



April 12, 2019

MEMO TO : Mayor, Council, and Park Board Commissioners

FROM : Paul Mochrie – Deputy City Manager, City of Vancouver  
Malcolm Bromley - General Manager, Vancouver Board of Parks & Recreation

SUBJECT : **Council & Park Board Motions Pertaining to Oppenheimer Park**

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Dear Mayor, Council and Park Board Commissioners,

Please find below an update on the recent motions passed by both City Council and the Park Board pertaining to Oppenheimer Park.

Vancouver is facing a housing crisis and people experiencing homelessness continue to be the hardest hit. Despite significant efforts by the City and its partners, the number of people experiencing homelessness in our city is persistent. Long-term funding partnerships with the Federal and Provincial Governments are needed to increase permanent affordable housing options across the city.

To be without a home is a stressful, limiting, and dangerous experience, and there are complex reasons why people find themselves in this situation. The City plays a role in supporting individuals who are experiencing homelessness to stay safe, to access shelter and/or a home and to connect them with important health and social services.

### **Background**

Members of the Carnegie Outreach staff are visiting Oppenheimer Park daily in an attempt to engage with those currently living in the park on their next step towards shelter and housing. On two occasions each week, Outreach team attends the park at 6am to obtain an accurate picture of the overnight occupants in the park and to understand their housing needs.

In recent weeks, there have been roughly 40 tents in the park. Outreach has connected with 38 people who are sleeping in these tents overnight and do not have other housing options. There are approximately 10 additional people who are staying in the park overnight and who have refused to speak to Outreach staff. Since December 2018, Outreach staff have placed 16 campers from Oppenheimer Park into temporary modular housing.

Engineering and Park Board staff attend the park on a regular basis and work in close partnership with the VPD and the VF&RS' Community Safety division to enforce a Fire Chief's Order which was issued to individuals in Oppenheimer Park on February 20, 2019. That Order was prompted by a VFRS inspection of conditions in the park that revealed a number of hazards posing a material and immediate risk of serious injury or death.

Pursuant to the Order, all people staying in the park must comply with the following:

- Remove all tarpaulin (tarp) enclosures or overhead tarpaulins use as canopies that cover more than one tent, and provide full visibility and appropriate egress and access routes from/to tents;
- Remove all wood in and around structures; wooden structures and metal used in the construction of shelters;
- Maintain one meter spatial separation between all tents;
- Cease using all open flame and/or flammable heat sources, including candles, inside or under tent and tarp structures;
- Cease using and remove all portable electronic heating devices from within tents;
- Cease using any open air wood or paper burning fires;
- Locate all propane barbeques outside of tent structures and at least 3m (10ft) from any building, tent or tarp structure;
- Remove propane or any other fuel sources located inside or under any tent and tarp structure;
- Take such other precautions as necessary to reduce the danger of fire or danger to persons;
- Comply with all other provisions of the Vancouver Fire Bylaw.

While acknowledging the fundamental challenges of those individuals camping in the Oppenheimer Park who do not have other options for shelter, staff are also cognizant of the critical role that this park plays as one of the only open public spaces and green spaces where DTES residents can gather. We have heard concerns from other members of the community regarding the deterioration of people's sense of safety and impacts on access to social, recreational, and nutritional programming, including for families who rely on this park and playground.

As an extension of Carnegie Community Centre operations, the Oppenheimer Park fieldhouse operates 9am-5pm, 7 days a week, serving Downtown Eastside community members impacted by poverty, homelessness, mental health, addiction, & historical trauma through the provision of:

- accessible social, cultural, educational and recreation programs;
- core essential services such as public washrooms, harm reduction response, referrals to other critical service providers and free food; and
- supporting safety, security and inclusion in the park through regular check-ins, monitoring washrooms, providing first-aid and overdose response to members of the public.

The extent to which Oppenheimer Park is utilized as a location for people to live has a direct impact on the City's ability to deliver critical social and recreational programming that is highly valued in this community. Fieldhouse staff resources are already being redirected to increased conflict management & mitigation, violence prevention, emergency response, and grounds maintenance.

Later this month, the Park Board will be undertaking lawn maintenance work in Oppenheimer Park. A portion of the turf area of the park will be fenced temporarily to accommodate fertilizing and seeding, as well as irrigation system testing. City and Parks staff will be removing

any garbage or abandoned tents from the area in question in order for this work to proceed. The fencing will not prevent people from erecting tents in other parts of the park. The fence will stay in place until mid-June and be removed before the National Indigenous Celebration planned for June 16, 2019.

### **Update on Recent Park Board and Council Motions**

In relation to the specific actions set out in the above-referenced motions, we can provide the update.

#### **A. Funding temporary and/or permanent accommodations**

City staff continue to engage with BC Housing on a regular basis to explore additional housing and shelter options which the Province could fund.

In March 2019, BC Housing announced that the Province had approved an additional \$3.1 million in operating funding to keep eight temporary winter shelters in the city open for the next 12 months until March 31, 2020. This means that people experiencing homelessness in Vancouver will continue to have access to nearly 240 shelter beds, which would normally have closed on March 31, 2019.

#### **B. Warming station**

The establishment of a warming station in Oppenheimer Park or on other City-owned land within close proximity will be incorporated as a part of the City's Winter Response Strategy. With the increase in temperatures in recent weeks, there is no immediate need for a facility of this nature for those currently staying in the Park overnight. The installation of a warming station, in addition to warming centres, will be considered as part of the 2019/2020 Winter Response Strategy. However, there are a number of significant life safety and operational issues that have not yet been resolved with VPD and VF&RS and other departments that would be involved in operationalizing this direction.

#### **C. Washrooms**

In order to address the immediate need for additional washroom facilities within the park overnight, Park Board staff have purchased four portable toilets, two of which are accessible units, and we expect they will be placed in the park next week. The toilet structures are currently being reinforced in an effort to reduce the likelihood of damage by vandalism or fire. They are also being adjusted to improve the safety of those using the facilities.

Park Board staff are engaging with staff from the fieldhouse to determine the best location for the units within the park. The additional toilets will only be open overnight. During the day, the public can access the permanent washrooms that are located in the fieldhouse. Those washrooms are currently being cleaned twice a day at a current daily cost of \$100.

#### **D. Storage**

Outdoor hoarding by some individuals staying in the park has a considerable impact on the community's ability to use the park and has been highlighted by VF&RS as a life safety concern. The Carnegie Outreach Office offers a service for homeless clients to store their important personal documents. People who are currently staying in Oppenheimer Park are being encouraged to store personal documents at the Outreach Office located across the street from the park at 392 Powell.

Based on a staff review of storage facilities operating in other West Coast cities, the establishment of a stand-alone storage service for larger items would be costly to operate and is not expected to improve the hoarding issues currently being experienced in the park. As one example, the City of Portland runs a day storage program for up to 60 people. The program operates out of a shipping container at an annual operating cost of approximately \$150,000 USD. Other US cities operate larger-scale storage programs for individuals experiencing homelessness, with most providing one 60 or 90 gallon storage tote per person; operating costs for those facilities typically exceed \$1 million USD per year. None of these programs have reported success as a solution to outdoor hoarding issues.

Outdoor hoarding can pose a major barrier to people accessing shelter and/or housing and as such staff recommend linking storage options directly to shelter and/or housing opportunities as a more effective response than stand-alone storage facilities. Staff are presently engaged in discussions with BC Housing about how to ensure there is adequate storage options for potential future shelter locations. In the meantime, all personal storage must adhere to the current Fire Chief's Order which is in place for Oppenheimer Park.

Any items in the park that are found to be in contravention of the Fire Chief's Order are removed by staff. This includes items that are considered to be abandoned as well as whatever people voluntarily leave behind when they are asked by staff to vacate the park. In such cases, people are given advance notice (typically 2-3 days) by staff as to when they are expected to vacate the park, or any other public space, so that they can have time to pack-up their belongings.

#### **E. VPD and VF&RS input on public safety**

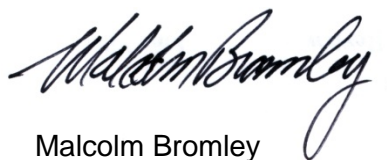
City Staff continue to work very closely with our partners at the VPD and VF&RS on all matters related public safety in Oppenheimer Park, as well as other areas in the city where groupings of tents appear.

Should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Regards,



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City of Vancouver



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