

NANAIMO: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TASK FORCE

Results of Pilot Session #3: July 28 2018 at Oliver Woods Community Centre

Homelessness: How do we increase understanding and move towards action?

Introduction:

The Community Engagement Task Force (CETF) consisting of residents, City staff and members of City Council was put together following a council motion in 2016 to create a public engagement pilot program to “*further community engagement and public conversation*” in a less formal setting than a Council or Committee of the Whole meeting.

To date, the CETF has held two pilot community engagement sessions. Pilot Project Session #1, in November 2017, was an open space technology discussion centred around “*Building Nanaimo for the Future: What are your priorities*” where five topics chosen by the community at large were debated and discussed in a round table format. Pilot Project Session #2, held in April 2018, utilized a “*micro town hall*” format with participants bringing their own questions that they wished to specifically ask of members of City Council again in a round table format.

Purpose of session #3:

The specific purpose of this Community Engagement Session Pilot Project #3 was: *to demonstrate a collaborative type of community engagement where residents partner with the city in developing a strategy or action plan to meet an issue of importance to Nanaimo.*

The intent of this process was to dive deeply into a single issue of importance to our community, examine it from all angles and collectively identify potential solutions. This being the third session of the Task Force, it was intentionally designed to move beyond conversation and into action planning. The session would begin with a panel of relevant experts to provide a common ground of information about the issue for all participants. This would be followed by multiple table discussions on various aspects of the issue to potentially arrive at viable solutions.

Process to choose the topic:

To select the topic, the CETF reached out to the community at large for input asking for a single topic ‘problem’ statement, which allows participants to think about the current situation (where are we?), the ideal state (where do we want to go?) and what is needed to bridge the two (how do we get there?).

To guide the public in forming their problem statements, the CETF offered the following examples of topics which would be well suited to the type of meeting method:

1. How do we make Nanaimo the most engaged city ever?
2. What is good governance?
3. How can we create a more economically viable Nanaimo?

Forty-six responses were received with the most popular topics being.

1. Homelessness (13 responses)
2. Economic development (7 responses)
3. Community Engagement (6 responses)
4. Affordable Housing (6 responses)
5. Downtown Nanaimo (5 responses)
6. Transit & Transportation (4 responses)

As a result of this input, the CETF chose as the topic for Session #3: *“Homelessness: How do we increase understanding and move towards action?”* The specific outcome for the day was to establish a common ground for action by:

- Building knowledge and understanding;
- Building discussion and collaboration;
- Building community; and
- Building ideas about solving the problem

Format of the Session:

The overall facilitator for the day would provide opening remarks including a description of the format for the session in terms of background, context, objectives and expectations. This would be followed by an initial presentation setting the scene of homelessness in Nanaimo and then a series of panelists sharing their experiences about homelessness from a variety of perspectives such as: community; front-line workers; and those living as homeless. The presentations were also available on Facebook Live.

Participants would then break into randomly selected, moderated, round tables to discuss their reactions to the panel presentations out of which specific themes would be identified as a focus of a second round of group discussions on priorities for action planning.

The role of council members was to see it as an opportunity to listen to a full range of perspectives on the topic; hear how citizens are processing the issue; and reflect on what the community thinks is important to focus on.

Some background material was available for participants including a location map of current supportive housing facilities and social service centres in Nanaimo. What follows is a transcription of the panel presentations and of the final results of the focus group discussions on action planning. The live feed of the panel presentations and the presentations by the final focus groups can be seen at: <https://youtu.be/6lc5YCfLjqU>

TRANSCRIPTION OF PANEL SESSION AND FINAL RESULTS OF FOCUS GROUPS.

Opening remarks: Bill Manners of the CETF opened the session of over 50 participants noting that the focus today was on *“Homelessness: taking action”* using a collaborative approach to community engagement. This was Session #3 of a pilot program initiated by City Council in 2016 and spearheaded by the CETF to find new and meaningful informal, open topic ways of engaging the community in public conversations that matter to the people of Nanaimo.

The objective of today was to build an understanding of the impact of homelessness on all segments of our community; to provide opportunities for respectful listening and learning across the community; and identify ways that individuals and organizations can act to improve outcomes through the whole community.

Bill recognized members of the CETF as well as members of City of Nanaimo Council and staff in attendance; and then introduced Dyan Dunsмор-Farley, Wave Consulting Ltd of Gabriola Island who graciously volunteered to be the facilitator for the day.

Dyan set the stage for the session by noting the three things that we wanted to accomplish were to:

- Build understanding of the impacts of homelessness on all parts of our community recognizing that every single person’s perspective is important.
- Build opportunities for respectful listening and learning across the community. We can all learn from each other; there is no singular expert and every point of view is a valued one

- Begin to gesture towards the ways that we can take action both as individuals and across organizations; inspire a sense of possibility and hopefulness; and establish some common ground for action. We will not come up with an action plan or a strategic plan but we can begin to say, as a community, that these are some things we can work on.

She noted that homelessness is a super “wicked” social problem defined as: an issue where no accepted definition of the problem exists; where one problem is interrelated with others and where the solutions preferred to address it are precarious, controversial and difficult to implement. What is more is that these types of problems pit those involved in trying to solve them against each other in jurisdictional conflict. All that emotion that we are feeling about homelessness whether you are living in homelessness or whether you are in the neighbourhood or business or community agency is because these types of problems put us at odds with one another. They do the very thing that as citizens we should be trying not to do. We need to find common ground. This is not a simple task.

PANELISTS:

Signy Madden, Executive Director, United Way

- Gave a brief overview on what is going on in the way of services to the homeless in Nanaimo
- United Way manages \$750, 000 in federal funding that comes to Nanaimo to help address homelessness
- The Homeless Coalition of Nanaimo comprised of service providers, in place for 10 years meets monthly, helps integrate that funding into the community
- We also already have solutions in place such as a Housing First program that gets people immediately off the street into market rent apartments; 25+ people have been housed in the last two years in that program
- We do not have to reinvent the wheel or start from scratch.
- There now is a federal interest and a provincial interest all aligned looking at poverty reduction and homeless strategies
- Conducted a “Point in time” count of these living homeless in April 2018; population of homeless has doubled in the last two years
- Now have a multi-year strategy which has been presented to City Council and has also been adopted by the Chamber of Commerce
- We now have the players in place, we have a plan, and we have data that we can use to demonstrate and make a case particularly to the province for funding to address homelessness
- The work of this workshop will feed into the Homeless Coalition and to the next group of municipal elected officials.

Penny Richards, Flying Fish, Commercial Street

- We are the cornerstone retail of downtown and we see not only other business people and neighbourhood residents but also a lot of homeless/ street people
- the downtown goes through peaks & valleys: when the commercial aspect of downtown does well; the social aspect does well. When the commercial aspect does not do well; the social aspect does not do well. Events like the new Thursday night market are reinvigorating downtown. If you can’t maintain a profit, you can’t stay in business.
- Tourists love downtown; it has a lot to offer and we want to see that element maintained
- There has been a change in the type of street people over time; in the past we knew them individually and helped them. We fed and clothed them. Now there is an increased level of aggression and mental health issues have escalated.
- We have issues around theft; we have issues around overdoses; and we have security issues: most of our employees are women as are many shoppers so there is a lot of anxiety; shoppers are concerned

that they are being followed so we help them to their boats or their cars. In the past, we had no support but now a private security firm, Footprints, helps to deescalate the situation.

Jacque Howardson, Downtown Neighbourhood Resident

- Nob Hill is ground zero since it is the closest to downtown; used to live there, now live in the Old City Quarter
- Personally, I'm engaged with many of our neighbours who are homeless on a regular basis. Once you engage with someone like that, you have a different perspective
- But from the neighbourhood's perspective it is much different; it is one of fear and resistance
- We need to break down the walls of fear and resistance and build fences instead; and create compassion and have a sense of accountability including those on the street. There is a perception that homeless can't be a part of the neighbourhood, they can't do anything, they can't reciprocate.
- How can we get homeless to be part of the community? How can we stop you from leaving needles, litter, clothes and shoplifting? We can't help you if we don't know who you are.
- NIMBYism should be struck from everyone's dialogue.
- When neighbours are resistant it is coming from a place of fear; they are resistant because those fears were not allayed
- Communities care about each other and feel they belong together and have a relationship developed through trust. Going to have to work hard to get the community on board and until we do that, the walls are going to get bigger. Need meaningful dialogue.
- Need to advocate for immediate and affordable health care treatment centres and safe housing after treatment.
- Need to allay the fears: get the litter and needles picked up by the city since residents are not able to understand everything.

Aimee Chalifoux, Youth Worker

- Did live in foster care and a group home; my oldest children have suffered from addiction
- Need to invest in our youth; we have a responsibility to them
- This is a health care crisis.
- The biggest gap for youth is access to mental health services: youth don't know their identity; they don't know where they come from; they don't know how to grieve: they are left flailing around in the system; not understood
- I feel that I'm not doing enough. I think there's more we can do

Kayla Lilledahl, Tenant Support Worker, Pacifica Uplands Walk Supportive Housing

- Built in 2014 with 33 bachelor units as permanent housing for the hardest to house; they cannot maintain market rent
- Secure housing means they can deal with other issues like health
- The resistance and push back that housing gets in a lot of community
- This year we see more people coming to see us looking for housing
- Not a lot of support services
- 50-60 minimum referrals for people who have applied for housing
- Very little turnover in our building: definitely more units need it
- Now have a joint project with library and Nanaimo Seniors Lodge to clean up their areas in terms of garbage and needle disposal
- Able to live with dignity and stability

Bob Christenson, Tenant, Pacifica Uplands Walk

- Was homeless for six months, in and out of the Salvation Army, the severe weather station and the 7-10 Club
- Got myself into Uplands Walk where I've been for 3 ½ years
- I have been able to reconnect with family and my boys and secure a part-time job and hold it. I was able to keep a job for 3 years ½ years at Woodgrove Mall and really enjoyed it
- While working and at Uplands Walk, I became more connected with society. I learned to reach out to people and identify with their struggles. I learned to deal and live with drug and other addictions of gambling and drinking.
- I take pride in my home, having a phone number, mailing address, taking pride in my community
- I have also learned to deal with a mental illness, which I have. It's very manageable and I am able to come to terms with the symptoms. It's not a crime, it's a disease, and I think I am just going to leave it at that.

GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS:

In the first breakout session after the panel presentation, those who participated were randomly assigned to tables when they arrived at the session so that there would be a diversity of people at each table. The groups were tasked with reflecting on what they heard from the panelists and to identify some of the needs, both as individuals and as a community, we have to meet in order to move towards action on homelessness.

From this initial discussion, seven themes emerged:

1. Building an inclusive community;
2. Safety: overcoming fear;
3. Addressing gaps in health care;
4. Housing and homing solutions;
5. Targeted focus and supports for youth;
6. Addressing the economic impacts of homelessness; and
7. Improved processes for public engagement and accountability of all players.

After a brief conversational lunch, participants selected which theme they wanted to discuss for the second break-out session. In this session, they were tasked with identifying actions and prioritizing them as well as suggesting who needed to be involved in addressing the action.

Theme #1: Building an inclusive community

Factors:

- People are looking for community in everyplace they might find it
- Everyone belongs in Nanaimo, no matter where they are from
- Welcome the homeless (people without homes) as neighbours
- Acknowledge people who are on the street

Action Planning:

1. Sharing information/ stories about homelessness with everyone especially children (schools, volunteers, non-profits, Homeless Coalition)
 - Re-educate about homelessness; challenge myths around meritocracy; break down ideas about exclusivity; create more avenues of individual stories of homelessness
 - Educate general public on economic and health reasons behind homelessness
 - Focus on educating children about homelessness (Unitarian Church already has a school program)
 - Challenge our own prejudices/ investigate our own biases
2. Create neighbourhood drop-in centres (BC Housing, non-profit, City of Nanaimo)
 - Homeless looking for work are already using Federal Building on Front Street as a drop-in centre

- Libraries are doing their share in welcoming homelessness: setting an example as a democratic institution
 - Create a centralized resource centre or use existing ones (like Oliver Woods); like a neighbourhood drop-in house for everyone not just the homeless
3. Actively engage and include the homeless on assessing their needs and future planning (BC Housing, Homeless Coalition)
- Have a housing conversation with the currently homeless
 - Go to where the homeless are
 - Involve them in planning for their future

Theme #2: Safety: Overcoming Fear

Factors:

- Keeping lines of communication open
- Increasing connectivity between different groups: especially homeless community, business and neighbourhood associations
- How to create an atmosphere of neighbours and understanding and knowing where each group is coming from
- Need to develop an ethos of listening; just sitting down and listening to the stories of one another. Allowing for fears to be heard; like little children, if you don't allow them to speak about their fears there is no way to understand how to address those fears; natural to have fears; understand what leads to them; having that being part of the planning process when we are designing new buildings in neighbourhoods; allow community associations to play a role in this process of understanding of fears.

Action Planning:

1. Address the issues of nimbyism. Give priority to how to have open channels of communication between all groups. Allow for proper awareness and public education around nature of homelessness, the backgrounds of people who are experiencing homeless, understanding what are the contributors and for people to understand that it is very easy to have good human conversations between everyone
2. Building and strengthening our forums for community discussion and integration. The neighbourhood associations is an excellent area that can be strengthened and nurtured where the community can come and speak about issues that are pertaining to certain groups along with other forums such as this where the Chamber of Commerce, merchants and neighbourhoods can all come together continue the conversation about issues that are arising
3. Know who to mobilize to address these issues (merchants, neighbourhoods, general public, security groups, police, city reps). The more that people can come together and talk about these issues will really address what the needs are in of safety and security.

Theme #3: Addressing Gaps in Health Care

Factors:

- Difficult not to address gaps in health care without stumbling into a passionate discussion around housing because these issues are so interconnected. Cannot talk about improving someone's access to health care and getting the proper treatment if they don't have a place to live. It's great to get someone into detox and treatment but if they are being released to the streets, there is not much chance of them actually recovering
- Lots of discussion about the upcoming municipal and school board election and a desire to see some changes. Will be putting pressure on candidates both municipal and school board regarding these issues. Doing a lot of education out in the community so that citizens know what's expected of various levels of government, what is local government/ province responsible for, who funds housing subsidies, so that people are informed and able to be powerful citizens

- Foster more support for mental health education and reducing stigma. Desire for more people sharing their stories of lived experience and feeling supportive and safe to do that. This way we can break through those two camps/schools of thought where: yes, addiction is a health issue vs no, it's a choice.
- More public engagement; educating our local officials as to what public needs to be engaged; and also provide opportunities for populations not online such as mailouts to seniors housing as well as more community forums

Action Planning:

- More mental health and substance abuse education, especially in schools; get it in the curriculum; educate kids, they will educate the parents
- Big "C" collaboration between various levels of government, across cultures and health authorities (e.g. relation between Island Health and Indigenous Health Authority), and between services providers to ensure no one falls through the cracks
- Increased support of mental health front line workers to prevent burnout
- Self-care for citizens and other strategies to restore humanity. We have fundamentally lost our love of humanity; we are so beaten down by the impact of these issues that we struggle to have compassion; we need to get back to the place where we see the person in front of us as a real human and not someone who is just getting in my way.

Theme #4 Housing and Homing Solutions (2 Breakout Groups)

Group #1: Action Planning

- Because this is a "wicked" crisis, we need to get roofs over the heads of those that don't have roofs over their heads now, not from 2018 to 2023, and so extraordinary solutions and temporary responses are necessary. In responding to this need, key words are: Sharing, Involving, Cooperating and Flexibility
- Personal actions reflect these words such as:
- sharing your skills (cooking, driving), your knowledge (organizational) or your facilities (eg renting out a room in your house at below market rates);
- pushing government to provide a pilot project;
- getting different types of housing whether it is people sharing a mobile home or trailer; using army tents; or accessing land that the school district or the federal government has to share;
- cooperation between the five or six different levels of government including First Nations
- donation of land by the City for building houses
- involve builders in building homes; they already participate in organizations like Habitat for Humanity
- we have to be flexible: a lot of rules and bylaws created by different levels of government make it hard to respond now, not in three or five years

Group #2: Action Planning: What needs to change:

- Better understanding of definition of homelessness. What it means to be homeless is one big term reflecting very different needs such as seniors or those enroute to somewhere else.
- Once we better identify those needs then we can identify what are the specific housing solutions for the particular needs of that individual
- Keep the pressure on government. They need to know that this is a concern and we want to see action
- Engage local First Nations and find out how can we work collaboratively
- We also need to investigate different rules especially in regard to tenancy and insurance which may make it difficult for those wanting to rent out their home

Theme #5: Targeted focus on & supports for Youth

Action Planning:

- Making a personal commitment to youth which is part of building community and trust that has come up repeatedly throughout the day as well as us taking personal accountability recognizing that it is not always an institutional problem and there are human to human things we can do for youth such as: providing laundry vouchers and groceries or taking a youth for a coffee
- Recognizing there is a huge gap for youth aging out of care between the ages of 19 and 21 who need supportive housing and there are only a few units available
- Providing other home share options, similar to foster care, but a way more flexible and focusing on the needs of youth instead of the needs of government.
- Increasing collaboration (round table) between service providers (e.g. NYSA, SD, CLBC, Pacifica, Aboriginal Centres) so that we are not working in silos but communicating more between us
- Ensuring a child representative phone service for youth accessible 24/7
- Enhancing life skills programs for youth who are not in school or who are part-time students who don't fit current mandates.

Theme #6: Addressing the Economic Impacts of Homelessness

Action Planning:

- Our top priority is to provide affordable housing in the region and the economic impact in the community will be reduced
- Need island Heath to step up and deal with the drugs and mental health
- Personally, we and our families could volunteer or donate to organizations which are supporting homeless issues
- Enhance services so that people could stay in their homes longer
- Use of crown land for community building
- Investigate what is being done in the Capital Regional District
- Keep our elected officials' feet to the fire
- Utilize diverse housing options like containers

Theme #7: Improved Processes for Public Engagement and Accountability of all Players

Personal Commitments made by those at the table

- Be informed
- Be open to hearing and listening to other perspectives, even when it's difficult
- Create an environment where real honest conversations can happen; facilitate public dialogue
- Volunteer skills and experience in conflict resolution, communication, community engagement and building bridges to be able to move this conversation forward
- Recognize the humanity of everyone; it's not us vs them
- Not be disengaged as the result of feeling overwhelmed.
- Be aware of who I am talking to and invite collaboration from all partners not just those ones I am familiar, comfortable or in agreement with
- Participate in all opportunities for engagement and conversation
- Spark community conversations via Social Media to increase dialogue
- In my professional capacity, work at designing a model of affordable housing in Nanaimo.

Priority community action:

- City leadership and key stakeholders (e.g. Homeless Coalition; Chamber of Commerce) take out a full-page advertisement in the newspaper which acknowledges that this is a big issue in our community; commit to having regular conversations with the community about the issue; to establishing a set of shared values about the issue; and to communicating a plan. Included in the ad would be the sharing of stories about how this person got to this place as a really powerful mode of communicating a complex

issue; re-humanizing those who are having an experience of homelessness; and collectively beginning to see ourselves in the issue.

The participants felt a little more hopeful at the end of the session than when they started the day. They and city staff, members of City Council who attended along with the panelists and facilitator Dyan Dunsamor-Farley were thanked and honoured for coming out on a Saturday knowing that this wasn't an easy conversation in which to engage.

Closing remarks: Erin Hemmens of the CETF noted that this Session #3 was the CETF's attempt to look at one single heated issue and point towards solutions recognizing that homelessness is a "wicked" and complex topic. We will be presenting to City Council sometime in September the results of this community engagement process in terms of its modality and the conversations that resulted about "Homelessness: moving towards action." The CETF will also be providing the findings of this session to the Homeless Coalition.

Results of Evaluation of Session #3:

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation form about the public engagement process. Twenty feedback forms were received and a summary of all the responses is attached.

All of those completing the form were satisfied with the overall event. They appreciated the short presentations made by the panelists; hearing diverse points of view and range of insights; and the sense of shared purpose and compassion shown by all participants. On the negative side, respondents would have liked to have seen more attendees who were living the homeless experience.

Again, all of those completing the evaluation appreciated the attendance of the Mayor and Councillors Fuller and Armstrong. Said one person, "it's powerful to have City Government present at meeting dealing with important community issues." Another noted: "I was empowered to know that I was not alone in how I feel about people on the streets."

The majority felt that they had some influence in identifying which topics which were important to them. They understood how to participate and felt welcome and respected while doing so. They felt that their input was valued and that the experience itself was of value.

For future pilot program community engagement events, participants stated that it was a good model and they were pleased with the process particularly having the panel presentation. Hearing about the event was pretty evenly split between word of mouth, the newspaper and Facebook. Participants were spread across the city with a majority coming from the Downtown, South End and Harewood neighbourhoods. Forty percent of the respondents were between 50 and 64 years, and forty-five percent were over sixty-five.