

Gimme Shelter

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In the Metro Vancouver area, homelessness is often thought of as a phenomenon of the “Downtown Eastside”, but in fact it is a feature of the suburbs as well.

In 2006, a study of homelessness in the eastern suburb of the Tri-Cities (Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody) revealed that there were in excess of 150 persons living in the bush and parks of the core downtown areas. A task group of government and non-profit agencies, community groups, politicians and concerned citizens was galvanized to conduct a strategic planning exercise and, not surprisingly, identified an emergency shelter as a key objective for the Tri-Cities. But shelters typically take years to implement – the time required to acquire funding, find land, rezone the property and construct the facility. The task group devised an innovative approach to provide shelter in the interim cold wet weather months of November through March pending a permanent shelter – tap the resources of local churches (space and compassionate members) and funding available from the federal government’s Homelessness Partnership Strategy. The result – the Tri-Cities Cold Wet Weather Mat Program.

The mat program is operated by the Hope For Freedom Society, which also provides homeless outreach services under contract to the provincial government. Five area churches host the shelter on a rotating basis, one month at a time. Shelter guests are provided with a mat and blankets for the night, an evening meal upon arrival at 10 PM, a breakfast and a bag lunch before leaving at 7 AM - and, if desired, someone to listen. Since none of the host churches are close to the concentration of homeless persons in the Tri-Cities, shelter guests are picked up at designated muster points in each of the 3 Tri-Cities, bused to the shelter location and returned to the muster point the following morning.

Although spartan – there are no shower or laundry facilities, and guests must vacate the space during the day – the program has proven

remarkably successful in assisting homeless persons to leave the street, typically to addictions recovery or directly to housing. The combination of warm food and a night's sleep in a safe location coupled with ongoing contact with shelter workers and caring volunteers has opened a door in many lives. The program has also proven to be energizing for the host churches, providing their members with an opportunity to provide service and live their personal missions.

The mat program, of course, was just the beginning. The task group's long term shelter goal is for a permanent emergency shelter and transitional housing facility in the Tri-Cities which will operate 24 hours/day, 7 days/week throughout the year and provide a gateway to a full range of services which persons without a home need to regain their lives. The City of Coquitlam has generously dedicated a parcel of vacant City-owned land for this purpose and, in the spring of 2010, initiated the rezoning process to remove any hurdles to provincial funding of the shelter facility. The site – 3030 Gordon Ave. – is a wooded lot in a commercial/light industrial area and backs on to the CPR mainline right of way – to the south of which is a residential subdivision. It is well-located given its proximity to the concentration of homeless persons in the Tri-Cities. During the summer the City sent out notices of rezoning and a newsletter on the shelter facility proposal to occupants within 400 metres of the site, and in late September conducted 2 open houses at City Hall to provide community members with an opportunity to view and discuss the proposal.

The open houses were a wake-up call for the task group when it became apparent there was a ground swell of hostility to the shelter project from residents south of the CPR tracks and from residents of neighbouring Port Coquitlam just east of the site. The opposition voiced the usual litany of claims against special needs residential facilities – increased crime and violence in the neighbourhood, decreased property values and wrong location. As is likely typical for opposition to such facilities, it took only a few impassioned objectors to alarm their neighbours and soon petitions opposing the shelter facility were circulating throughout the adjacent neighbourhoods. With a public hearing before Coquitlam Council looming on November 29th, the task group developed a two-part strategy to ensure that a majority of Council would vote in favour of the rezoning:

1. Conduct a community engagement campaign to get as many supporters as possible to write or e-mail Council in favour of the shelter facility, and then to demonstrate their support by attending the hearing, and
2. Enlist speakers with specific strategic messages to speak at the hearing for the purpose not only of swaying Council, but also informing the public attending the hearing.

For the community engagement campaign, the task group once again turned to the churches and their reservoir of support for issues of social justice. The task group recognized it would be futile and perhaps counterproductive to attempt to counter the thinking in the neighbourhoods adjacent to the shelter site as there was a lot of talking but not much listening going on there – the goal was to engage as many voices of support from the community as possible to balance and, hopefully, overwhelm the voices of opposition. A Powerpoint presentation describing the need for the shelter and addressing the neighbourhood concerns was presented at many of the area churches over the month leading up to the public hearing and a flyer distributed. Supporters were given information on how to write or e-mail mayor and council and how to sign up to speak at the hearing, as well as information on attending the hearing such as time of arrival and parking (given that attendance was expected to overflow the hearing venue).

The “strategic” speakers were enlisted to bring specific experience or perspective to the hearing. Members of the shelter community in the Metro Vancouver area were more than willing to provide whatever support they could, and several shelter managers were engaged to explain how 24/7 shelters operate under provincial guidelines, the lack of neighbourhood impact of shelters that had also experienced strong opposition prior to opening and how one shelter had successfully modified its operation in response to neighbourhood concerns. Other presenters spoke of their experience of living near a shelter facility (didn’t know what it was for the first 5 years) or of their opposition to the mat program when it was first proposed (which evaporated once it was operating). Two courageous persons who lived in the adjacent neighbourhoods spoke in favour of the shelter (courageous because there had been prior threats of violence). Finally, to put a human face on the need to be met by the shelter, 2 persons who had previously been

homeless in the area and were helped through the mat program to leave the street spoke of their experience without a home and how they had turned their lives around.

Roughly 300 people attended the public hearing on November 29th, with a strong showing of support for the rezoning. There were 65 speakers and a total of 70 presentations (some presenters spoke twice) – two thirds of the speakers spoke in favour. The hearing, which lasted 5 hours, was immediately followed by a Council meeting at which the rezoning was approved - 8 members of Council voted in favour, 1 opposed. Our work is not yet done, however – the next challenge for the task group and the City is to garner provincial funding. But one step at a time.

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