

Special Report

— on —



HOUSING SOLUTIONS *for the* DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

 **PIVOT**
PIVOT LEGAL SOCIETY

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HOUSING SOLUTIONS *for the* DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

with contributions from *Matt Wadsworth*

Aaron Zacharias

Dave Cumming



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Introduction

David Eby

IN OCTOBER OF 2006, PIVOT LEGAL SOCIETY CHALLENGED POST-secondary students in planning, geography and political science departments of universities across Canada to write an essay on how to solve the homelessness crisis in Vancouver. The parameters were simple: don't displace the existing community; provide high-quality accommodation; look to models from other jurisdictions; think outside the box.

The essays in this report are the three best of the many submissions received in answer to this challenge. They canvass just some of the countless mechanisms through which our governments, most frequently our local government, could cover the costs of building new low-income rental housing and solve our homelessness crisis.

An innovative approach by any of our three levels of government to build new low-income housing on a large and ongoing scale could result in significant increases in quality of life for residents and business owners, as well as the homeless, coupled with major savings for governments. A survey done by the B.C. Government in 2001 found that the average annual cost to taxpayers of leaving someone on the street ranges from \$30,000 to \$40,000. The average annual cost of providing a single supportive-housing unit, including the cost of the unit and supports, ranged from \$22,000 to \$28,000 per year.

The idea that homeless people actually cost governments more money than people housed in government-funded housing

is counterintuitive. The statistics do, however, make sense when considering the hundreds of millions of dollars poured into “supports” for the homeless like outreach workers, emergency shelters, criminal court workers, police officers, ambulances and hospital emergency departments.

The point of this collection of papers is not to provide *the* solution to the housing crisis in Vancouver, Metro Vancouver or Canada (although many of the solutions outlined are very appealing) but rather to demonstrate that with some creativity Vancouver could build housing and realize a net reduction in its street homeless population. If this report helps our governments realize that there are many different ways to fund new social housing, the authors of these papers will have accomplished a great deal.

Other communities are already realizing the benefits of a reduced street homeless population. New York, which has built over 10,000 units of new supportive housing and drastically reduced its street homeless population, has seen tourism increase dramatically because its streets are perceived as “safer.” Portland, Oregon, is proving that street homelessness can be addressed by offering people housing. They have reduced chronic homelessness there by 70 percent in just two years and overall homelessness by 40 percent.

Surely we can all agree that the time for reports like this is over. We know what the problems are. We know other cities have found solutions. The time for action on the part of government is now. Will our governments bring the creativity and money needed to solve homelessness? Or will they hope the problem resolves itself through increased policing and enforcement? Only time will tell.

Since these essays were written, some policies have changed at the provincial and municipal levels for the better. For example, Vancouver’s fee to convert lodging house rooms to tourist use or condominium use has increased to \$15,000 per room. The province has also announced a modest re-investment in social housing, in the form of buying existing lodging houses from private owners and announcing the intention to fund new housing on city-owned lots.

Unfortunately, little has changed on the ground, as the city is refusing to enforce its own conversion bylaws, the new social housing construction will be spread over several years mitigating any positive impact on the homelessness population, and the recently purchased lodging houses are being emptied to prepare for renovations at a time when vacancy rates are near zero for people on social assistance. In short, despite some modest steps forward, an ongoing commitment to build new social housing on a much larger scale is required in order to reduce our street homeless population in British Columbia, recently estimated at more than 10,000 people.

American Influence in a Canadian City

How Housing Strategies in Portland, Seattle and San Francisco will Help Create Sustainable Affordable Housing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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Abstract

VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE FACES AN IMMINENT URBAN crisis: homelessness. Homelessness in Vancouver is predicted to nearly double between 2005 and 2010. This crisis will be compounded by a series of factors, including gentrification of the Downtown Eastside, the approaching Olympics and ever-increasing costs of living in Canada's West Coast metropolis. This paper examines the best practices of Vancouver's closest American neighbours in an attempt to offer the city a series of options to combat homelessness. These will include increasing social housing, establishing supplementary social service delivery and achieving long-term sustainability. Despite these best practices, Vancouver will still face a significant implementation problem because of the division of powers within Canada. As such, one further recommendation, the expropriation of sole responsibility for homelessness strategies within the city, by the city, will be made.

Introduction

HOMELESSNESS IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE (DTES) is rapidly degenerating into an urban crisis. The dichotomy of Vancouver's reality is best outlined in a recent United Nations Population Fund report, suggesting that the DTES is "a world of violence and desperation that is literally steps away from some of the most expensive and coveted real estate in North America."¹ The support structures in the DTES have been overwhelmed, and homelessness is increasing exponentially,² This problem has not gone unrecognized by the people of Vancouver, as a December 2006 poll indicated that 24 percent of the city's residents identified homelessness as their greatest concern (CTV, 2006).³ This number jumps to 67 percent if concerns associated with homelessness, such as cost of housing and poverty, are included.⁴

The City of Vancouver has been aware of this problem for some time, as have both the provincial and the federal governments. All three governments came together in 2000 to sign the Vancouver Agreement, a cost-sharing program to help reduce harm to the homeless living in the DTES.⁵ The attempts at harm reduction on Vancouver's streets have been moderately successful. Though a noble effort, it seems as though harm reduction has reached its maximum marginal utility. A new program designed to get people off the streets and end homelessness in the long term is the next logical step. Effective programs designed to do just that have already been designed and implemented in other jurisdictions, specifically in the United States.

The purpose of this essay is to use international best-practice models to identify programs that can stop the increase of homelessness in Vancouver and reverse it. The first section defines the problem of homelessness and breaks down its associated costs. An examination of the causes of homelessness in Vancouver will follow, as will a brief overview of the programs already in place in the city. The review will then outline the shortcomings of the current policies in order to better identify effective international best practices. Because of the barriers involved in the Vancouver case, the paper will draw lessons from Canada's neighbour to the south, notably from the cities of San Francisco, Seattle and Portland. This essay will outline effective policies from each city, along with the context within which each jurisdiction operates, and will then examine how these policies apply to the Vancouver case. The final section outlines the difficulties Vancouver faces in addressing homelessness and social issues in general.

Defining Homelessness and its Costs

THE HOMELESS ARE CONSIDERED TO INCLUDE INDIVIDUALS living on the street, in shelters or some other form of accommodation where the individual does not pay rent.⁶ The main cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing in a community.⁷ In addition, a lack of income is also a significant factor in an individual becoming and remaining homeless.⁸

Because of the significant increases in homelessness and the number of individuals at risk of becoming homeless, programs need to address long-term abatement. Social housing has been shown to provide significant long-term benefit to people who use it. Experience in major cities has shown that 80 percent of formerly homeless people remain stably housed over time.⁹

The costs of homelessness to the City of Vancouver and the Province of British Columbia are high. In 2001, a Government of British Columbia report on homelessness in Vancouver estimated that a group of 800 homeless individuals will cost between \$24 million and \$32 million per year in service costs to the province and the city.¹⁰ On average, medical costs of a homeless individual is 33 percent higher, per year, than a housed person.¹¹ The biggest expense that the Province of British Columbia incurs on behalf of homeless individuals is within the justice system, an average of over \$11,000 per year.¹² The single greatest cost the province incurs for socially housed individuals is social program spending, which averages to \$9,000 per annum.¹³ A homeless, unhoused individual can cost the province \$80,000 in services each year. Housed individuals have significantly lower associated cost to government, between \$12,000 and \$27,000.¹⁴

Homelessness in Vancouver

VANCOUVER'S DTES IS HOME TO THE MAJORITY OF THE LOWER Mainland's homeless, and their number is increasing.¹⁵ Between 2002 and 2005, the number of all types of countable homeless across the Lower Mainland rose by 94 percent, while the number of street homeless increased 238 percent. Vancouver alone saw a total increase of 106 percent. By 2010, it is expected that over 3,000 people will occupy the streets of the DTES. If current rates of increase are maintained, the population could top 6,000 by 2015.¹⁶

Homelessness poses a significantly increased risk among certain populations in Vancouver. First Nations are the most overrepresented group among the homeless, and Aboriginal women are homeless at a higher rate than women as a whole.^{17,18} The fastest-growing segment of homeless is seniors and those over 55, with a growth rate of 275 percent since 2002.¹⁹ While the largest group of homeless remains in the age group of 25- to

50-year-olds, the number of people under 25 entering the street is comparatively stable.²⁰

Homelessness has been exacerbated by the loss of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) accommodations in the DTES.²¹ SROs are the only available affordable housing units in the market. Consequently, they are easily lost as property values rise, properties are redeveloped and changes in ownership occur. The current loss of SROs in the DTES is due to the encroachment of trendy neighbouring communities and the gentrification of the historical area in general. In the lead-up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, anecdotal evidence suggests that homelessness has accelerated, as owners of residential hotels remove residents in order to renovate rooms and properties for the purpose of cashing in on an expected bonanza. While no number can be confirmed, some claim that the SROs lost from March 2006 to March 2007 alone number 500. Others claim that 20 percent of all SROs in the DTES have been, or are in the process of being, sold to developers.^{22,23} Residents that do not lose their SROs to redevelopment can just as easily lose them because of rising rents. As of 2001, over 67,000 households, renters and homeowners across the Lower Mainland were at imminent risk of homelessness, as more than 70 percent of their household income went to paying shelter costs.²⁴ The need for social housing units becomes much clearer when considering the wait lists for social housing. In 2003, 9,408 applicants were waiting for social housing across the Lower Mainland; nearly two of every three applicants were families.²⁵

Vancouver's Homelessness Strategy

UNTIL MARCH 2007, THE CITY OF VANCOUVER'S STRATEGY TO DEAL with homelessness was *The Homeless Action Plan* of 2005. This plan focused on providing support for income, housing and services.²⁶ While each of these represents an important step to reducing homelessness and harm, the program had little effect.²⁷ The plan called on the province to partner with the city in providing adequate social services, including social housing and an adequate social safety net.²⁸ However, the provincial government chose to ignore the city's pleas and maintain the status quo. The city spent, and continues to spend, much of its resources on buying SROs from landlords.^{29,30} This action prevents the loss of more SROs in the city; however, it also limits the investment the city can make in new housing, as the government must pay large sums of capital to buy and then upgrade these properties.

City council passed a new housing plan in March 2007.³¹ According to its critics, the new plan essentially transfers

social housing responsibility to the City of Vancouver without transferring funds to maintain this new responsibility.³² It allows for the creation of 1,500 low-cost and social housing spaces by 2015, although 700 of those were already budgeted.³³ An additional 540 SROs are to be bought from existing stock.³⁴ Meanwhile, the province will fund an increase in shelter spaces over five years and has addressed some cost-of-living problems, providing an extra \$50 to the housing allowance, the first increase in 15 years.³⁵ While this raises the housing allowance to \$375, only \$5 below the mean monthly cost of an SRO, one must remember that \$380 is merely the average price.^{36,37} Approximately 50 percent of SROs will still be beyond many people's ability to pay. The province followed these increases by buying 10 percent of the SROs remaining within the city in April 2007.³⁸ These units, however, were some of the most stable.³⁹ Though seemingly tackling the correct problems, the new program will not appreciably impact homelessness in Vancouver, especially if the city continues to lose 500 SROs annually and homelessness increases exponentially.

International Programs

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKING CREATES SEVERAL BARRIERS TO implementation in Vancouver. For one, the city has a unique geography and climate, and thus some individuals outside of Vancouver are drawn to it, whereas cities with different geographies and climate may experience a flight of homeless people. Consequently, while each city may need to address homelessness, they have different contextual challenges to overcome that make direct comparisons difficult. Furthermore, public attitudes towards social programs, and responsibilities for supporting them, vary widely from country to country. Mandates and responsibilities of different levels of government also vary. As previous discussion surrounding comparative policy has demonstrated, drawing effective lessons in these circumstances becomes difficult.^{40,41} In short, drawing lessons without compensating for context will result in bad policy. Consequently, this analysis will attempt to circumvent these difficulties by drawing lessons from cities in Canada's closest neighbour, the United States.

The advantage in choosing American case studies is that the United States, like Canada, is a federal state. While it is generally accepted that American social programs are less developed than Canadian ones, they are much closer in scope than European examples. Furthermore, the United States offers the ability to look at cities that are regionally similar to Vancouver and ones

that face similar problems. This essay will present case studies on three American cities: San Francisco, Portland and Seattle. Four policies will be presented, each as a complement to the others. The first outlines an overarching strategy for tackling homelessness. The second outlines a method that maximizes the cities' financial resources while addressing homelessness. The third policy supplements the first, making the macro strategy more effective. The final policy outlines a method to provide long-term funding sustainability.

Each city in the case studies has signed on to the American federal government's program to end homelessness. To do so, each city created a 10-year action plan designed to eliminate homelessness entirely. In each case, the cities have focused on housing the destitute and have identified it as the single most important aspect of their social policies targeted at the homeless.⁴²⁻⁴⁵ In a short time, each city has seen some success.

Portland, Oregon

PORTLAND IS A CITY OF SIMILAR SIZE TO VANCOUVER, AND BOTH share a common history. Both were formerly part of the Oregon Territory. Portland's 10-year homeless plan was tabled in 2005.⁴⁶ One might assume that very little would be accomplished in such a short period; however, by 2006 Portland had made significant progress in its most important tenet – housing. In early 2006, Portland announced that it had been able to house 600 individuals, a much higher number than the initial goal of 160 for the first year of the plan.^{47,48} The plan also called for 350 families to be housed by the beginning of 2006 and 600 additional family homes by 2015.⁴⁹ To lessen the strain on housing starts, the city created short-term assistance for those with difficulty paying rent.⁵⁰ This initiative has helped families and individuals avoid initial entry onto the streets. Portland has proven that short-term abatement policies can be successful and that immediate and intensive housing pushes can make a significant difference.

San Francisco, California

SAN FRANCISCO HAS A POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY 750,000.⁵¹ The San Francisco metropolitan region, the San Francisco Bay Area, is home to over seven million.⁵² The city has a large homeless population and has been working to address it for some time. San Francisco's housing strategy has shown significant success in housing the homeless in the early years of the 21st century, though updates to the program in subsequent years have seemingly not shared the same levels of success.^{53,54}

Like the other American cities presented here, San Francisco has a strategy that emphasizes housing as the main principle

of the city's homeless policy.^{55,56} This approach has had an appreciable effect on San Francisco's homeless population. San Francisco's 2007 homeless count found 6,377 people living with varying degrees of homelessness.⁵⁷ While this number is an absolute increase from 2005, researchers can account for this increase through more effective counting methods.^{58, 59} Had counting methods remained the same in 2005 and 2007, there would have been a drop of 7 percent,⁶⁰ and between 2002 and 2007, the city experienced a dramatic change in homelessness. Over that time period, homelessness fell from 8,640, a drop of 26 percent.⁶¹ Street homelessness has seen an even sharper drop, 38 percent since 2002.⁶²

Two programs in San Francisco have the potential to play an important role in helping Vancouver's homeless. The Master Lease program is part of the city's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness.^{63,64} The plan calls for 3,000 new social housing units within a decade. Half of these are to be built by the city, the other half are to be leased by the city of San Francisco and sublet to the city's poor.⁶⁵ While San Francisco will pay some capital costs required to build 1,500 new units, a large capital investment cost is saved on the remaining 1,500. Furthermore, the city does not have to wait for the units to be operational. The units are available, for all intents and purposes, immediately. This also allows private firms and capital to be involved in abating homelessness.

A secondary strategy that came out of San Francisco is a supplement to an effective housing strategy. The concept of a one-stop-shop program has been very successful in San Francisco and expanded to Portland. The program has become known as Homeless Connect.⁶⁶⁻⁶⁸ It has, in fact, become so effective that December 2005 saw the first Connect Day across the United States.⁶⁹ In Portland, this program has taken the form of a large one-day event. The event brings together non-governmental organizations, such as churches and aid organizations, as well as government services all at one venue.^{70,71} The services provided at this event can go a long way in helping low-income and homeless individuals receive benefits from organizations to which they otherwise may not previously have had access. By bringing organizations together in one place, the support that this program provides dispenses with common hurdles to receiving services. For example, travelling time and cost are largely overcome in this model. Travelling within the city is often cited as a difficulty for low-income individuals.⁷² Providing a one-stop shop can potentially reduce travel to just one destination. Furthermore,

individuals may deem it more worthwhile to attend an event where they can receive multiple services, instead of having to travel to many places to receive equivalent benefits.

The one-stop-shop program serves a series of purposes. The first is replacing lost personal identification. Lost identification can be a major barrier to finding employment and shelter.^{73,74} Lost identification and its corollaries are also barriers to receiving government services. Furthermore, people on the streets often do not know whether they qualify for government aid. At the San Francisco events, private corporations, such as Lenscrafters, are frequently on-site to repair glasses and provide eye tests. In some cases, a local culinary school provides meals.⁷⁵ Portland's first Homeless Connect provided 40 unique services as diverse as veterinary services for pets to personal hygiene support and health services.⁷⁶ This event also helps direct homeless individuals to services that may not be represented at these events. Perhaps the most important aspect of this program is that it brings interested and dedicated groups together.⁷⁷ This program allows non-governmental organizations, private businesses and governments to come together in one place and coordinate efforts, share ideas, innovate and network in an atmosphere of common purpose.

Seattle, Washington

SEATTLE IS VANCOUVER'S CLOSEST MAJOR AMERICAN NEIGHBOUR. The geographical and social climate of the two cities is virtually identical. Along with Portland, Seattle and Vancouver share a traditional history within the Pacific Northwest, including a long history of social activism. Finally, the number of homeless found on Seattle streets, 1,589, is very similar to the number of homeless in Vancouver.⁷⁸

Seattle's action plan is in its infancy. While there are no confirmed appreciable effects yet, it appears as though the current strategy has offset the entry of new individuals to the street.⁷⁹ Despite its early stages, the plan proposes one significant step that potentially has significant medium- and long-term implications for cities that are able to reduce homelessness. The Seattle plan calls for the funding currently provided to shelters and transitional housing to be reallocated, in order to provide more holistic services, as resources in these areas become less necessary.⁸⁰ This means that as the development of social housing continues, the resources spent on sheltering programs can be moved to support other strategies. This could include a continued increase in acquiring new housing or, alternatively, in substance-abuse programs or counselling services.⁸¹

As is the case with any good program, sustained evaluation over time should be a priority. Over time, an effective housing strategy may result in fewer people requiring shelter or a reduction in the cost of housing homeless individuals and families. This can occur through more efficient service delivery, including savings from new housing methods and savings from services for the homeless beyond housing. An effective housing policy will lessen the need for shelters. Ideally, those funds should remain in social services in order to fund further housing initiatives and associated programs and not fall victim to government clawbacks. Housing the homeless is only one part – albeit a significant part – of a much more complicated problem surrounding poverty. This program will temper future growth in the homeless population and continue to help those that are housed but still poor. Specific reallocation could be targeted towards youth-counselling services, drug treatment, education programs or services for First Nations.⁸²

Application in Vancouver

THE MOST EFFECTIVE MEANS TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS, intuitive as it may be, is by housing people. Each of San Francisco, Portland and Seattle has made housing the central tenet of their homelessness strategies. Portland and San Francisco have shown that a concerted short-term housing strategy can have significant, sustainable results. That is to say, those that are housed, stay housed. To keep up with its Pacific Coast neighbours, Vancouver needs to do better.

The City of Vancouver has not been blind to the need for more social housing. Vancouver has attempted to emulate a housing-first strategy, which was initiated in 2005 and included a proposal for 8,000 new social housing units.⁸³ A new plan adopted in 2007, significantly scaled back, also attempts to address this issue.⁸⁴ However, short-term projects are virtually non-existent, as no new rooms will come online prior to 2010, though some remodelled city-owned SROs are set to reopen in 2008.⁸⁵ Given recent events, such as the elimination of the majority of social housing stock promised to be converted from the Athletes' Village, some spaces that the city committed to have available in 2010 may not become so, as social inclusivity commitments have been fluid post-2005.⁸⁶ Most planned housing, assuming there is no planned usage change, will not be accessible until 2012, when homelessness is likely to have increased significantly, even from its 2010 numbers. In short, Vancouver needs an interim crutch to make it to the point when these housing units become available. Interim housing will likely

need to be maintained over a longer period so as to supplement what may become another housing shortfall by the time the planned housing is finished.

As it happens, each of San Francisco, Seattle and Portland has a significant advantage over Vancouver in implementing a housing strategy. All three cities are part of a federal program designed specifically to provide funds for such policies.⁸⁷⁻⁸⁹ In Canada, the federal and provincial governments have pledged funding to eliminate homelessness, but these commitments are fleeting.⁹⁰ As such, Vancouver cannot necessarily rely on its Olympic partners to support the Inclusivity Commitment they signed. If this proves to be the case, the city will be unable to afford the significant capital investment required for immediate action.

Vancouver, for the most part, must then implement programs independently. The Master Lease program can be easily adapted to Vancouver and offers several potential benefits to the city. First, it can sign long-term lease deals with landlords, thus limiting large capital investments by the government in buying the SRO stock, allowing investment in a greater number of SROs by the city and province. It also helps guarantee the maintenance of the stock through the end of the Olympics and beyond. A Master Lease program allows the city to control more SROs sooner, as the upfront costs are lower. Of course, the city will not own the buildings. But as sublessors, the city will have a significant beneficial effect on low-income renters. The city can set rents as it sees fit, without imposing them on landlords. The city can also protect renters from potential problems arising from the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA). For example, it can increase the protection of low-income renters from landlords that choose to take advantage of residents who are not familiar with their rights under the RTA. Finally, the city will be able to maintain a greater number of properties at livable levels.

Long-term costs associated with a Master Lease program could well be offset by lower service costs for sheltered and unsheltered homeless. The city currently employs a “1 for 1” social housing bylaw.⁹¹ 1 for 1 is a program that forces developers to replace any redeveloped SROs with new SRO units.^{92,93} Instead of building replacement units, developers generally pay a fee of \$5,000 per redeveloped SRO to the city, which the city can then use to create replacement units.^{94,95} It has since been determined that the creation of each new SRO unit costs between \$15,000 and \$20,000.⁹⁶⁻⁹⁹ This program can further offset much of the cost associated with a Master Lease program, especially if a nominal increase to the \$5,000 fee, to more accurately reflect

the cost of replacement units, is considered, though one was just introduced.¹⁰⁰ Some of those funds already go to buying residential hotels. Consequently, a simple transfer or reallocation is all that is required. Another significant benefit of a Master Lease program is that the city can more easily protect the integrity and cultural value of the historical DTES, without using subversive means such as zoning bylaws targeting developers.

A potential negative of the Master Lease program is that the city will not own the leased units. One might argue that it is a bad investment for the city. However, the San Francisco program also allows the city the option of buying the property at a reduced price during the term of the Master Lease.¹⁰¹ If Vancouver deems it worthwhile, the city could take advantage of this provision within a Master Lease program. However, if in time the city decides that buildings or units acquired through the Master Lease program are no longer required, it can quickly and easily return them to the private sector. This provides the opportunity to save large sums of money in the long run while at the same time providing a program that can quickly be increased or accelerated if the city's current plans to house the homeless are inadequate or if there is a steep deterioration in affordable housing and increase in street dwellers. In the short term a Master Lease program provides a push of immediate intervention and bridges the housing gap for the next five to ten years while new social housing stock is built. Such a program can yield benefits similar to those seen in Portland and San Francisco, making the program a valuable investment.

One other issue needs to be addressed. David Eby has found that, functionally, there is virtually no vacancy in SROs within the DTES.¹⁰² Consequently, one may question the degree to which the Master Lease program can be effective. Experience in San Francisco has indicated that leasing buildings has resulted in a higher SRO yield than expected, as many residential hotels did not use all of their space effectively for permanent residency.¹⁰³ Furthermore, units in non-SRO buildings – hostels for example – could be included in Master Lease negotiations.

A one-stop shopping program could be of significant benefit to low-income and homeless individuals in Vancouver. As with homeless in the American cities, Vancouver's homeless face major barriers to housing and employment if they lack personal identification, including a driver's license or social insurance card.¹⁰⁴ Often upon entry into the streets, individuals will lose or be robbed of their identification.¹⁰⁵ With limited means and no permanent address it is virtually impossible to get replacement ID. These problems are compounded when many

social services require identification. Alarming, 75 percent of street homeless in Vancouver are without any social service support, a massive increase over those not receiving benefits in 2001.^{106,107} Furthermore, many individuals currently living in SROs experience abuses associated with the RTA. The one-stop-shop program can help them get timely, effective help.^{108,109} The program can provide a myriad of services to many people. Individuals that need services not provided can easily be directed to places where they can get the help they need. Most importantly, this program offers services that help individuals break out of the poverty cycle. This program is an integral supplement to a strong housing plan.

The long-term sustainability of housing programs and homelessness reduction policies will always be questionable. Consequently, Vancouver should aim to implement a program, as established in Seattle, to reallocate funds as service requirements shift, in conjunction with the programs outlined above. Moving the funding focus to emphasize a long-term commitment to ending homelessness from reactionary policy will be a very important step forward. As people are housed, fewer may require shelter spaces, and the profile of their needs will change, as will the needs of those that remain on the street. Vancouver requires a program that adapts to the changing needs of the homeless population quickly and efficiently – such a program will greatly benefit all citizens and the city.

Overcoming Program Shortcomings

THE PROGRAMS PROPOSED ARE BY NO MEANS PERFECT, AS THERE ARE legitimate concerns about each that need to be addressed. Aspects of San Francisco’s Master Lease program have been strongly criticized. The most concerning is the means by which the city has chosen to pay for the program. San Francisco has decided to pay for its housing-first strategy through the “Care Not Cash” program.¹¹⁰ Care Not Cash provides housing for many poor San Franciscans. However, for each poor person that this program helps, the city cuts program spending for the equivalent of two persons in other low-income aid. As a consequence, homelessness advocates have seen a decrease in the quality of life for those people that remain on the streets.¹¹¹ Given that the program focused primarily on chronically homeless individuals “to the exclusion of other homeless populations,” and that the city chose to “move personnel and funding away from homeless services that are not linked to housing,” this result is not surprising.^{112,113}

Financial aid was cut in San Francisco County from a maximum of \$420 to \$59 per month. The city has touted the

fact that this measure cut the homeless caseload by 1,800 as of 2005.¹¹⁴ At the time, 690 of those cases were housed, and the rest ended contact with the city's Department of Human Services.¹¹⁵ Presumably, they sought benefits from other cities or no longer felt it was worth their time or effort to communicate with city officials. Given that well over 6,300 countable people are still homeless on Greater San Francisco's streets, one must question the wisdom of such a one-dimensional program structure.

While Care Not Cash is a central aspect of San Francisco's Master Lease program, it is not an essential part. Vancouver can easily, and must, avoid the Care Not Cash program. Care Not Cash is a funding scheme, and some consider it merely a political ploy to appeal to certain segments of the San Francisco electorate.¹¹⁶ Funding can be secured through reallocation of money already committed to housing, as outlined above. Should the city choose to cut current harm reduction and poverty-related programs in order to speed up housing schemes, life on the streets would likely become worse, and all the progress made through harm-reduction programs would be lost in short order.

There is very little in the way of criticisms regarding the one-stop shopping program. A significant concern remains, however – namely, the ability for those in need to access the event. Transportation, even to an event this important, can be difficult for those of limited means. Other potential challenges include making those in need aware of the event and accurately estimating the potential response. If organizers do not correctly estimate attendance, those who arrive may find long lines and wait times or may be turned away. This, in turn, could push rejected individuals further away from aid programs.

As outlined above, the one-stop-shop program has virtually no drawbacks. Transportation remains an issue for Vancouver's homeless, and while the program is designed to overcome transportation difficulties that the poor face, the one-stop shop does not alleviate them entirely.¹¹⁷ Consequently, Vancouver should consider providing multiple one-stop-shop sites and dates to service the DTES community and ease access issues. This program can help homeless people get off the streets and remain housed. It can also provide housed individuals with resources that can keep them off the street.

Since the Seattle program has yet to be implemented, it does not have a track record. Given the immediate need for housing and tight funding for poverty-related services, it is hard to imagine the need for a program designed to reallocate funding from one place to another, the method by which it will be implemented

and the benefit it will provide the homeless and urban poor populations. However, reallocating funds to address the changing needs of the community in a timely manner is an intuitive need and a core aspect of good governance. Since problems surrounding the urban poor change over time, flexibility in funding is vital in maintaining the fight against poverty.

The Vancouver Challenge

A SERIES OF PROGRAMS INTENDED TO HELP ADDRESS THE DIRE plight of Vancouver's homeless have been put forward in this essay. Yet, proposals put forth before those outlined in this paper have been beyond the city's reach. Programs currently in place, though largely associated with the city, are funded and administered by three¹¹⁸ levels of government.¹¹⁹ The city's 2005 homeless plan should have adequately addressed the causes of homelessness. However, the plan was well beyond the scope of powers the city has at its disposal. In many places, the plan called upon the provincial government to provide greater resources to social programs in the province. Despite the Vancouver Charter, which provides the city with a series of basic powers other cities in the province do not have, the city needs the province's cooperation to adequately address the root causes of homelessness.^{120,121} This reliance marks a distinct difference in governance within Canada versus the internal governance structures of many other countries.

International homelessness programs have shown relative success owing to the role of the city in homelessness prevention and abatement and are, in part, due to the constitutional powers and responsibilities of municipalities.¹²² In Sweden, Denmark and the United Kingdom, municipalities are required to take responsibility for homelessness in their community.¹²³ In Canada, cities are not legally required to address homelessness, as they are, constitutionally, creatures of the province.¹²⁴ As such, the responsibility of homelessness is less cut and dry, sometimes becoming a tripartite effort between federal, provincial and municipal governments to address the problem, as demonstrated by the Vancouver Agreement.^{125,126} Other times one order of government will attempt to push responsibility for the problem on to another. If Vancouver had more control over funding means to support the implementation of homelessness strategies, other international programs could be more effectively applied. The primacy of the city, and strong policy making from within it, has proven to be a strong factor in homelessness abatement.¹²⁷ Currently Vancouver cannot claim this to be the case locally.

Vancouver's history defines it as a unique municipality within British Columbia. The creation of the Vancouver

Charter means that the city has been able to take control of programs of local concern.¹²⁸ This ability has led to several historical examples of strong city action, the city's safe injection site being a prime example. A ceding of provincial and federal involvement in local issues has resulted in the city taking control of programs and acquiring funding to maintain them.¹²⁹ In a similar fashion, Vancouver needs to outline a plan to adequately address homelessness and work to force the cooperation of the other levels of government. This will ensure that Vancouver can develop the best programs that suit the needs of the city's homeless, not whatever the provincial or federal governments are willing to finance. Vancouver can increase the odds of long-term success of its poverty related programs if it controls program design and implementation.

Conclusion

HOMELESSNESS IS NOT A NEW ISSUE TO VANCOUVER. IT HAS surpassed the point of being managed through harm reduction, though that remains an important objective. The scope of homelessness now requires an immediate plan to get people off the streets as effectively as possible in the shortest amount of time. Programs of Vancouver's southern neighbours, Seattle, Portland and San Francisco, illustrate that large-scale social housing projects can be effective in the short run. Housing development is the most important part of homeless abatement. How to pay for it and develop it quickly has become, and continues to stand as, a barrier to effectively housing Vancouver's poor. A Master Lease program provides the city with a short-term option to rapidly increase social housing units, relying on the market and landlords to increase social housing. However, effectively ending homelessness requires more than just putting a roof over someone's head. Other social services are required as well. Both Portland and San Francisco have incorporated one-stop-shop programs to help integrate the homeless into society. Finally, maintaining the commitment to social services and social housing in the long run is essential to maintaining low levels of homelessness, once they are initially attained. Consequently, a program to reallocate funds from one program area to another, as need and evolving scenarios dictate, is essential. Flexibility will more easily allow for homelessness strategies to adapt to changing circumstances and maintain funding. While there may not be an explicit reduction in social service costs, government costs across the board at different levels of government will result in significant, sustained savings for both the city and province. However, even if the city immediately implements the above

suggestions, homelessness will not simply end. Housing is the first step, but a properly targeted and administered holistic approach that includes effective social welfare, prevention and social programs is required to eliminate it.

The City of Vancouver will find it difficult to accomplish all of these goals independently in the current political climate. It needs significant help from the federal and provincial governments to acquire, even under a Master Lease program, a large number of social housing units in short order. Given Vancouver's history of independent action, it is reasonable to assume that a strong city council and mayor could gain control over homeless strategy programs within the city. What Vancouver does not need is the provincial government dictating responsibilities to the city, without providing funding. Some argue that the new program agreement between the City of Vancouver and Province of British Columbia will lead to this problem.¹³⁰ What the city really needs to accomplish from such a transfer of powers is a transfer of tax credits to adequately pay for the creation and implementation of these programs. Then funding should not be subject to changes in provincial or federal government spending priorities or changes in governing party. It should furthermore allow for complete control of local programs so that the peculiarities of homelessness in Vancouver can be addressed locally.

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A Personal Account of Homelessness

with Suggestions of How to Rebuild Community in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Aaron Zacharias

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN BY GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF MY PERSONAL contact with homelessness in Vancouver.

As well as having worked with and supported the homeless, I have personally experienced being homeless in Vancouver. This occurred for ten and a half months, between June 1998 and May 1999. Even though I had friends who supported me this fact did not minimize the trauma I underwent, nor did it protect me entirely from mistreatment, exploitation and other indignities. This entire experience triggered in me a huge episode of post-traumatic stress disorder from which I have only recently recovered.

With support from friends I bit the bullet and went on welfare, which was hard enough to get then – even before the B.C. Liberal Party under Gordon Campbell was elected to power and implemented their now legendary welfare reforms that have helped perpetuate our national homelessness crisis.¹ I spent two years living in inadequate and at times unsafe shared accommodations. During this time I was still too ill to sustain employment. My already fragile mental health was further compromised by having to live in legislated poverty as well as having to endure the abusive treatment of certain welfare workers and so-called career coaches. With the assistance and support of

Judy Graves, coordinator of the Tenant Assistance Program of Vancouver, I was able to get on a number of supported-housing lists and eventually found myself living in Candela Place, where I have lived comfortably since August 2002. Throughout 2003 I was employed with the Lookout Emergency Aid Society, which put me on the front lines observing and addressing the already mushrooming crisis of homelessness in this city. In 2004 I left Lookout to train and begin working as a peer support worker with the Vancouver Community Mental Health Services, where I continue to be employed.

I am providing these details of my life to illustrate and emphasize the huge benefit of and need for adequate housing to serve as an essential springboard for rehabilitation and to bring meaning and cohesion into a person's life. For this reason I would, in this essay, like to address the issue of human dignity for the homeless – how it becomes compromised and how, in restructuring public housing policy, it can be won for the many homeless who live in our city.

CANDELA PLACE IS A FAIRLY NEW SOCIAL HOUSING FACILITY IN the Downtown South area on Granville Street, funded by B.C. Housing and operated by the Mennonite Central Committee. Candela Place opened in August 2002. It is a 63-unit building of small (320- to 360-square-foot) bachelor apartments. Some 40 percent of these units are rented to clients of the Coast Foundation Society, a non-profit group that supports and promotes recovery and wellness in consumers of mental health services. The other apartments are rented to low-income urban singles, people with disabilities, students and refugees. Because of the kind and very careful attention of the staff and management at Candela Place, a sense of community has developed and flourished here. It has become for many tenants a safe and welcoming place where we can carry on with the work of building or rebuilding our lives with all the necessary supports in place. I dread to think where many of us would be now had we not ended up in Candela Place.

In any non-nomadic society, a certain importance is given to place – each individual hopes to have a stable place to live, be it a house, an apartment, a room or a shared facility with family, a spouse, a lover, a friend or a roommate. This sense of place marks our initial point of belonging in society and the base from which we can begin to participate fully as citizens. This is where we sleep, eat, clean ourselves, rest, and find refuge from the outside world; and this is where we interact with our families and loved ones. Without this most fundamental sense of

belonging – the security of knowing that we have a fixed address, a place to live, a roof over our heads – we cannot begin to play our part in society. Not to have a home is virtually not to exist.

But, the homeless do exist. We can be seen on our sidewalks, in doorways, in back alleys, in parks and under bridges. We can be seen begging, scavenging, selling drugs, selling our bodies, sleeping out in the open; we can be seen imploding and deteriorating before your very eyes while the rest of society carries on with its usual business of the day. We have been robbed of our visible dignity, though the dignity of our essential humanity always remains untouched.

The homeless are vulnerable to bad weather and attacks and molestation from others while sleeping on the sidewalks. The homeless have no way of protecting their physical and mental health, and this often deteriorates, leaving them vulnerable to tuberculosis, HIV and hepatitis infections, body lice and scabies. It makes us particularly prone to depression, anxiety, psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder. The rate of suicide among homeless adults is particularly high.²

Things are not much better either for the so-called hidden homeless. Often after several months of couch surfing we will have worn out our welcome everywhere, thus leaving us alienated from the kinds of supports from family, extended family and friends that most people take for granted. This is how a lot of people end up on the street – the paucity of available affordable housing, especially in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, has left many of us without options.

To address the homelessness crisis, one of the first courses of action would be to change and strengthen social infrastructures in order to help prevent homelessness from occurring. I became homeless for some very basic reasons. Because of the economic restructuring that took place as a result of the global recession during the '90s, it became increasingly difficult for me to make a living in my profession at the time, as a home support worker. The relentless cutbacks in hours and service eventually made it impossible for me to earn a living wage. At that time, I was trying to avoid having to go on welfare out of a combination of pride and fear of the nasty treatment that the welfare program's administrators have become famous for giving their clients.³ I also had very little knowledge of and no access to good, competent employment counselling and resources. One day, after quitting my job in despair, I discovered that I would not be able to pay my rent and that no help was coming my way. I became homeless.

This need never would have arisen had the following supports already been in place for me:

1. *The legislated ability to earn a living wage.* There no longer exists in Canada any semblance of a social contract between employer and employee. By not giving an employee enough hours of work in order to earn a decent income, many employers have defaulted on this most elemental moral obligation. This and the lack of a decent, livable minimum wage keeps many of the working poor living in perpetual risk of becoming homeless. By bringing into legislation the requirement that all employers be obligated to provide each of their employees with enough work, short of overtime, as well as a minimum wage that is annually raised according to changes in the cost-of-living index and inflation, government could largely resolve the housing crisis.
2. *Available and affordable housing.* If it became illegal for a landlord to evict a tenant for the inability to pay rent, we would have a lot fewer homeless people on the streets. This proposal may seem like an unworkable pipe dream, but if subsidies through the government, or through developer-government partnerships, were made easily accessible to all low-income renters, including single adults on social assistance, considerably fewer evictions would take place.
3. *Treatment with dignity by social service institutions.* If the provincial ministry in charge of welfare would raise the housing allowance to cover monthly rent no matter how expensive it was and raised welfare rates to a level at which recipients could survive and live with a semblance of human dignity, the stigma of squalour that is traditionally associated with poverty would diminish considerably. The current eligibility requirements for welfare have to be rescinded, and social assistance, without strings attached, should be made easily available to anyone in need. I propose that rental income be provided on a case-by-case basis. If the renter who has applied for social assistance is paying \$695 per month for rent, then that is the monthly shelter allowance that he should be entitled to; if she is paying \$500 per month, then that amount should be her rental allowance; if she is paying \$1,200 per month, she should still be legally entitled to that full amount for her shelter allowance, and so on. If this kind of social assistance appears exorbitant, then we need only to recall that homeless people living on the streets are a huge burden on the taxpayers, as

a result of their disproportionately high number of visits to hospital emergency wards, not to mention police and other interventions that they necessitate. In fact, keeping people decently housed cuts the taxpayers' burden for subsidizing the poor by a third,⁴ a fact that ought to be emphasized and better publicized.

Similarly, the government must increase the living allowance to include realistically indexed costs of groceries and transportation (enough to cover the price of a monthly bus pass), a monthly entertainment allowance, a clothing allowance, and a realistic minimum for discretionary spending. This proposal may seem like a nasty burden to the taxpayer, but it really is an investment into the local economy. Every penny provided through government services in the form of welfare and other support gets reinvested into our global sacred cow, the Economy.

But what if the homeless and indigent don't want to work for a living? Simply legislate into existence a living wage and begin to restore a sense of social contract between employee and employer, the absence of which is the likely root cause of the lack of motivation to work. A strengthened and renewed labour movement could be very helpful here to assist the working poor and help those in the retail and service industries organize and push for change. Also, by treating social assistance as an inalienable human right to which no one in need may be refused, policy makers could further destigmatize poverty and thus put in place further measures to prevent homelessness.

Anti-poverty measures need to be introduced into our understanding of human rights. The Canadian Human Rights Act and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms – which do not adequately protect one's economic rights – are still sadly out of step with the basic tenets of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Canada is a prominent signatory. Citizens must be educated about the importance of including fundamental economic rights as part of the tapestry of human rights legislation.

We still treat available and affordable housing and welfare as privileges. They are fundamental human rights. We need to re-educate ourselves and one another. Living as we do in a "meritocracy" we tend to share a tacit expectation that we get only what we deserve in life. If you happen to be a corporate CEO raking in millions of dollars per year, the common notion is that you have earned it. If you cannot pay your rent on time because your marriage has fallen apart, the resulting stress has

made it impossible for you to keep your job and you end up on the street smoking crack to staunch your pain, society assumes that you somehow deserve this. This mentality of reward and punishment has been hijacked by the architects of global capitalism and is now imposed on the rest of us as an insidious form of economic enslavement. They are essentially saying that if we do not fall into line, if we refuse to work for their tiny wages, if we organize and unionize, then they are going to brutally punish us by denying us all manner of economic support, thus reinforcing in us this fear of poverty, homelessness and an early and lonely death as we continue to march to the infernal drumbeat of global capitalism. This kind of thinking needs to be addressed, critiqued and challenged. I would like to see formerly homeless persons run workshops and seminars and speak publicly at venues from schools and campuses to corporate boardrooms about homelessness and possible remedies to the problem based upon their personal experiences. Social service NGOs, churches and other concerned parties could spearhead such an initiative. This balderdash of meritocracy needs to be undermined if we are to see any lasting and constructive changes in Canadian attitudes about poverty and homelessness.

The erosion of affordable housing in the Downtown Eastside – particularly evictions from single room occupancies – must be halted immediately. The mayor of Vancouver must fulfill his election promises to reduce homelessness,⁵ and the city must immediately gain possession of every property that contains single-room occupancy accommodations, upgrading, renovating and rebuilding them where necessary. Simultaneously, all city-owned property that has been reserved for affordable housing must be immediately developed for that purpose and that purpose alone with the help of all three levels of government. As the need for housing grows, new affordable housing must also be built. A study has recently found that we have at least 2,200 homeless people throughout Greater Vancouver and likely many times that number of “hidden homeless.”⁶ At this time in B.C., 13,000 people are on a waiting list to be approved for living in affordable housing.⁷ Therefore, I propose that a minimum of 16,000 new units of affordable housing be made available in Vancouver this year, and more units made available by 2010.

In the meantime, in order to quickly meet this quota, every apartment building in Vancouver with rental units should implement a program that makes government- or government-developer-funded subsidies available to low-income earners, pensioners and tenants on welfare and disability. Churches or

government could also initiate a home-stay program similar to what is available to international students – training and generous compensation would be given to homeowners, churches, and other organizations with spare rooms to offer to some categories of homeless people. This type of program would provide some stability to homeless individuals and help them move on to safe and affordable housing.

The city must immediately place a moratorium on the erosion of rental units throughout Vancouver but particularly in the Downtown Eastside. Every private property developer in Vancouver must be brought to the table through the combined efforts of government and social service NGOs and persuaded to allocate a workable percentage, based on need, of their dwelling units, whether rentals or condominiums for purchase, for low-cost housing in all residential buildings constructed from now on, in order to meet this quota. Why shouldn't people living in subsidized rental units be permitted, through rent subsidies, to have their rent count towards eventual purchase? They would then have not only safe, affordable housing but also a home that they would eventually own, thereby making them permanently safe from becoming homeless again. After all, famed Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung once wrote that for general, public mental health to be made possible in any community it is imperative that each person should have their own personal house and garden. The city would still have buildings providing subsidized rental units exclusively for the working poor, the homeless and the "hard to house," but this added approach could do much to help reduce stigma and also to help build community. It would be a small piece of a fully integrated approach for future housing developments where in the same building we would have market-housing units, subsidized housing, and supported independent living for consumers of mental health services, with all tenants having the option to purchase their units. My proposed housing strategy would allow for generous subsidies that would ensure that no working person, senior citizen or person on welfare or disability should ever have to pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent.

In the meantime, it is imperative that homelessness, in the words of federal NDP leader Jack Layton, be declared a national emergency.⁸ Government must release funding to build new emergency shelters and to allocate vacant properties for such emergency purposes. The shelters must be provided as new rental facilities are constructed. Lookout Emergency Aid Society, where I used to work, is an excellent model: they now have a number

of affordable housing facilities throughout the Lower Mainland, many of which have as tenants some of their former emergency shelter clients. This approach needs to be widely adopted, with public-private partnerships involving all levels of government, business and churches.

I am reminded here of one of Aesop's fables, pertaining to a council of mice. One of them recommends that they should put a bell around the neck of a marauding cat that has been threatening them. One brilliant mouse suddenly asks, "Who, then, is going to bell the cat?" Similarly, one may ask, how are we ever going to persuade the property developers, economists and corporate barons that it would be in their best interest to allow for these adjustments and compromises in order to accommodate a class of humanity that has absolutely no relevance to them? We have to find ways of appealing to the self-interest of these economic leaders if we are going to extract any concessions out of them. For example, we could argue, as already suggested, that preventing poverty makes good economic sense. Raise the incomes of the working poor and persons on social assistance to a level such that they can also buy personal computers, cars, nice clothing, home entertainment systems, holidays, cruises and the like, and when all the material rewards and perks of capitalism as available to them as to anyone else, our national economy will bloom and grow. The extra revenue that will be generated in sales taxes and income taxes, since the working poor will finally be getting justly paid for their labour, could even be invested into a special fund to construct and run supportive housing and treatment facilities.

The Downtown Eastside has become a commercial ghost town not only because of its social problems and crime but also because no one there has any money to buy anything. This is why so many businesses on Hastings Street between Cambie and Main streets have gone bankrupt or relocated. If revenue is first poured into the lives of the local residents through realistically increased and enhanced incomes, we can again have a stable economic base here that can help foster economic renewal.

It takes only a little investment. Persuade the developers that by including the poor and indigent in their construction plans for new condominium towers that they will also be assisting in cleaning up the streets. There will no longer be unsightly beggars, scavengers and petty thieves making the streets of our beautiful city unsavoury to our wealthier denizens and frightening to the many foreign visitors who pump billions annually into our tourism and hospitality industry.

None of this is impossible. If we continue to work at persuading leaders in government and in the business community with an effective public-relations onslaught it will eventually become very difficult for them not to start considering more socially responsible alternatives.

BEFORE WE CAN APPEAL TO BUSINESS LEADERS, THOUGH, WE MUST first appeal to the Downtown Eastside's residents. Tenants must be involved in making decisions regarding any affordable housing strategy; giving them a voice will empower the members of the community. With significant involvement and participation of low-income tenants in the Downtown Eastside, this district, currently known as Canada's poorest postal code, could be transformed into a vibrant, safe and attractive community. The following are some considerations to explore:

1. The Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, particularly the area that runs between Cambie and Main streets, is a treasure-trove of beautiful heritage architecture. These buildings could be cleaned up, repaired and redeveloped to include low-cost housing, community and commercial space. This would be most feasibly accomplished, I believe, through government-developer partnerships that include every non-profit organization currently involved in the Downtown Eastside in the planning, strategy development and implementation. The ideas, energy and wisdom of these organizations – including the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), the Eastside Movement for Business & Economic Renewal Society (EMBERS), Women's Information Safe House (WISH), Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society (DEYAS), Pivot Legal Society, First United Church, St. James Community Service Society, Urban Core, Portland Hotel Society, Co-op Radio, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), among others – would be of invaluable help to create and establish new community infrastructures to provide foundation and structure to new and lasting community initiatives.
2. We must respect the ethnic diversity within the Downtown Eastside and consult the ethnic populations as we plan and implement housing strategies. In particular, we must take steps to break down barriers to dialogue, including the social insularity of the Downtown Eastside's Chinese community,⁹ and we must consider and respect the cultures of the Aboriginal peoples and their ancestral title to the land. We must also persuade the Latino community in the Downtown

Eastside, many of them refugees,¹⁰ to participate in projects of economic renewal that can increase their employment opportunities, bolster their incomes and help provide them with a meaningful sense of participation in the cultural and economic life of Vancouver.

3. The decision making and planning for new housing should involve and include considerations for seniors and consumers of mental health services, who require supported living; women; single-parent families, who need family-friendly living and recreation environments, as well as affordable day care; and people with addictions, who should have ready access to treatment and harm-reduction options. The groups that would benefit most from these various types of supportive housing know better than all the professionals who are paid to help them just what kind of accommodations and community supports they need. Their voices should be heard, their needs must be respected and their recommendations need to be carried out.
4. Local owners of property and businesses (including hotels and stores) should also, if possible, be involved in the process. As with the business and economic leaders, we would likely need to appeal to their self-interest and convince them that getting people off the street, housed, with decent incomes will in the long term be much better for local business interests than the current situation. The City of Vancouver should give any property owners that do not support these measures the option of selling their interests to the city with fair and equitable compensation provided.
5. Any strategy must also address policing and security needs. As long as the drug trade continues to flourish in the Downtown Eastside, criminal behaviour and threats to security will persist. A project of peace making – for example, holding events that give police the opportunity to hear the voices of the marginalized in a respectful setting – mediated by local churches and NGOs, would be essential in bringing local drug users and sex-trade workers into constructive dialogue with the local constabulary.
6. Establishing new housing and commercial facilities will mean jobs in construction and renovation, and residents of the Downtown Eastside, particularly those who are or have been homeless, should be given priority for those jobs, at union rates. Those who have been homeless should also be given the option of owning any unit of their choice in the buildings that they work on. Community meetings that

also offer free food and cultural entertainment could serve as forums to facilitate such collaborations.

7. The EMBERS society could be particularly useful in providing support, consultation and human resources and energy to stimulate the growth of local independent business in the area, with priority and availability of commercial space being given to Downtown Eastside residents, the homeless, the formerly homeless and those on low incomes. Again, community gatherings offering free food and entertainment would be ideal opportunities to inform and train local entrepreneurs.
8. The many artists in the Downtown Eastside must also be a part of the process to build a sense of community. Local leaders could consider using the artists' energies and gifts on huge collaborations to create murals and other public art, and the aforementioned community meetings could be good opportunities to showcase the talents of local musicians and actors. Writers and potential writers must also be encouraged – this essay contest by Pivot Legal Society is a brilliant example of the kinds of community initiatives that could help local artists flourish.

IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT THAT THE SENSE OF PLACE AND community of those currently living in the Downtown Eastside be thoroughly respected, protected and upheld throughout this procedure. The community is neither just a street location nor merely a collection of buildings. The community is the people who live in it, and the people who live in it are the community. This is their neighbourhood and their home, and they ought to be given priority in making a life and a home for themselves in the Downtown Eastside. Vancouver does not need another Gastown, Yaletown or Robson Street. All current and future development towards affordable housing and commercial development must also take into consideration the existing infrastructure of residences, community services and commercial holdings and wherever possible respect and integrate with whatever already exists.

Given the intensity and immensity of social needs in the Downtown Eastside, the process of bringing lasting and positive change to the neighbourhood is going to be a very long one. Government and local leaders should acknowledge that some of the area's problems may never disappear. Implementing harm reduction and increasing the number of treatment and rehabilitation options would be the best strategy to help sex-trade workers and those with addictions. Once again, appealing

to the self-interest of developers and other business leaders in the community could help secure funding for these options. If all parties with a vested interest in revitalizing this unique and diverse community are prepared to meet together in a spirit of goodwill and reasonable compromise the Downtown Eastside will see real and lasting change that will uphold and enhance the well-being of its poorest residents. I believe this integrated approach towards self-empowerment to be a far superior model to the current wave of gentrification that has been sweeping through the poorer districts of Vancouver, and it is one that will guarantee that nobody will have their human or economic rights, or their personal dignity, trampled on by the fiscal interests of neoliberalism.

Without displacing its poorest denizens – but rather by soliciting their involvement, participation and leadership – the Downtown Eastside could attain all the characteristics of a healthy and thriving neighbourhood. East Hastings Street could come to resemble Commercial Drive or Mount Pleasant with a lively mix of cafés, affordable restaurants, decent and affordable markets, shops and services. It could have parks, green space and community gardens. Facilities could be added and annexed to the Carnegie Centre and First United Church. The heritage buildings could be fully restored, providing affordable housing, commercial and public space.

The Downtown Eastside is the heart of Vancouver. From this community our entire city has been born. It is time to honour this unique and diverse neighbourhood and its current and future residents through timely and integrated action. If this plan is successfully carried out we will have a role model to offer to other cities showing what is possible when everyone in the community can participate and work together to restore not only a neighbourhood but also a fully integrated sense of community.

Notes

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Harnessing Gentrification

Context and Policy in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Dave Cumming

Abstract

THE INITIAL REACTION OF SEVERAL DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE residents to upscale development within their community has largely been characterized by fear and resentment. Although this viewpoint may be unfortunate, as it increases social tensions in the area, it is not unjustified. Gentrification has long been associated with displacement, social polarization and homelessness. It is not unreasonable to predict that further development in the Downtown Eastside will lead to increased homelessness and eventually to "squatter movements" similar to those that have already occurred in gentrified neighbourhoods in municipalities such as New York and Amsterdam. However, if policy makers understand the causes and consequences of gentrification, they may formulate strategies that capitalize on the positive aspects of gentrification while avoiding its negative social consequences. Gentrification is a powerful cultural and economic phenomenon that will remain a persuasive force in the city of Vancouver for years to come. Eliminating these pressures is simply not possible. But if the process of gentrification is controlled, solutions to the social problems that characterize the Downtown Eastside community may become possible. This essay will examine this prospect in three sections. The first part is a broad outline of the cultural and economic determinants of gentrification; the second section describes the specific policy challenges concerning gentrification and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside; and the last section suggests policy responses to protect low-income housing units while relieving gentrification pressures.

Gentrification Cultural and Economic Determinants

THERE ARE MANY CAUSES OF GENTRIFICATION AND MUCH discussion regarding how gentrification pressures emerge. However, there has also been remarkable consistency in how almost all major cities experience gentrification trends. Recognizing gentrification as a predictable feature of city growth, and knowing the causes of gentrification, helps to better understand and control its effects. Broadly speaking, gentrification is the result of converging cultural and economic trends that lead to large-scale reinvestment in inner-city areas, resulting in an increase in high-income housing within previously depressed areas. When examining the root causes of gentrification, researchers often describe the movement as a social and economic counter-reaction to earlier suburbanization movements. From a cultural standpoint, gentrification can be seen as a rejection of suburban values and generational changes in consumption habits.¹ From an economic standpoint, suburbanization trends have produced prolonged disinvestment in certain inner-city neighbourhoods, depressing property values. As gentrification pressures increase, developers tend to buy up low-value residential property and convert these areas into higher-income housing units. In Vancouver, the rows of up-market apartment complexes that line the Pacific and add to the spectacle of the Vancouver skyline are a good example of this process.

To a large extent, the process of gentrification represents generational and cultural changes within society. It is important to understand that gentrification has as much to do with rising transport costs as with a cultural reaction to suburban housing trends and the ideology of the suburban lifestyle. Urban theorists such as Jon Caulfield have postulated that suburbanization trends represent cultural desires for increased living space and for a more secure and comprehensive private environment.² As subsequent generations grow up in suburban environments, many emerging middle-class professionals seem to reject the emphasis on the private realm that suburban living implies. Some have interpreted the declining preference for suburban living among middle classes as an emerging desire to “escape” the dominance of capital and consumption and seek out communities with wider support networks.³ Other researchers such as Neil Smith have postulated that the “new middle class” emerging in major municipal centres is more outward looking and publicly engaged than the previous generation and hence more likely to favour higher-density, more active communities;⁴ likewise, Caulfield, in his study of gentrification in Toronto,

cites community, tolerance of marginal values, spatial and architectural features, and demographic diversity as reasons for middle-class gentrification.⁵ Whatever the specific reasons, it is clear that several next-generation would-be suburbanites are starting to favour housing within the city core rather than within the suburban environment out of which they emerged.

Gentrification also reflects how the creation of suburban housing has changed the economic dynamics of housing within affected cities. Analysts such as David Harvey have argued that suburbanization can be explicitly linked to consumption-based economics.⁶ According to this view, the expansive tendency consumer demand has led to the pursuit of greater space and has created the present suburban environment, wherein affluent classes have favoured low-density housing farther from the downtown core over high-density housing closer to the city centre. Subsequently, prolonged disinvestment in certain downtown neighbourhoods has occurred, resulting in a depression of property values in the inner-city core. As a result, a “rent gap” is created between potential value derived from the property (or potential rent) and actual capitalized value (actual rent).⁷ As the cost of suburban homes rise, and transport costs associated with suburban living increase as well, demand for inner-city housing will tend to rise. Given this increased demand, developers are able to purchase inner-city housing at a low cost, then build high-income housing in its place, capitalizing on the increased rents. Generally speaking, areas where prolonged disinvestment and the rent gap are most intense will experience greater gentrification pressures because of the low cost of the property within them. Accordingly, the poorest working-class neighbourhoods, with high densities of low-income housing, typically experience gentrification pressures most intensely.⁸

Thinking of gentrification movements as broad economic and cultural phenomena has implications from a policy standpoint in that it helps make sense of how gentrification will operate. As cities expand and the costs associated with suburban living increase, development pressures will inevitably come to bear on inner-city communities. Developers will target inner-city areas that have experienced the greatest degree of disinvestment for acquisition given the low cost of property within these areas. Moreover, cultural attitudes towards urban and suburban lifestyle tend to change once a city has experienced significant suburbanization. Young, affluent persons increasingly seek out housing in inner-city communities, causing greater demand for upscale housing within previously economically stagnant areas.

Although public policies may temporarily protect low-income housing by controlling rents, this measure often has the effect of intensifying development pressures as the rent gap widens. Hence, for some neighbourhoods, the question is not whether gentrification-related development will occur but how and when such development will take place.

Although this description may broadly outline the mechanics of gentrification, it says nothing of the social consequences – which have always been a concern of city planners in Vancouver. Gentrification has the potential to create both positive and negative outcomes, and whether gentrification is ultimately a positive process depends a great deal on local circumstance. Unfortunately, much of the dialogue surrounding gentrification has been coloured by ideology. Pro-development groups and individuals tend to prefer the term “revitalization” to gentrification and argue that more affluent individuals moving to depressed urban areas leads to a better delivery of public services, greater political power for community associations, and an increased chance of upward mobility for low-income families and individuals.^{9,10} On the other side of the argument, more left-leaning, socially oriented actors tend to argue that gentrification schemes essentially amount to state-sponsored displacement of low-income residents. They point to the substantial evidence that suggests that spatial proximity to more affluent classes does not necessarily lead to upward social mobility.¹¹ They also argue that middle-class residents generally prefer personalized, private services to public services and do not participate in community-oriented programs or improve public services in the neighbourhood.¹² Broadly, groups opposed to development argue that gentrification leads to more homelessness, the marginalization of homelessness as a political issue, and the eventual criminalization of the poor.^{13–15}

In practice, however, the consequences of gentrification are not at all uniform. Much like their causes, the outcomes of these processes are inconsistent and varied. However, it is clear that gentrification can have both positive and negative effects. Those who condemn gentrification in every instance ignore situations in which the effects of gentrification have been largely positive, leading to improved public services and greater empowerment for low-income residents. Those who dismiss the negative effects of gentrification in favour of further development ignore the problems of social polarization, displacement and homelessness within gentrifying communities. In order to effectively deal with gentrification pressures, local government must formulate

a policy that, as much as possible, resists ideologically based arguments in favour of realistic and socially conscious solutions to the housing problems in the area.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

THE JOURNEY OF VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE (DTES) from a prosperous neighbourhood to an area of urban decline is typical of several communities currently experiencing gentrification. Certain inner-city areas that are initially characterized by wealth and importance early in the city's history then experience decline and deterioration as economic patterns change. As suburbanization (and gentrification) increases, developers will target these areas for private development and "revitalization" or "heritage" policies. As an example, the Old City in Amsterdam, which has experienced significant urban decline, has been the target of several "heritage" and "revitalization" policies.^{16,17} In my hometown of Calgary, the community of Inglewood, which contains a great portion of the city's original townsite, is currently experiencing intense gentrification pressures after years of disinvestment and decline. The situation in Vancouver's DTES is similar. Initially, the area was one of the most prosperous areas of the city as it served as the transport and warehousing centre. Social problems in Gastown and the Downtown Eastside can be traced back to the 1940s when developments in roadway transport deemphasized the economic importance of the railway and made suburban locations more cost-effective warehouse locations.¹⁸ What followed was a period of prolonged economic stagnation in the downtown core. As early as the 1960s, the area had become the centre of low-rent housing within the city, and some of its residents were already experiencing displacement due to development and gentrification pressures.¹⁹ The social problems facing the DTES were compounded as the drug trade intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. The arrival of heroin and crack cocaine led to further social deterioration of the area as police struggled to control the burgeoning drug trade.²⁰ Despite efforts by the municipal government and community groups, poverty, drug-use and criminal activity remain prevalent in the DTES. Concentration of certain social services within depreciated urban areas often leads to the concentration of poverty and service-dependent individuals within a small inner-city centre. This phenomenon can lead to the marginalization of poverty and dependency as politically salient issues as these problems become less visible to city residents.²¹ This sort of process is a recurring phenomenon and can be directly linked to urban decline within several global cities.²²

In Vancouver, the growth of the drug industry in the 1980s and 1990s, and the associated rise in crime within the DTES, has led to a huge concentration of emergency shelters, low-cost meal centres and health agencies in the area.²³ The DTES also has a large concentration of low-cost housing, containing about 79 percent of the city's single-room occupancy (SRO) units despite having only 3.2 percent of the population.²⁴ Consequently, the Vancouver DTES is characterized by a large contingent of persons dependent upon public services, living within a poverty-stricken area with close access both to social services and to drug and criminal elements. The intensity of social dysfunctions in the area has even caused some residents to suggest that the public services in the DTES only serve to perpetuate these problems.²⁵

The municipal government of Vancouver is unique in Canada in that it exercises a great degree of autonomy from the provincial government. This arrangement has resulted in the city council taking on greater social policy responsibilities.²⁶ In other words, the state has a recognizable, even obligatory, role to play in promoting socially responsible housing development and socially conscious urban design within Vancouver. This mandate has been especially evident in the Downtown Eastside, as the area has been the target of several public policy initiatives. Perhaps the most central policy in the "revitalization" of the DTES has been the designation of the area as a "heritage site" in the 1980s. What followed were "beautification" schemes, which included repaving streets, installing new street lamps, and initiating monument-type projects – all of which made the area more livable but also caused housing prices to rise and, as the area became more attractive to the middle class, gentrification pressures to increase.²⁷

The fact that marginal investment into previously depressed inner-city areas can actually increase gentrification pressures is a sad truth and one of the greatest policy challenges when trying to address the negative effects of gentrification-related development. Although developers will generally target devalued areas in which a large rent gap exists, the presence of social problems and illegal activity in the area can serve as a check on gentrification.²⁸ Tragically, efforts by government or community associations to "clean up" inner-city areas can lead to further displacement and homelessness. Researchers have recorded such trends in notable communities such as Harlem (New York), South Parkdale (Toronto) and the Old City district in Amsterdam.²⁹⁻³¹ Although the heritage project has given the

DTES some desperately needed commercial activity, it remains to be seen whether the area will be able to withstand gentrification pressures due to its renewed appeal to the middle class.

More recently, city council has sought to address the social problem facing the DTES through the Gastown Land Use Plan of 2000. Under this initiative, city council expressly sought to preserve the area by favouring small-scale development of residential units and by building more housing through the “flexible application of seismic standards to facilitate heritage conservation.”³² In other words, city council tried to make it easy for developers to build small-scale housing within the area – the hope being the area would undergo “revitalization” without the displacement associated with large-scale residential projects. Accompanying this initiative was a renewed commitment to deal with drug-related problems in the area through greater enforcement, prevention and treatment of drug dependencies.³³ Unfortunately, residents’ groups within the DTES have not welcomed these policies. Critics of the policy have argued that the government is more committed to marginalizing drug-related problems and making them less visible than to finding productive solutions. One particularly marginalized group representing drug-user networks in the area have argued that the new “multi-pillared” approach to the DTES in fact only comprises “one approach, enforcement.”³⁴ The group goes on to express how long-time residents increasingly feel excluded and polarized because of the large increase in housing for “yuppies” and the growing presence and aggressiveness of police (referred to explicitly as “pigs”).³⁵ Moreover, the group expresses frustration at their exclusion from political processes and their perceived lack of control over development of the DTES area.³⁶

Although city council and several Vancouver citizens may consider groups such as these as troublesome and destructive political irritants, the existence of politically active groups within the DTES may in fact be the area’s greatest asset. Political activism at the community level has been identified as a decisive limiting factor in gentrification-related development.³⁷ In Philadelphia, gentrification occurred most intensely in areas where little community activism existed, whereas politically active community associations slowed gentrification-related development.³⁸ Likewise, local political groups have been successful in slowing gentrification development in Amsterdam. Amsterdam experienced its most intense gentrification in the 1970s, which was a result of the relaxation of state regulatory controls over housing.³⁹ Subsequently, gentrification-related

displacement has caused tension between civic authorities and community groups over the use of public space. Community activism and anti-poverty movements in Amsterdam, beginning in the 1970s, are seen to have contributed to interventionist policies such as tenant protection schemes, homeowner tax deductions and rent control, all of which serve to relieve gentrification pressures.⁴⁰ Social housing persists in the city centre and east port area of Amsterdam, significantly dampening upscale development within the core.⁴¹ Amsterdam, however, continues to struggle to find a balance between the social needs of its most vulnerable citizens and the economic imperatives to develop the downtown core to project an image that attracts more international capital. As gentrification pressures increase in Vancouver's DTES, and given the anticipated exposure of Vancouver to the global market with the upcoming Olympic Games, it is vital that Vancouver city planners learn from the successes and failures of cities such as Amsterdam, which have experienced these sorts of policy dilemmas before. If the Vancouver municipal government allows the goal of becoming a "global city" to override the welfare of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups within the city, it would abandon the very principles of social and urban policy that have produced a city centre that has earned global acclaim. The current impasse between DTES community groups and municipal authorities represents a missed opportunity. If Vancouver is to successfully address gentrification in the DTES in a socially responsible way, both community groups and the government need to show a greater willingness to work together to achieve an effective strategy for future development of the DTES.

Gentrification and Policy Implications in the Downtown Eastside

GENTRIFICATION PROCESSES OPERATE IN A VARIETY OF WAYS AND can produce a variety of outcomes, not all of which are necessarily negative for low-income residents in gentrifying communities. Studies in New York and Boston have shown that gentrification does not necessarily increase displacement or homelessness.⁴² In fact, the presence of new middle-class residents has been shown to improve public services in areas experiencing gentrification, particularly schooling and police protection.⁴³ New middle-class residents may in fact have the potential to strengthen and improve the relationships community associations have with City Hall. In this way, new residents may actually help to relieve disturbance in the community by acting to preserve the area. This has been the case in the neighbourhood of Belleville in Paris, where new, slightly more affluent residents have acted

to preserve certain aspects of the community “that brought them there in the first place.”⁴⁴ In this study, newer Belleville residents are referred to as marginal gentrifiers, as they work to preserve alternative cultures within the area, do not create vast social polarization, and actually seek to prevent displacement by “speaking for residents facing eviction.”⁴⁵ Another study of gentrification in three London communities has reported that gentrification can coexist with positive community values such as “voluntary co-operation and sense of graphically focused unity.”⁴⁶ These examples demonstrate that not all potential new residents will act as harbingers for typical gentrification-related development. In other words, although new, more affluent residents in depressed inner-city communities may not welcome the crime and substance abuse in the area, they also might not like to see their community fully transformed into expensive condominiums, coffee shops and retail chains. The challenge to Vancouver public authorities is finding policies that allow for a middle ground between excessive development and recurrent poverty.

Given the proximity of the DTES to the city centre, the low rents in the area relative to surrounding districts, and the geographical limits to suburbanization in Vancouver, gentrification in the DTES is to be expected. Trying to “protect” local residents by limiting investment in the area would only increase the rent gap, polarizing DTES residents both socially and economically (given the relative high-end property values in surrounding areas), while making extensive development of upscale housing in the area an eventual reality. However, simply opening up the area to developers would drastically increase gentrification, further marginalize the area’s most vulnerable residents, and increase social polarization within the area while doing little to encourage potential upwardly mobile households and individuals.⁴⁷ Clearly, a mixed approach to gentrification pressures needs to be employed. If the process of gentrification is properly controlled, new residents and new housing developments in the area may actually empower, rather than marginalize, vulnerable DTES residents.

If the City of Vancouver is serious about finding a socially responsible solution to housing pressures in the DTES, then it must consider gentrification realistically. In order for policy makers to achieve socially responsible outcomes, they need to properly manage changes in the housing market to help current residents whilst preventing displacement, social polarization and increased homelessness. If these goals are to be met, government

should address the following policy objectives. Firstly, integral, small-scale investment in the area needs to be encouraged so as to lessen the rent gap while preventing displacement. Concurrently, measures need to be taken to assure that low-income housing remains accessible within the area. Harmonizing these objectives will be difficult. However, policy makers should realize that change and development in the area is inevitable, and any effective policy in the area will be one that balances social needs and economic realities. The challenge facing the DTES will be one of how to manage, rather than prevent, gentrification-related development.

Managing gentrification in a socially responsible manner requires that the city monitor and control the type and amount of investment and development. Finding a suitable solution to problems brought in by changing development pressures means finding the proper balance between integral investment and regulation. The DTES's designation as a heritage site places the district within a very specific realm of policy. Designating an area as a "heritage site" effectively justifies more stringent regulation of development in the area. In Canada and elsewhere, engagement on the part of the city with communities that have acquired heritage status has been found to promote community values such as identity and place while providing increased social and economic opportunities to local residents.⁴⁸ However, the City of Vancouver has not sufficiently used this designation to benefit low-income residents within the DTES. Beginning in 1969, the city recognized 10 blocks within the neighbourhoods of Gastown, Chinatown, and Victoria Square as containing historically significant buildings and henceforth designated them as a single heritage site. As a result, certain buildings in these areas underwent significant upgrading in order to capitalize on their increased marketability to tourists and middle-class residents and increased property values. Unfortunately, because many of the buildings were built in the early 20th century, and since any renovations had to comply with heritage standards, upgrading proved to be very expensive. As a result, landowners who did upgrade their buildings typically introduced high-end retail and housing in order to finance building costs, in effect of increasing gentrification within the area.⁴⁹ These developments have also increased social polarization, as much of the DTES outside the "heritage" area has continued to experience prolonged disinvestment despite the economic activity in neighbouring communities. Although the designation of much of the DTES as a heritage site has not been used to help its low-income residents,

the fact that the city has a large amount of policy influence in the area is an undeniable advantage to the city council when managing gentrification pressures as it allows public authorities to justify regulating investment and development in the area.

More recent city policy has shown that the city is becoming more conscious of the need to maintain affordable housing in the downtown core. Although the Gastown Land Use Plan of 2000 has been criticized for not stopping upscale developments, it represents a well-intentioned plan and has successfully managed gentrification to a certain extent by favouring small-scale development projects. However, this provision will not be enough to prevent displacement and social unrest in the area as gentrification pressures inevitably increase. More recently, the city passed the Single Room Accommodation (SRA) By-law in an effort to preserve affordable housing in the area. According to this policy, landlords are required to pay a levy of \$5,000 in order to convert an SRO unit into another type of housing.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this measure is also in question, as several SRO units have been closed owing to maintenance, fire and health concerns, allowing landlords to exploit a loophole by which they can sell and convert the property containing SRO units without paying a punishing levy.⁵¹ Moreover, the \$5,000 levy does not cover the cost to the city of building new SRO units.⁵² Hence, the problem remains that, despite efforts from city policy makers, landlords do not have sufficient incentive to build and properly maintain small-scale, low-end housing. To remedy this problem, policy makers need to move beyond simply punitive measures such as the SRA By-law and introduce the incentive policies to encourage property owners to offer and maintain low-end housing.

In order to properly manage development in the DTES, the City of Vancouver needs to take a leading role in controlling investment in the area. Rather than let private investors dictate development and financing in the DTES, the City of Vancouver could finance investment in the area, at relatively little cost, in order to produce more socially acceptable outcomes. In the United States, Tax-Increment Financing (TIF) has recently been used in residential districts experiencing prolonged disinvestment. Areas that are not likely to attract investment without public subsidy are targeted for TIF by local government authorities whom, for whatever reason, are seeking to promote economic activity within the targeted locality.⁵³ The property values for that area are assessed, and then bonds are taken out to finance improvements in the district.⁵⁴ As these improvements

lead to increased property values and subsequently increased tax revenues, public authorities can use this created revenue to pay off the original bonds or to build social housing projects in the area.⁵⁵ Although this type of policy has typically been applied to commercial and industrial areas and only more recently to residential communities, the initial feedback from these programs is encouraging. In Chicago, applying TIF to residential communities had a positive spillover effect, as surrounding property values increased; however, this increase was not enough to cause displacement of low-income residents within these communities.⁵⁶ The City of Vancouver could use similar financing schemes under its heritage policy to encourage integral reinvestment and small-scale development in the DTES. Using a mixed approach, the city could purchase and subsequently improve low-end housing within the area. Concurrently, the City of Vancouver should enhance investment in education, infrastructure and social services in the DTES with the intention of marginally increasing property values. Once property values increase, the city could use the increased tax revenue to pay back the bonds it used to finance the improvements and to maintain the operating costs of housing in the area.

To complete the policy objectives, the city must take steps to ensure that affordable, low-end housing is still available to residents within the neighbourhood. In other words, the government must enact policies to prevent developers from capitalizing on increased investment in the area to build high-end housing projects. Fortunately, the SRA By-law and the Gastown Land Use Plan represent policies that specifically favour small-scale investment in the area. However, given the inevitability of rising property and living costs in the area, the city must do more to ensure access to affordable housing now and in the future.⁵⁷ One effective way to promote access to affordable housing in the area would be to use a voucher program to assist vulnerable community residents in finding and maintaining accommodations. According to this model, low-income residents are given vouchers in the form of rent relief out of the municipal government's general revenues. As the vouchers are only available to poor residents, the program effectively subsidizes low-income housing and encourages developers to build low-income, high-density housing. Although this system has typically been applied to private rental property, there is little reason to believe that a similar program could not be applied to social housing and mortgage payments.⁵⁸ Applying a flat-rate housing voucher in addition to social assistance payments

for DTES residents would lead to increased demand for low-income housing in the area, encouraging developers to build more SRO and multi-family units. Moreover, because vouchers can be applied to mortgage and rental payments, and because the voucher has a flat-rate, rather than a means-tested value, upwardly mobile individuals and families may be encouraged to exercise thrift, acquire savings and move into home ownership, hence breaking the poverty cycle and making capitalization on increased property values a real possibility.

Another advantage of voucher programs is that they can be targeted to property within a certain area so as to ensure the provision of affordable housing to vulnerable individuals in areas where a service network is available. Given the social problems in the DTES, and the concentration of services in the area, focusing voucher programs on this neighbourhood in particular would maximize the efficacy of these programs. Recent case studies have shown that access to secure housing has a positive effect on standard-of-living indicators for individuals who are coming out of, or currently undergoing, treatment for drug addiction.⁵⁹ However, the need for a “floating” support network, which entails close access to support services for individuals who have already completed rehabilitation programs, is crucially important to prevent relapses into serious drug abuse.^{60,61} Moreover, SRO housing has also been shown to be more effective than project living in promoting continued abstinence for recovering addicts.⁶² Given the availability of low-income housing and the concentration of social services in the DTES area, introducing voucher programs to make secure, safe housing a possibility would greatly aid the efforts of social services in the area.

Like all public benefit programs, there are several potentially negative aspects to housing voucher systems. The main problem with this policy is the cost, which has caused several communities to forgo voucher programs in favour of “inclusionary zoning” schemes that pass the cost of supporting low-income housing to developers.⁶³ Although these programs help to create low-income housing units, they do not protect tenants against rent increases. As a result, these policies are unlikely to prevent significant displacement and social polarization in the DTES. Another possible cost problem with voucher programs is the potential of increased risk to landlords who house program recipients. Although subsidized tenants represent a lower collection risk to landowners, extraneous factors associated with these tenants, such as inspections from public housing authorities and increased risk of volatile behavior, may lead to

higher operating costs.⁶⁴ As a result, property owners might be unwilling to accept subsidized tenants, or they may raise rents to compensate for the risk of increased costs. Moreover, as is the case with all public benefit programs, several potentials for abuse exist. On the supply side, landlords may capitalize on voucher provisions simply by raising rents, hence negating any increased benefits to program recipients.⁶⁵ On the demand side, the problem of moral hazard exists as tenants may be encouraged to submit inaccurate information about their income and/or living conditions in order to acquire more benefits.

Although these problems cannot be completely eliminated, there are ways to mitigate program ineffectiveness. In order to limit the extent to which applicants can exaggerate their situation in order to receive vouchers, municipal authorities could restrict the program specifically to individuals and families currently receiving help from support services within the DTES. This way, public authorities will already have records on program recipients and will be allowed to better monitor their situation through interaction with other support services. Moreover, once applicants have qualified for the program, implementing a flat-rate (rather than means-tested) benefit basically eliminates problems of moral hazard, as recipients have no recourse through which to raise their benefit levels. The advantage here is that needy individuals and families would be able access to affordable housing, despite rising rent levels, and would also be encouraged to exercise thrift and seek better housing if their circumstances improve.⁶⁶

To prevent voucher programs from leading to further rent increases for low-income housing requires finding a balance between social needs and market realities. Limiting the program to social-service recipients reduces the potential costs of the program and would also prevent landlords from raising rents to capitalize on the increased availability of capital among potential tenants. If the city were to purchase a portion of the low-end housing in the area, they could use these assets to serve as a check on rent increases. The city could renovate the property to bring them up to health, fire, and safety standards and then offer low-income housing at or below market value. The idea here is not to offer social housing at well below market price, thus undercutting other low-end property owners in the area and reducing the incentive for developers to build low-end housing, but instead to serve as a counterweight to potential rent increases in the future by offering low but competitive rates.

Dealing with gentrification pressures in the DTES represents a very difficult policy dilemma. To resist gentrification intensely would mean a perpetuation of poverty and depression in the area; to promote middle and high-end housing in the area would lead to displacement, polarization, increased vagrancy, and further social unrest. The optimal policy solution to gentrification pressures in the DTES is a middle way – one that favours integral investment now rather than large-scale development in the future and protects low-income residents from rising living costs. TIF-type financing, homeownership incentives, and voucher programs represent some possible solutions to the housing problems of the DTES. However, regardless of whatever policy course the city takes, policy makers must recognize that the current housing situation in the DTES is not sustainable. Rents cannot simply be expected to increase at the current rate without increasing displacement and homelessness. Moreover, public authorities must recognize that any progressive solution to housing problems in the DTES requires that the city become more positively engaged in the area. For any policy to work within the area, the adversarial relationship between public authorities and several residents within the DTES must change.

Notes

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- 23 Putner, 277–278.
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- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- 37 Shaw, "Alternative Culture," p. 155.
- 38 Shaw, "Local Limits," p. 177.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 172.
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