, since the above issues are outside the jurisdiction and control of local government, the City has focused on lobbying for Provincial changes and attention, while doing what the City can with its limited resources and authority.

With the knowledge that businesses and residents were being more and more heavily impacted by the above listed issues, the current Council made addressing them a priority immediately after the election in 2018, as the status quo was not working.

1. Safer Community Plan

- a) In early 2019, the City met with representatives from the highway corridor regarding their experiences and observations and immediately reached out to our neighbouring local governments to engage in working together to address the issues raised.
- b) In early 2019, the City partnered with North Cowichan, Cowichan Tribes, and the RCMP, on the Safer Community Plan initiative, which dedicates bylaw enforcement and private security resources to patrolling the highway corridor area throughout the three jurisdictions. The City administers the contract with the private security company (Blackbird).
- c) In the fall of 2019, Safer Community Plan patrols of the highway corridor began, and the City went beyond the commitments in the Safer Community Plan to hire additional bylaw enforcement staff to patrol (by bicycle) throughout not only the highway corridor, but the remainder of the City as well.
- d) As part of the Safer Community Plan, staff from the City, North Cowichan, Cowichan Tribes, and the RCMP meet regularly as a Safer Working Group, to identify, prioritize and coordinate appropriate bylaw enforcement responses to reduce crime and public disorder in the Trans-Canada Highway Corridor.

- e) For many years, the City has funded a Duncan Mental Health program called the “Open Door Street Crew” where participants perform weekly or bi-weekly rounds of certain City streets to pick up street litter. In early 2019 the City expanded the program to include Whistler Street and St. Julien Street.
- f) In March 2020, the City was successful in initiating a two week coordinated effort of late night and early morning patrols of Duncan, North Cowichan, and RCMP staff in the York Road/Lewis Street area, to disrupt unwanted behaviour that was occurring overnight in that area.
- g) Community Policing – The previous service provider has struggled for several years and is not currently operating. The City is working with North Cowichan and the CVRD to select a new service provider. Once this selection is complete, we will be working together to develop a program ensure the new service provider engages with businesses and residents to build the necessary supports within neighbourhoods.

2. Cowichan Leadership Group

- a) In June of 2019, Mayor Staples participated in the formation of the Cowichan Leadership Group, in response to and increasing need from different levels of government and organizations in the community to coordinate action and communications on regional issues.
- b) In early 2020, the Cowichan Leadership Group asked the province to provide funding for treatment facilities for people with addictions and for people with mental health issues and initiate a safe drug supply. That proposal was rejected but the Leadership Group continues to advocate for more of these support services.

<https://www.northcowichan.ca/EN/meta/news/news-archives/2020-archive/cowichan-leadership-group-seeks-support-from-provincial-government.html>

3. Increased Neighbourhood Supports (around the Overdose Prevention Site and elsewhere)

- a) The City has not had input into, or control over, the current (221 Trunk Road) and previous (Margaret Moss - in 2017) Cowichan Valley Overdose Prevention Site (CV OPS) sites in Duncan. The provincial government special ministerial order gives the health authority the mandate to establish the CV OPS.

This means that not only is the local government NOT consulted, but even when objections are raised, we have learned through our experience there has been no recourse to change the health authority’s decision on the location of this service.

However, in December 2019, the City was able to create a partnership with Island Health to fund the City hiring security service to patrol the neighbourhood area around the current CV OPS on Trunk Road, which has been very impactful in reducing previous congregation issues. We understand that same level of neighbourhood support is likely to be provided in partnership with the Municipality of North Cowichan for the new site on York Road, and we encourage proactive communications with Island Health to ensure supports in the York Road area are sufficient.

- b) After Mayor Staples was contacted by local businesses concerned about increased impacts of homelessness due the pandemic, the Mayor and City's staff reached out to BC Housing to find out their plans for providing pandemic support and were informed that communities had to develop their own response plans and submit them for BC Housing's consideration. The Mayor reached out to the Cowichan Housing Association (who chairs the Cowichan Coalition on Homelessness and Housing) to ask if they would be able to lead a COVID-19 Vulnerable Populations Emergency Response Task Force, and they agreed. Cowichan Housing Association worked to bring together representatives from organizations and governments across the region to develop and submit a temporary response plan that would support the needs of the entire region.

That plan included establishing managed, supported, and secure tenting sites for no more than 12 individuals at each site, and the securing of a hotel to house up to 40 people with supports and security. This also freed up space at Warmland House so there was shelter space available for people with more complex needs.

This temporary response has now become a longer emergency response. The task force is currently working on a winter phase, as well as developing a phase 2 plan that includes rehousing some of the people in the hotel and tenting sites. In addition, the task force is working together to develop options for supports and services for the complex and harder to house individuals who have remained unhoused during the pandemic. These individuals require more supports than the supportive housing developments will provide.

- c) In August 2020, the City received confirmation that we have been awarded funding, from a 2019 grant application, to offer and expanded sharps collection program in the core area. This program will also include some collection of litter and other discarded materials. This program is now up and running and a press release is to be issued shortly with more information.

4. General Increases in Security Spending

- a) In April of 2020 the City was successful in partnering with North Cowichan and the Downtown Duncan Business Improvement Area to provide an increase of 4 nighttime shifts per week to deliver 7 nights a week of night patrols in the highway corridor and downtown areas due to concerns of break and enters while many businesses were closed in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The partners did not wish to extend funding past the initial 3 months.
- b) In May of 2020, the City doubled its spending on night patrols in order to cover more of the City and ensure staff were able patrol harder to get to spots in Centennial Park, Rotary Park, and other areas. The City is quick to act when encampments are discovered on City lands.
- c) In July of 2020, the temporary increase in night patrols ended and the City continued to provide 3-4 nights a week of coverage as it has for many years prior to the start of the pandemic.
- d) In October 2020 Council approved further increases to night patrols to establish 7 nights a week of coverage for 2021.
- e) In October 2020 Council approved the creation of a Manager of Building and Bylaw Services, in order to dedicate more time and resources to addressing the issues of public disorder.
- f) In October 2020 Council approved the budget for a 2021 City wide Enhanced Security Initiative Program, where commercial property owners can apply for a 50% grant up to \$1,000 towards new or improved security initiatives for their property.

- g) In October 2020 Council approved the budget for a 2021 City wide graffiti removal program where property owners can receive a voucher for up to \$60 in paint and materials to paint over graffiti.
- h) In October 2020 Council approved the budget for a 2021 Highway Corridor Façade Improvement Program. Since 2012 the City has provided a similar program for the downtown in partnership with the Downtown Business Improvement Area. This is a similar but separate program that provides 50% grants, up to \$1,000, to support aesthetic improvements to buildings on the corridor, excluding general maintenance.

5. Conference Calls with Provincial Ministers (September 2020):

- a) Requested Minister Eby, Attorney General, to provide additional resources for Crown Counsel to deal expeditiously with charge assessments in the interest of pursuing tougher sentencing for repeat offenders.
- b) Requested Minister Darcy, Mental Health and Addictions, to establish detox beds, and addiction treatment and recovery programs for adults and youth, as well as housing oriented to sobriety and wellness for people who have undergone treatment. Providing access to a local supportive recovery environment will help individuals, and our community, stabilize.
- c) Requested Minister Darcy, Mental Health and Addictions, to direct Island Health to extend the hours of operation of the CV OPS, to not only improve the safety of CV OPS clients but will also reduce the negative impacts on neighbourhood outside the service hours. It is imperative to improve the current and future operations of the CV OPS.
- d) Requested Minister Darcy, Mental Health and Addictions, to direct Island Health provide additional neighbourhood supports for the current and future location of the CV OPS: improve communications with the neighbours, sharps and garbage sweeps in the surrounding area, and security patrols. It is imperative to take steps to reduce the negative impacts.
- e) Requested Minister Robinson, Municipal Affairs and Housing, to create a long-term plan for continued investment in all types of government-assisted housing in the Cowichan Valley to address the housing needs in our community.

CHALLENGES

What is reducing the effectiveness of the City's actions?

1. COVID19

Due to the pandemic, incarceration for property crimes is more limited, court processes were/are scaled back, and shelters have reduced capacity.

2. Jurisdictional Borders

While the Safer Working Group and other collaborative efforts have greatly improved coordination, there are still between 3-4 jurisdictional boundaries within several 500 metre radiuses along the corridor: Cowichan Tribes, City, North Cowichan, and CVRD. The City can only directly control efforts inside City boundaries. Continued improvement on coordination and alignment of approaches is paramount, in addition to increased collaborative efforts between private properties, the Safer Working Group, and service providers.

3. **Community Frustration Directed at Local Government**

While frustration is certainly understandable, misinformation and uninformed accusations are not. These have led some to believe the false narrative that the City and Council does not care, is doing nothing, and somehow accepts this level of community disruption. Whereas the reality is that the City HAS been taking action in many areas (many listed above). The City does not respond to comments on various social media sites, but always responds to emails and letters that often include the same inaccurate rumours and innuendo found on social media.

POSITION STATEMENT

The City's Position Statement (on what is required to take real steps towards reducing the community impacts):

This position paper is a living document and will be reviewed each time Council is provided an update on the status of Strategic Plan initiatives or there is new information available.

1. Mobilize Community Support and Understanding

- Support is needed for this position paper and the City's current and future lobbying efforts to the Province and the Federal Government.
- Awareness is needed of the City's actions and limitations. All of City Council is committed to working hard, within our jurisdiction, on these issues. Attacking Council, or attacking individual members of Council, with accusations and misinformation takes time away from the actions the City is trying to undertake. Please work with us or talk to us directly about where you disagree with us; but understand we are trying.

2. Revisit the *Mental Health Act* – To Improve Treatment (for Those Where Other Supports are Insufficient)

New - Council will meet with the Minister of Health and Addictions for:

- Incorporating repeated episodes of temporary drug induced psychosis when considering holding patients for longer periods of time to enable stabilization and support.
- Creating additional capacity and facilities for those requiring institutionalization.
- Institutionalization is for those that are beyond helping themselves and are a potential danger to others and themselves, or consistently causing community disruption.
- Institutionalization is not permanent; when an individual stabilizes, they can be free to leave, if they destabilize, they can be re-institutionalized.

3. Establish Improved Preventative Measures

New - Council will meet with the Minister of Education and Minister of Health and Addictions to encourage:

- Establishing proactive programs in schools to educate youth on addiction, as well as coping mechanisms and tools for dealing with life challenges without turning to substances.
- Expanding youth outreach and counselling services to improve access and support capacity.

4. Provide Additional Court and Corrections Facilities Resources (to Improve Escalating Sentencing)

Prolific offender programs are purported to have some success in dealing with the worst of the property crime individuals, but there is still a revolving door of catch and release with some extreme examples of individuals having over 100 offenses. There must be a deterrent. Escalating sentencing must be improved. Increases to rehabilitation programs while in custody should also be considered.

In September 2020, Council requested that Minister David Eby, Attorney General, provide additional resources for Crown Counsel to deal expeditiously with charge assessments in the interest of pursuing tougher sentencing for repeat offenders.

5. Impose Larger Penalties for those Pedaling a Poisoned Drug Supply

New – Council will meet with the Attorney General to propose that the Province lobby the Federal government for larger penalties for individuals that are arrested with large quantities of fentanyl or carfentanyl.

6. Improve Neighbourhood Security around Overdose Prevention Site, Shelters, and Supportive Housing Sites

In September 2020, Council requested Minister Darcy, Mental Health and Addictions to direct Island Health to extend the hours of operation of the CV OPS, to not only improve the safety of OPS clients but will also reduce the negative impacts on neighbourhood outside the service hours. It is imperative to improve the current and future operations of the CV OPS.

Council requested Minister Darcy, Mental Health and Addictions to direct Island Health provide additional neighbourhood supports for the current and future location of the CV OPS: improve communications with the neighbours, sharps and garbage sweeps in the surrounding area, and security patrols. It is imperative to take steps to reduce the negative impacts.

7. Increase Affordable Housing Programs

The City has incentivized affordable housing in its update Zoning bylaw.

In September 2020, Council lobbied Minister Selena Robinson, Municipal Affairs and Housing to create a long-term plan for continued investment in all types of government-assisted housing in the Cowichan Valley to address the housing needs in our community.

8. Increase Supportive Housing Programs

The upcoming BC Housing developments on White Road and Drinkwater Road will help reduce some of the impacts that residents and businesses are currently experiencing. The City's bylaw staff have reported that the temporary supportive tenting sites in the City, North Cowichan, and Cowichan Tribes has somewhat reduced the community impacts of homelessness. The White Road and Drinkwater Road developments will not be sufficient in the long term to address the need; this is consistent around the Province and Canada; additional capacity needs to be added in all regions.

9. Increase Treatment and Recovery Programs and Beds

Requested Minister Darcy, Mental Health and Addictions to establish treatment and recovery programs for adults and youth, as well as housing oriented to sobriety and wellness for people who have undergone treatment. Providing access to a local supportive recovery environment will help individuals, and our community, stabilize.

10. Review of Sharps Distribution Programs

Council understands the globally held evidenced based philosophy of harm reduction and shifting away from an sharps exchange to sharps distribution. Council believes there must be changes to encourage proper sharps disposal and will request that the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions review and consider options for changes.

11. Educate about Safe Supply

In early 2020, the Cowichan Leadership Group asked the Province to provide funding for treatment facilities for people with addictions and for people with mental health issues, and a safe drug supply. That proposal was rejected but the group continues to advocate for more of these support services.

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Safe supply has the potential to reduce not only deaths, but also the criminal element due to property crime and cutting out the dealers.

New - Council will advocate for improved communications from Island Health regarding the upcoming (2021) Safe supply program (for up to 25 individuals), its execution, management, reporting results, and also address community concerns about the program.

WHO TO CONTACT

Questions or comments related to the Position Paper can be directed to:

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