

CSAC Panhandling Report 2010

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for the Community Safety Advisory Committee

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HISTORY

Since January of 2007, the City of Duncan has been actively addressing panhandling issues in its downtown core and surrounding areas. Along with local business owners, the RCMP, support agencies, residents, the regional district, Community Policing and others, concerned community members have gathered to explore solutions to deal with this public problem. There have been newspaper interviews conducted with Duncan's mayor to talk about panhandling, and 'A Hand Up, Not a Hand Out' brochure created by the DBIA (Downtown Business Improvement Association). This last year the Community Safety Advisory Committee (CSAC) was asked to facilitate two community meetings to discuss the issue; a community forum, on November 4th, 2009 and a February 4th, 2010 follow-up meeting. These gatherings were attended by a broad section of Duncan stakeholders, including residents, business owners, local government and agency representatives. The recommendations coming out of these meetings are being reviewed by the Community Safety Advisory Committee (CSAC) and will be forwarded to stakeholders in October 2010.

PROCESS

Meeting Nov. 4th 2009

The purpose of the November meeting was to engage community members in a discussion about concerns regarding the emerging downtown panhandling issue. Duncan was experiencing an increase of people gravitating to the downtown core and engaging in panhandling. Incidences of people sitting on the sidewalk in front of businesses were becoming more frequent, with some of these people behaving in an aggressive manner while soliciting shoppers for money. Business owners were concerned that potential customers were becoming uncomfortable – even fearful – of being approached by the panhandlers and choosing not to shop in the downtown core because of their fears.

It was also recognized that street-involved residents have a right to access and belong to their community, the streets, parks and sidewalks of downtown Duncan is where they choose to gather. As the City of Duncan, RCMP and Community Policing were all receiving complaints about safety issues concerning aggressive panhandling in the downtown core, the need for a facilitated discussion for community members to come together was apparent.



The November 4th, 2009 meeting was arranged and structured as a panel discussion. The panel consisted of community leaders Mayor Phil Kent, DBIA spokesperson Gary MacGregor, RCMP Corporal Kevin Day, CMHA (Canadian Mental Health Association) Homelessness Outreach Worker Chuck McCandless, Anne Balding (CMHA/Warmland House), and Carol Ann Rolls of Community Policing. There were 42 community members participating in the discussion.

One of the themes that informed the discussion was about 'public spaces' and how people access and make use of public spaces. Solutions and strategies of the past and suggestions for the future were brainstormed in the meeting and this list was compiled into four areas. Discussions about the kinds of activities, accessibility and the safety of shared spaces are important in preserving our community. In general, participants agreed on the importance of equal access to space and the rights of all people to equal use of public space as they choose. Participants generally agreed that limits to the use of public space should only occur when unsafe behaviours or activities prevent the use of space by others. Safety when used as a central principle in this dialogue, was interpreted in its most specific and broadest meanings. Some participants pointed to experiences that were frightening, conflictual and aggressive. Others spoke to expectations of public behaviour and discomfort with certain activities and the appearances of individuals. Of note in the meeting, was the general consensus that discussions focus on behaviour and to promote understanding and increased ability of all citizens to participate in public space.

Meeting Feb. 4th, 2010

The second meeting was organized to explore the solutions compiled into the 4 areas. Round table discussions were facilitated by issue-engaged stakeholders, and the 31 participants were encouraged to circulate through the four topic specific discussion tables, with the opportunity to discuss the solutions. The possible solutions discussed were:

- 1) Changing panhandler behavior. Solutions in this area centered on the general public's expectation for socially appropriate/acceptable behavior and enforcement for the problematic and aggressive activities in public spaces. The possible solutions:
 - a. Report aggressive behaviours to RCMP
 - b. Enforce the 'Safe Streets Act', prosecute offenders and create 'no go' zones
 - c. Use the Commissionaire approach to shift or contain behaviours
 - d. Design a public campaign to promote 'good citizenship'
- 2) Changing donor behavior. This approach was centered on the ways that the general public relates to the panhandlers. As many of the complaints received reported feelings of fear of these street-involved residents, this was center to the discussion. Inviting the general public to view people in a more positive and inclusive light was mentioned, and it was noted that they are as much a part of the public as the shopper. Whether or not to give the panhandlers money was questioned.



The solutions discussed were to:

- a. Educate donators to give instead to social service agencies
 - b. Provide other ways for people to donate on-site
 - c. Design a voucher system for donors to purchase
 - d. Educate customers to de-escalate their fears of panhandlers
- 3) Changing the environmental factors. This approach looked at solutions that involve the use of public space, and at how alternate uses can work effectively to create a feeling of safety for all. The solutions discussed were to:
- a. Do mapping to identify where panhandlers gather, which needs are being met, track numbers of panhandlers and incidents/concerns
 - b. Provide spaces for these activities to have less impact yet promote safety, inclusion and meet needs
 - c. Create an 'ambassador' program to counteract negative behaviours and contribute to safe public space
 - d. Use a social marketing approach to promote a 'Safe Streets' campaign
- 4) Changing the social causes. This approach looked at the 'macro view' of the panhandling issue; poverty, lack of housing, lack of mental health and addictions services and others. This topic table came up with some effective solutions for beginning the process, but it was acknowledged that these are long term approaches. The solutions discussed were to:
- a. Identify social causes, maintain and promote sufficient and continued services
 - b. Develop alternative and low barrier economic opportunities (social enterprise)

WHY IS CSAC INVOLVED

The Community Safety Advisory Committee reviews issues put forward by citizens that may create conditions that promote or detract from community safety and the ability of all citizens to participate in public life. CSAC becomes involved by engaging citizens to identify the concerns and brainstorm solutions. Recommendations arising from community engagement on a safety issue are put forward to relevant bodies or organizations and also to local government if applicable.

CSAC engages with a particular issue if the presenting concern or issue:

- Creates an unsafe situation that is likely to lead to personal harm.
- Creates a perception or belief that a risk exists for harm to occur.
- That prevents or acts as a barrier for citizens to be actively involved in public life.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations are drawn from the meetings and assess the viability, priority of proposed solutions and suggest the possible lead organization(s) to review solution areas.

Solution Area #1. Social development

High viability. Continue to identify social causes of panhandling and take a macro view towards the issue. Consider and identify gaps in the region related to housing, poverty, and social services. Identify relevant agencies to continue dialogue and maintain awareness of the issue. Engage in feasibility study for social enterprise – opportunities for low barrier employment or short term earning opportunities.

Suggested leaders in this area:

Social Planning Cowichan – Provide the coordination of social services, social supports.

Take on or continue with a function of supporting the coordination of social services and initiatives, identify gaps and barriers addressing multiple and intersecting social issues in the Cowichan Valley region such as homelessness, poverty, mental health and ability challenges, substances misuse, and others. Establish a means to identify and compile the intersecting activities and build on strategic social planning to guide areas of focus and development for the community.

Create a group of agency representatives to meet quarterly or semi annually to consider overall coordination of social supports in the region. Create information materials (pamphlet) that raise awareness for citizens/ business owners about complex social factors as causes for panhandling.

CMHA -Homelessness/Mental Health Outreach – maintain and increase the presence of outreach workers to provide support and assistance where appropriate.

Solution Area #2. Consistent Responses

High viability. Develop clear and consistent responses to panhandling behaviours that contribute to risk and unsafe conditions. Create clarity for citizens and business owners about enforcement and immediate approaches for concerns. Ensure reporting of incidents of aggressive behaviour and enforce Safe Streets Act to maintain consistent message about criminal behaviour. Obtain clear evidence of actual events and concerns.

Medium viability. Maintain strong Commissionaire presence and provide training for consistent engagement with panhandlers. Commissionaires are commended for their successful interaction with panhandlers, getting to know the people who are street involved, asking for alternative behaviours or for containment to reduce impact on public spaces.



Suggested leaders in this area:

DBIA - Create a 'one-pager' document for business owners outlining the procedure for reporting progressively more serious incidences. Develop a method for businesses to record/track incidents and concerning behaviour as it occurs. Review periodically and support businesses to provide a consistent response.

City of Duncan – Maintain funding levels for consistent Commissionaire presence and encourage best practices for consistent response. Explore bylaw development to identify areas to reinforce consistent responses (e.g. create busking or loitering bylaw).

RCMP –Maintain frequent contact with business owners to review incidents and responses. Provide RCMP presence whenever possible on foot or bicycle in downtown areas and develop relationships with panhandlers and street involved citizens. Ensure RCMP members have consistent information and training about responses to panhandling and to enforce Safe Streets Act when appropriate. Engage in prevention strategies through dialogue, suggestions for alternatives and the use warnings or to move along.

Crown Counsel – Enforce Safe Streets Act with 'no go' provisions for short terms as part of conditions.

Solution Area #3. Education and awareness, change donor behavior.

Medium viability. Provide education to increase awareness and understanding about the activity of panhandling, its causes and address fears. Redirect donors to donate directly to social service agencies rather than to individuals directly. Promote safe streets by raising awareness of the value of safe and inclusive communities and promote citizenship. Encourage tolerance and understanding of the lived realities of all citizens. Encourage engagement with panhandlers to promote inclusion and membership for all citizens.

Suggested leaders in this area:

DBIA – Review pamphlet for consistent messaging and for effectiveness. Integrate pamphlet into overall social marketing strategy that puts forward the kind of community that businesses and patrons would like to promote (such as Safe Streets campaign, Good Citizen campaign, etc.) Request presentations for local business group from community agencies and identify services that exist within the community. Encourage businesses to build proficiency at educating shoppers about the relatively low risk of harm from panhandlers and the benefit of providing donations directly to community agencies. Provide means to donate at businesses downtown to be forwarded to community agencies.

City of Duncan – Invest in tourism and encouraging shopping in downtown with ambassador program. Provide consistent training to support ambassadors in approaching citizens and contributing to safe



public spaces. Contribute to public campaigns for tourism/ shop local etc. Explore the possibility of public donation outlets or boxes on the street.

Community agencies – provide information to businesses about their activities, services and educate about social issues.

Solution Area #4. Environmental design.

High viability. Consider the built environment and design of public spaces through a safety lens. Consider areas that are problematic and create barriers for access and the inclusive participation of citizens. Consider additions and activities that promote participation and reduce emphasis on target groups.

CSAC/ Safer Futures – Identify a group of interested participants and do a safety walk/ condensed audit. Provide report with recommendations. Work with businesses to establish system for obtaining evidence of panhandling activity related to frequency, risk, and response. Engage in mapping of where activities occur and identify areas of risk.

City of Duncan – Consider recommendations and provide additions or alter public spaces to promote inclusion and increased safety. Promote and provide incentives for the use of public space for communal purposes and increase frequency of public events in problem areas. Identify areas and opportunities for communal use that are altruistic and supportive of community involvement (not only profit oriented activities). Encourage community supportive activities that promote inclusion and address basic needs.



Panhandling Update to November 2010

Since the community dialogues in November 2009 and February 2010, the ideas and solutions raised at these meetings have been carried forward by the various stakeholders to address many of the concerns related to panhandling in the downtown Duncan core. The DBIA continues to be at the forefront of raising the issue and bringing forward concerns to the attention of the City of Duncan and the RCMP. Panel participants in the dialogues point to measures that have contributed to improvement in the panhandling situation, with a reduction in the occurrence of the more serious behaviours creating a concern for personal safety in the area.

In the four areas of solutions highlighted in this report and part of an overall strategy, a number of suggested responses have been implemented.

In the area of enforcement, there is improved clarity and a renewed commitment to a consistent response that is applied to behaviour that creates risk and fear of crime. In a meeting held with DBIA, RCMP clarified the circumstances when citizens should contact them and a reporting form was developed to record incidents to track the nature and occurrences of the problem.

Over the summer, RCMP increased their presence in the area with their Bike Patrol, dedicating three members and recruiting some of the 15 new RCMP auxiliary members, being trained to assist in enforcement and prevention duties. The patrols identified areas including Centennial and Charles Hoey Parks and the strategy proved successful both as a method to respond to incidents but also as preventative for crimes such as the use of alcohol in public places, aggressive behaviours, and other concerns. Although a number of arrests occurred in July, a significant reduction was noted by August, with the initiative in its second month of operation. The RCMP continues to use intermittent bike and foot patrols to reinforce their presence in the area.

Commissionaire presence is also maintained in the area and as responders noted, the consistency of response and diligent early intervention -especially in the public consumption of alcohol, has resulted in improvements including a form of 'peer' pressure constraining certain activities.

Also in the area of consistent responses, a new City Bylaw sets important limits to panhandling that can assist to curtail certain behaviours in their frequency, duration, and location. The ByLaw provides an additional tool to the RCMP and Commissionaires to respond to behaviours. The ByLaw is one component of the overall strategy for increasing interventions as appropriate for chronic and/ or escalating behaviour that provoke the greatest concerns. Crown Counsel is engaged in the protocol of this response, and can propose conditions to the Court that support temporary or longer 'no go' provisions or suggest treatment options. In this manner, these tools provide consistency in the community's response and give clarity for all of those who are affected. These types of responses are not meant to be seen as punitive and it is acknowledged that penalties such as 'fines' are ineffective in themselves. Instead, these measures form another component of the overall strategy and emphasize the importance of setting clear community standards of behaviour that promote safety and the full participation of all citizens.



In the second area of solutions, donors continue to be educated about the uncertain benefit derived from direct contributions to panhandlers. The brochure developed by Community Policing and a later version produced by DBIA, suggest that donors channel donations to social service agencies instead.

In addition to the clarity of these responses, solutions that are related to an environmental design approach recommend improvements to the structural elements of public spaces that promote or detract from citizen safety. The relocation of the gazebo at Charles Hoey Park to the WarmLand shelter is an example of this approach and the new home for the gazebo is seen as more consistent for its intended use as a gathering and visiting structure. New bus shelters promoting access and equal use for transit users are expected to arrive at the Charles Hoey location to serve waiting passengers, with other seating interspersed throughout the park to promote consistency with park functioning.

The city has also made significant improvements to Centennial Park, which was viewed as another problematic location in terms of safety issues. Hiking trails, a new playground and spray park, improved tennis and basketball courts, a washroom structure and picnic areas are all part of the City's efforts to make this location more inviting to the general public. This park has become a busy hub of activity in this downtown neighbourhood, and is being accessed by children, families, athletes and elders.

Other environmental design initiatives include safety improvements to the railway corridor, a complex trail system linking Duncan and District of North Cowichan and a safe pedestrian access from the downtown area and the Cowichan Commons Mall. The proposed trails are intended to link up North Cowichan neighbourhood trails with Somenos Marsh trails and the urban railway trail system.

Social development initiatives continue to be a key component of an integrated and multi level strategy responding to the issue of panhandling. The CMHA Mental Health Outreach Worker continues to provide support to people with barriers to housing and advocates for clients in matters with the City. A casual labour pool was offered in the summer for people interested in working for the day for cash. With busking being defined as a separate activity, this distinction creates room for this activity within parameters that can clarify location and the duration of performance activity on the street.

Since the 'panhandling' dialogues, the Warmland Shelter is now providing temporary housing for people in the area and a number of individuals are residing in their new Transitional Housing Units. VIHA's Caulfield House also increases the overall stock of available housing for people who benefit from additional support and facilitated entry to housing placements.

With these improvements, the strategy provides for multiple levels of response that addresses immediate concerns and also seeks to address underlying causes to panhandling. Panelists in the dialogues recommend consistency in responding and a continued effort to address larger community issues that contribute to problems in this area. These include continued momentum in addressing the misuse of substances, the shortage of available housing, and the demand for adequate support and safe gathering places for challenged individuals.

