

Howe Shelter Consultation Results
July 27, 2009

1. Background

The City has gathered public input on the Howe Shelter and provides this report to the Minister of Housing and Social Development for consideration.

2. Consultation Process and Stakeholders Consulted

In response to the Minister's requirement for public consultation, the City launched a public consultation process on homeless solutions and the Howe Shelter. The process built on feedback received through a June 11th public meeting with over 150 people attending and email correspondence with over 100 people. The consultation involved two additional components:

- Web-based feedback; and,
- Small group meetings with residents and stakeholders.

Vancouver citizens were informed of the opportunity to take part in the web consultation by newspaper advertisement on Friday, July 17, by postcards handed out in the immediate and larger vicinity of the Howe Shelter on Friday, July 17 and Monday July 20, by a notice on the City of Vancouver website, by email notification to people who had previously contacted the City, and by word-of-mouth.

3. Feedback from Web Consultation

Given the short timeframe for the process, a web-based consultation was developed to facilitate participation from a large number of people. A key goal of this consultation is to hear from a broader range of perspectives regarding the Howe Shelter and solutions to homelessness. The web consultation allowed this to happen.

This summary is not a scientific poll, and it is absolutely not a referendum. Similar to a face-to-face public consultation process, some participants in this online process may have chosen to speak more than once, some may speak more forcefully and other voices may have joined in at the behest of their friends and networks. As such the results summarized are only taken to represent the views of those members of the Vancouver public that have chosen to take part in the online consultation process.

Responses were collected from Thursday July 16 to Wednesday July 22, 2009. In total, there have been 1,656 consultation forms submitted by people who live or have businesses in Vancouver.

- 210 from participants that live or operate a business within 4 blocks (two blocks in each direction) from the Howe Shelter;
- 617 from elsewhere in the downtown core;
- 819 from elsewhere in the City of Vancouver; and,
- 10 who did not report a location.

Approximately 3,400 people live within four blocks of the Howe Shelter.

Feedback on the Howe Shelter

Feedback from total participants:

- Overall 62% of respondents supported keeping the shelter open through next winter, or keeping it open if neighbourhood issues are resolved
- Overall 25% of respondents supported closing the shelter now and not re-opening it.

Feedback from those people living in the immediate area:

- 12% of respondents supported keeping the shelter open through next winter, or keeping it open if neighbourhood issues are resolved
- 72% of respondents supported closing the shelter now and not re-opening it.

Key Results on the Howe Shelter:

- As you move away from the shelter, support for keeping the shelter open gets stronger.
- Conversely support for closing the shelter was high among participants in the immediate area surrounding the shelter.
- Within the Downtown Core, 60% of respondents support keeping the shelter open.
- While 84% of participants in the vicinity of the shelter said the shelter had a negative impact on their neighbourhood, nearly 30% of participants in the rest of the downtown said the shelter has had positive impacts in their neighbourhood. This response corroborates input from businesses and residents in the rest of the downtown that the shelter has helped to reduce the impacts of homelessness throughout the downtown core (e.g. fewer people sleeping on beaches, in doorways of businesses, etc.).

Responses on Homelessness and the Interim Housing Strategy

- Overall, 93% of participants said solving homelessness is important or very important to them, with 82% saying it is very important.
- Overall, 76% of participants support or strongly support the Interim Housing Strategy, which is to provide temporary shelter and housing options while permanent supportive housing is being developed.

4. Feedback from Small Group Meetings

The City hosted four small group meetings with neighbourhood residents and other stakeholders. These meetings were intended to allow for more meaningful dialogue about the shelter and potential solutions to both neighbourhood issues and homelessness.

Meetings with local residents

Mayor Robertson hosted two meetings with local residents who live near the shelter. The meetings were attended by City staff members from the Community

Services and Engineering departments and staff from Rain City Housing and Support Society, the shelter operator.

Participants were identified by reviewing correspondence the City has received on this issue over the past few months and identifying those people who have been most engaged in the issue. Representatives from different strata buildings in the neighbourhood were also invited. The City appreciates that participants were willing to make time to meet on short notice.

- First Meeting with Local Residents (5 residents attended):
 - Residents stated that negative reactions and concerns about the shelter have been overstated. They indicated that there have always been homeless people in the neighbourhood and the shelter has not significantly changed the area. They expressed concern that media coverage of the negative reaction to the shelter had inaccurately portrayed the views of many of their neighbours.
 - The residents identified some issues with the shelter, including graffiti, loitering and drug-related activity. The residents indicated that the issues were initially serious, but have gotten better over the past few months. They had several suggestions for how to manage ongoing issues.
 - They are generally supportive of the shelter staying open and would like to be involved in a dialogue to resolve ongoing issues. They also want a dialogue about longer-term housing and homelessness solutions in their neighbourhood.

- Second Meeting with Local Residents (11 residents attended):
 - Nine residents strongly voiced concerns related the shelter, including lack of safety in the neighbourhood and the lack of public consultation before the shelters opened. Specific concerns raised included drug-related activity, increased garbage, noise and inappropriate behaviour.
 - They expressed the opinion that the current consultation process is flawed due to the short timeframe, lack of large public meetings, and other factors.
 - The residents focused on the impacts they see in their neighbourhood, rather than solutions to the situation with the shelter or homelessness more generally. They are strongly opposed to the shelter remaining open.
 - Two residents strongly disagreed with the views of other residents at the meeting, arguing that they have not seen negative changes in the neighbourhood since the shelter opened. They pointed out positive impacts of the shelter (e.g. fewer people sleeping on the beaches). They argued that we need to talk about solutions rather than moving the problem around the city. They strongly support the shelter remaining open.
 - Representatives of a few other organizations also attended the meeting to provide input and context.
 - The Vancouver Police Department expressed support for a low barrier shelter, but they recognize that this location has

raised concerns. They noted that police calls have increased and that some crimes have increased in the area (e.g. there has been a recent up tick in thefts from auto). However, in the larger West End and Central Business District, crime rates have decreased significantly. If the shelter remains open, the VPD will continue to work with shelter operators and neighbours to address issues.

- Covenant House, which serves homeless youth, expressed mixed feelings about the low barrier approach. They recognize the need, but also support a more programmed shelter model for homeless youth, particularly in neighbourhoods with large residential components.
- The West End Residents Association acknowledged similar concerns with homelessness in the West End. WERA identified the need for more dialogue and suggested a community advisory committee be set up.
- Homeless Nation noted that they have been working with street youth in this neighbourhood, particularly under the Granville Bridge, for years. Residents concerns are valid, but we also need to acknowledge vulnerability of homeless youth. They also noted that the zoning for the area is not residential, but is zoned for multiple uses including social services.

Meeting with Business Improvement Associations

Representatives of the Downtown Vancouver BIA, the West End BIA and the Gay and Lesbian Business Association of Greater Vancouver attended the meeting. Several attempts were made to contact the Yaletown BIA, but they could not be reached prior to the meeting.

- BIAs were generally supportive of the interim housing strategy, saying it makes sense to start connecting with street homeless now in advance of permanent supportive housing being completed.
- BIAs, particularly the DV BIA, have noticed improvements in the downtown core since the shelters opened. They have collected data showing that there are fewer people sleeping outside and in doorways of businesses. They have also noted a significant drop in street disorder, such as aggressive panhandling. People are still panhandling, but because they are well slept and fed they don't become aggressive.
- BIAs identified a significant need for shelter in this area, and expressed concern that the Howe shelter is now the only adult shelter in the entire Downtown South and West End.
- The BIAs expressed strong support for the shelter staying open. They suggested a Community Advisory Committee as a way to further engage neighbours in the shelter and address issues.

Meeting with Local Service Providers and Faith Organizations

Representatives of 20 downtown service providers and faith organizations attended the meeting.

- Participants expressed strong support for interim housing measures. Supportive housing is the long-term solution, but this is needed in the meantime to get people off the streets and begin to “triate” them.
- The shelter has had several positive impacts. Area service providers and churches noted far fewer people sleeping outside, on church grounds, on Davie Street, etc. Service providers also found that shelter users are more able to participate in programs during the day due to being well rested and fed. The YWCA reports increased success with assisting youth moving into employment when they are using the shelter.
- Service providers are very concerned about the broader impacts of allowing community opposition (i.e. NIMBY) to close a much needed project. Service providers report that they have already faced opposition in other municipalities citing the closure of the Granville shelter as a precedent.
- Service providers and faith organizations were clear that unless another location is available in the West End or Downtown South, the shelter needs to stay open. They recommended further community engagement efforts going forward to work with neighbours and address concerns.

5. Correspondence

From May 2009 to July 22, 2009, the City received approximately 220 emails from 110 individuals regarding the HEAT shelters at 1435 Granville Street and 1442 Howe Street. Approximately one-quarter of these emails came from 9 individuals.

- The email correspondence was overwhelmingly negative, with 98 of the 109 individuals strongly expressing concerns about the shelters. The primary concerns identified in these emails were decreasing perceptions of safety in the neighbourhood, inappropriate behaviours and the lack of public consultation prior to opening the shelters. Since launching the consultation process regarding the Howe Shelter, the City also received several emails criticizing the adequacy of the process.
- The 11 individuals who wrote in support of the shelters indicated that the concerns expressed by others in the neighbourhood were overstated and identified the need for all neighbourhoods to be involved in solutions to homelessness.

6. Summary

- Most residents and businesses expressed strong support for solutions to homelessness and the City’s interim housing approach, which is to provide temporary shelter and housing options while long-term solutions are being developed.
- There are some ongoing concerns about impacts of Howe Shelter on neighbourhood. Some residents very strongly expressed the view that the shelter should close, including a majority of web consultation participants from the immediate vicinity of the shelter.
- The consultation also brought out many residents who dispute the extent of neighbourhood impacts being presented by some and who are willing to work on solutions, both to issues with the shelter and on to homelessness more broadly.

- Other stakeholders (BIAs, service providers, faith community) note the need for shelter in this area and the positive impacts of the shelter throughout the downtown. They also note the significant consequences of the shelter closing (e.g. return to homeless on streets, doorways of businesses, etc.). They strongly support the shelter staying open.
- There was very little support for the shelter opening up on a seasonal (winter only) basis. Some people want the shelter closed permanently, while those people who support the shelter staying open do not see homelessness as a seasonal issue. They stated that shelter is needed year round.
- Nearly all stakeholders who were willing to see the shelter remain open expressed the need for further community engagement to work with neighbours.

7. Conclusions and Recommendation

Through the consultation process, many nearby residents strongly expressed the opinion that they want the shelter to close, and that the impacts on their neighbourhood have been significant. There are, however, a number of residents in the neighbourhood, in downtown Vancouver and throughout the City, who want to be part of solutions to homelessness and who view the Howe Shelter as a part of the solution.

As a result of the consultation process, we conclude that there are some legitimate and ongoing neighbourhood impacts related to the Howe Shelter. However, we also conclude that there are substantial positive impacts of the shelter that would be lost if the shelter were to close.

The City offers two options for the consideration of the Minister of Housing and Social Development:

1. *Leave the shelter open through April 30, 2010, thus ensuring that homeless and at-risk people are sheltered, have the opportunity to connect to services and suffer less hardship during the coming winter months.*

Should this occur the City will work with BC Housing, Raincity Housing and the neighbours to continue the dialogue on how the shelter can better integrate into the neighbourhood. A concerted effort would be made to engage all residents in a constructive process to encourage neighbourhood-based solutions. A development permitting process would be initiated to allow all voices to be heard.

This option is not, however, satisfactory to many residents and businesses in the immediate vicinity of the shelter.

2. *Extend shelter funding for an additional month, allowing for an orderly closure of the shelter.*

By extending the funding for an additional month, BC Housing, RainCity Housing and the City of Vancouver will be able to assist many shelter clients to move from the Howe Shelter to other housing options.