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Mayor and Council

City of Prince George

1100 Patricia Blvd

Prince George, BC V2L 3V9

RE: Letter of Support – Temporary Occupancy Pilot Program for the C1 Downtown Zone

Dear Mayor and Council,

I am writing to express my support for the motion proposed by Councillor Klassen for a **temporary use pilot for empty storefronts** in downtown Prince George.

This initiative is both timely and necessary. One of the most visible characteristics of our downtown is the number of vacant storefronts. While a certain level of vacancy is healthy and provides space and opportunities for new businesses and services to emerge and grow, the current situation has clearly exceeded what is considered desirable. Many storefronts have remained empty, not just for weeks or months - but years, signaling deeper challenges that need to be addressed.

There are significant problems that stem from an excess of vacant storefronts. Some of the known impacts include:

- Sending a visible signal of decline and reinforcing the perception that downtown is unsafe or not worth visiting - a narrative that impacts community pride.
- Business owners and service providers are more likely to open in downtowns where there is visible pedestrian activity and a strong business community. In the same way, residents and visitors are drawn to downtowns that are vibrant, engaging, and safe - qualities that vacant storefronts directly undermine.
- Vacant storefronts can lower property values, further affecting nearby buildings and challenging the viability of surrounding businesses. This discourages new investment, weakens the local economy and reduces municipal tax revenues.
- Long-term vacancies lead to building deterioration, degrading the visible appeal of the neighbourhood and creating issues related to public safety.
- High vacancies mean there are fewer reasons to come downtown, challenging the downtown's role as the social and cultural hub of the city.
- As renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs said, "*There must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street.*" Vacant storefronts run counter to this principle, diminishing foot traffic and natural surveillance, and increasing opportunities for unwanted activity.

These are just some of the known impacts. It is especially important to highlight that this is not just an economic or aesthetic issue - it is a matter of public safety. In recent years, Prince George has witnessed the devastating consequences of long-term vacant buildings, where the risk extends far beyond perception and to very real harm.

In 2021, the vacant building at 611 Brunswick Street was destroyed by fire. In 2023, the former Achillion restaurant, empty for nearly a decade, exploded, causing serious property damage across several blocks and, more tragically, resulting in severe injuries to members of the community. Most recently, in 2025, fire tore through the former City Secondhand store at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Dominion Street.

While these events routinely occur in Prince George, they are far from normal. These events highlight the real dangers of neglected and vacant buildings. While what remains of these buildings have since been demolished, the lots now sit vacant, compounding the impact that vacant parcels have on downtown vibrancy (a separate but related issue).

The *Smart Growth on the Ground: Downtown Prince George* concept plan envisions a downtown that is safer, more exciting, and lively - a place where residents, visitors, service providers, and business owners alike want to spend time, invest, grow, and flourish. To achieve this vision, the issue of building vacancy requires focused attention and meaningful action.

While I support the motion being presented today, I also encourage Council to consider undertaking supplementary work to better understand the range of factors contributing to the high vacancy rate. It is evident that there are deeper issues at play - issues that must be addressed before we will see downtown buildings fully leased with long-term tenants that bring more people and excitement back to the heart of the city.

The decline of downtown cores and the push for revitalization is a common reality in mid-sized cities. Change is possible but it will require sustained commitment, collaboration, and leadership. What downtown Prince George needs most right now is a strong advocate. I sincerely hope the Mayor and Council will embrace that role. I also offer my own time and energy to support these revitalization efforts in any way I can.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rylan Graham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rylan Graham, PhD RPP MCIP