

Subject: Concerns over PG Safe Street Bylaws Amendments

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Sent: Friday, June 25, 2021 1:32 PM

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Dear Mayor and Council,

As a citizen of Prince George, over the last year I have felt growing distress as I watched our homeless community face mounting hostility and violence. COVID-19 had adverse impact on most residents of Prince George but the harm that COVID-19 caused to our poorest community members is devastating. As you may be aware, Northern Development Initiative Trust funded an in-depth study implemented by Community Futures to understand the impact of COVID-19 on businesses and non-profits in our region. The research revealed that:

- Due to COVID-19 health protocols 75% of non-profit organizations had to cancel, reduce or change in-person programming. This meant that marginalized community members, especially those who do not have their own living room lost indoor places to eat, interact and heal. There were fewer services, like community meals, social programs, addiction services, counselling and therapy.
- A convergence of factors disrupted the housing continuum increasing vulnerabilities for people who were precariously housed. Housing costs soared^[1] which meant less stock of affordable private-market housing. People stayed in transitional housing longer while they waited for available long-term housing and fewer people were able to move from shelter to transitional housing. Furthermore, there were fewer treatment beds available because of COVID-19 health protocols.
- Non-profits reported that there was more work, higher costs and less funding. Non-profits in the north were far less likely to access emergency funding support compared to the rest of Canada, compromising their ability to meet growing needs.
- Non-profit organizations reported that community members, both young and old experienced heightened isolation leading to depression, anxiety and loneliness. Many social service agencies said that there have been increased addictions, homelessness, and even deaths.

I share this with you as a preface to my concerns around the proposed Safe Streets Bylaws. I am a social science researcher and I follow four steps when evaluating human interventions:

1. Is the PROBLEM adequately defined? Are stakeholders in agreement on the problem statement?

2. Is the intervention EFFECTIVE? Have a range of options been explored and is there evidence that the proposed solution will solve the problem effectively?
3. Is the intervention EFFICIENT? Is there evidence that the proposed solution will efficiently solve the problem considering cost, human labour, risk, etc.?
4. Does the intervention adhere to HUMAN RIGHTS?

Based on my professional opinion, the proposed Safe Streets Bylaws does not pass these standards for a reasonable human intervention. Please allow me to further explain.

The PROBLEM is inadequately defined

As per the June 14 council meeting, the problem to which Safe Streets Bylaws addresses is inadequately defined. Prince George is facing a protracted and complex social crisis which has resulted in an increase of homelessness, loitering, open drug use and hostility towards precariously housed community members. The increase in Calls for Service (CFS) is evidence of this. However, a number of factors were not included in the definition of this problem including:

- PG faces an inadequate supply of available appropriate housing. According to BC Housing there are 300 affordable units in the pipeline however the first unit will not be ready for move in until March 2022. COVID-19 has caused supply chain delays in housing materials and appliances.
- Non-profits are operating under severe constraint and have had to reduce social programming and indoor services. People without living rooms have lost safe and affordable spaces to congregate during daytime hours. This has increased isolation, depression and drug use, as well as street activity.
- There is a significant direct and indirect relationship between homelessness and residential schools. For some people, current shelter programs trigger residential school trauma.
- In Prince George persistent and systemic discrimination creates barriers for many people who are unhoused or precariously housed. In societies with greater social equality there is less crime, but crime increases when there are significant divides along racial and class lines. This is the case in PG.
- Encampments provide a stable place to sleep and store belongings. More importantly encampments offer community which is the foundation for healing. Finally, encampments offer residents a means to have agency in their lives, designing their homes in a way that meets their personal sensibilities. There have been no calls to bylaw services from local businesses since the encampment was established on George Street and residents have indicated “growth and healing.”

Based on consultations with people who are unhoused and precariously housed, as well as non-profits and social service agencies, I do not believe that the municipality of Prince George has adequately defined the problem to which the bylaws are expected to address.

The intervention is not EFFECTIVE

The Safe Street Bylaw is intended to reduce Calls for Services however enforcing these bylaws will not address the root cause of problem: people have no “good place” to go during daytime hours. The bylaws are targeted towards people who do not have living rooms – either because they are unhoused or precariously housed (in rooming houses, motels or “couch surfing”), or part of the shelter system. Without addressing our housing crisis or providing safe and affordable places for people to go during the daytime hours, this bylaw will likely only increase chaos and hostility. The bylaw does not offer tools to move people off the streets, instead it expands tools to criminalize people for not having living rooms and “shuffle people along.”

The intervention is not EFFICIENT

Tax payers in Prince George will be required to pay a number of costs to enforce the Safe Street Bylaws:

- 311 dispatch call service
- Bylaw officers
- Legal fees

- Communications to inform public about new bylaws.

As stated in the council meeting on June 14, 2021 there is little expectations that the poor people who are issued bylaw infraction will have the financial capacity to pay fines. The cost to enforce bylaws are sunk costs with minimal return on investment. The funding used to enforce bylaws would be more efficiently used to support housing or social programs so that people have a safe and affordable place to go during daytime hours, thus reducing loitering, open drug use and aggressive panhandling. As stated by council woman Terri McConnachie, on the Together We Stand facebook group on June 20, 2021 “if you want something done, partner with a non-profit org!” A more efficient way to solve this problem would be done by non-uniformed Indigenous social service agencies or non-profits.

The intervention does not adhere to HUMAN RIGHTS

The proposed bylaw amendments are unconstitutional and contravene international human rights laws. In the 2015 BC Supreme Court case *BC/Yukon Association of Drug War Survivors (DWS) v City of Abbotsford* the B.C. Supreme Court ruled against municipal bylaws that displaced homeless people from public spaces. Furthermore the “international human rights law does not permit governments to destroy peoples’ homes, even if those homes are made of improvised materials and established without legal authority. Governments may not remove residents from encampments without meaningfully engaging with them and identifying alternative places to live that are acceptable to them” (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, 2020)

Based on the reasons provided above I would like to state my serious concerns over the proposed Safe Street Bylaw amendments. The bylaw does not meet evidence based or ethical standards for reasonable human interventions, it is inefficient and neglects the complexity of the problems facing the city of Prince George.

In closing I would like to share that there are more than 1000 citizens on the TOGETHER WE STAND facebook group, a movement of mothers, sisters, sons, daughters, brothers, fathers, cousins and friends who want to create a livable Prince George for people without living rooms. This represents 1.2% if the population! Like me, many people joined this group because we can no longer stand by and watch the mounting hostility and violence targeted to our most marginalized community members. We want to be part of a sustainable solution for our city and we believe that when our most marginalized community members are harmed, we area also harmed. With that in mind I would like to offer my services as PG looks for more effective and efficient solutions that are good for people, good for businesses and good for our city. We have many humane options available to us!

I write to you as a citizen of PG. I represent no organization.

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In pursuit of powerful collective knowledge. Together, thinking new ideas, thinking the unthinkable!

^[1] "Housing prices soaring in Prince George," MYPGNOW, April 2021 and "Prince George BC, was once a city of affordable homes" CBC, April 20, 2021