

**Vancouver Agreement  
Hotel Analysis Project:  
Recommendations  
For Action**

**March 2007**

## **About the Vancouver Agreement**

The Vancouver Agreement is an urban development initiative of the governments of Canada, British Columbia and Vancouver to promote and support sustainable economic, social and community development in the city of Vancouver. In 2002, the Vancouver Agreement initiated a pilot project called the Enhanced Enforcement Initiative to develop and carry out collaborative enforcement initiatives among Vancouver Agreement partners.

## **About the Hotel Analysis Project**

In early 2006, the Vancouver Agreement brought together a number of government partners to specifically study 54 Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs) in the Downtown Eastside to develop a better understanding of the conditions of premises that house a large number of vulnerable residents. The Vancouver Agreement promotes long-term housing security for SRO residents. The intent of the Housing Analysis Project was to find ways to stop disinvestment in the SRO stock and to support better housing either through improvements to existing sites or through the City of Vancouver's policy of one-to-one replacement of closed SRO units.

This document provides a series of recommendations from the data collected as part of the Hotel Analysis Project. Implementation of the recommendations will be done in concert with the relevant stakeholders as required - tenants, landlords, non-profits and members of the community.

The Hotel Analysis Project was directed by a clear set of objectives, including:

- Identifying which hotels account for the largest number of emergency calls.
- Documenting violations of standards.
- Working with building owners, residents and community organizations that offer services to people with mental health and addiction issues to identify the reasons for the large number of emergency calls and to find solutions to address the problems.
- Improving understanding of specific business practices that contribute to positive and negative living conditions.
- Informing public policy approaches that can assist in providing improved accommodation for vulnerable people rather than through the use of emergency services.
- Finding remedies to any immediate life-safety issues
- Developing a balance of incentives and enforcement measures

Seven key agencies partnered on this project:

- Vancouver Police Department
- City of Vancouver Fire and Rescue Service
- City of Vancouver Property Use Branch
- Ministry of Health, B.C. Ambulance Service
- Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, Health Protection and Environmental Health
- Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services, Employment Standards Branch
- Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance

Each agency contributed to the review according to its area of expertise, creating a picture of the living conditions for many people in the Downtown Eastside.

The full results of the review are available in the document Hotel Analysis Project: Summary of Findings.

## **About the Hotel Analysis Project Recommendations**

Based on the information collected during the Hotel Analysis Project, the partner agencies developed high-level recommendations intended to improve living conditions in SROs in the Downtown Eastside. The recommendations are a first step in a process that must include a wide range of participants. Some of the following recommendations call for immediate action while others will require further analysis over the longer term. New or redeployed resources will be needed to implement some of these recommendations. The recommendations are intended to stimulate discussion on the most pressing issues and encourage greater communication and collaboration among the participating government agencies, the Downtown Eastside community and the municipal, provincial and federal governments.

The Hotel Analysis Project focused on the physical condition of the SRO hotels. However, it must be noted that there is a profound link between the condition in the hotels and the health of the tenants. The Chase Report, which interviewed over 3000 people, has highlighted the epidemic proportions and cost to the health care system of HIV, AIDS and Hepatitis C. Supportive care for tenants is a critical factor in improving the lives of the tenant population and reducing the costs of health care and emergency services.

Following discussion and dialogue, an action plan will be needed to move the recommendations forward.

## **Recommendations**

### **A: GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. Establish a permanent tenant advocacy position for residents of Downtown Eastside rental premises.**

In the early 1990s a similar position was co-founded by the City of Vancouver and BC Housing and was found to be helpful in assisting Downtown Eastside residents who for various reasons cannot advocate for themselves. This review found that reinstating a permanent advocate position would assist in representing and bringing attention to the needs of such residents, and could be a liaison between residents, building owners or managers and the various government agencies that can offer them assistance.

Situations and practices identified during the review that would benefit from the attention of an advocate include identifying and addressing owners who exploit low-income residents or whose buildings compromise their health and safety. The review found that residents of some SROs live with a lack of basic amenities

such as kitchens, adequate heat or functioning toilets. They are also often exposed to pest infestations, fire hazards and violence.

- 2. Continue to support the Enhanced Enforcement Initiative created under the Vancouver Agreement by forming dedicated, full-time inspection teams to conduct routine inspections to monitor compliance, educate and encourage the maintenance of standards in SRO hotels.**

The inspection teams would have an educational role, and where necessary, an enforcement role as well as establishing relationships among the various parties. The team would play an important role in facilitating information sharing among the agencies and thereby enhancing operational effectiveness.

The multi-agency team should include property use inspectors, Environmental Health representatives, Vancouver Fire and Police Department members, and staff from the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance and the Employment Standards Branch. A mechanism should be established to provide links to health services as required. As a first step, each participating agency would need to review their guidelines, policies, by-laws or regulations to ensure the ability to collaborate effectively to address issues affecting SRO residents.

- 3. Develop an inventory and vacancy registry of residential premises in the Downtown Eastside.**

Accurate housing stock information is critical to stabilize the population living in the Downtown Eastside. The City currently surveys low-income housing in the Downtown Eastside to capture data such as vacancy and room rental rates. Other agencies could contribute so that residents can more easily transition from one residence to another.

- 4. Build new, quality replacement housing to address the diminishing number of habitable SROs.**

This review of SRO hotels confirms that the majority do not adequately house their residents. Over the longer term, a need exists to build better quality low-income housing that meets the unique needs of this vulnerable population. This is consistent with the City's Homeless Action Plan which calls for 320 supportive housing units per year. The majority of these units need to be supportive units. It is important that a balance is struck between the creation of supportive housing units and affordable housing. It is recommended that where possible new housing consist of self-contained suites.

The Vancouver Agreement partners are currently working to provide replacement housing for obsolete SROs. Examples under development include a new building at 65 East Hastings Street, renovation of the New Pennsylvania Hotel and social housing in the Woodward's development. Additionally, the Vancouver Agreement has funded development of a business case for affordable housing to produce a simple and clear rationale for significant public and private investments in affordable and supportive housing in the Downtown Eastside and other areas of the city, particularly for people with mental illness and/or addictions. The business case will focus on forecasted social, economic and

financial rates of return on investments in housing and on the impacts of not making these investments at this time.

**5. Expand supports available for existing housing.**

While new housing is needed, there is also a need to increase support in key areas such as community-based health services and housekeeping services to meet the needs of Downtown Eastside residents, especially those with addiction, mental health and/or disability issues living in SROs.

Such services were an integral part of the Vancouver Agreement pilot Single Room Occupancy Housing Program at the Silver Avalon hotel which was extensively refurbished and provides 86 units of affordable housing for people at risk of homelessness. Plans are underway to refurbish two additional Downtown Eastside hotels based on the success of this pilot program.

**6. Surveys of Residents Living in DTES SROs & Residents of Social Housing.**

Initiate a survey of residents living in DTES SROs to better understand their demographic characteristics, health and service needs, quality and cost of housing, and housing history. A parallel survey of residents of social housing would provide a comparative analysis for residents in the two housing types. The final report will also include an analysis of the specific issues faced by women living in the DTES.

**B: USE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES**

**7. Police, Fire and Ambulance services should jointly study SRO locations with a high volume of emergency calls to better understand demand, the reasons for the calls and to consider alternate response measures.**

The 2005 data examined in this review for 54 single room occupancy premises showed there were 11,283 emergency service calls. Based on the total number of rooms, the average is almost three service calls per room per year.

Understanding the reasons for the calls is important in determining if there are alternate ways to respond that may both reduce costs and improve service. More information is also required to determine what, if any, relationship exists between a high volume of emergency calls and ineffective hotel management. A high volume of calls could indicate management that is proactive in calling for assistance or be related to hard-to-serve tenants with addiction and/or mental health issues. Understanding the nature of the calls would allow partner agencies to develop strategies that best utilize resources and ensure the necessary resources are in place to address the neighbourhood's problems.

## **C: HEALTH PROTECTION, ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND PROPERTY USE**

- 8. Provide a set of requirements for building owners/managers that cover health and sanitation issues, including:**
  - **Maintaining records pertaining to cleaning, sanitation, garbage removal and pest control.**
  - **Conducting and keeping records of routine room inspections carried out a number of times throughout the month.**
  - **Developing and implementing an integrated pest management program.**

During this review, Environmental Health officers discovered widespread health code violations, including water leakage, poor garbage control and many buildings with pest issues. As a result of the review, 50 rooms were ordered vacated due to sanitation and hygiene issues and the tenants were relocated to other premises.

In 2006, the Vancouver Agreement funded a pilot Hotel Pest Control Project to treat two buildings, one privately owned SRO and one social housing dwelling, for outbreaks of bedbugs. The purpose of the pilot project is to develop, test and evaluate a more-effective process to reduce infestations of bedbugs in Downtown Eastside buildings. Further action will be determined based on the results of this pilot project.

- 9. Make tools and educational aids available to assist building owners and managers implement building management programs in order for their buildings to comply with required standards. A program could also be created for landlords that provides financial and other incentives in conjunction with enforcement initiatives.**

Three quarters of SRO hotel managers do not have training in building management. Providing premises with a clear set of health, sanitation and other maintenance requirements would help them maintain adequate sanitation.

Downtown Eastside SROs often have significant operating challenges because many residents have mental illness and/or addiction issues. Existing training programs do not target the very unique situations found in these buildings. Specific training programs for these SROs would help managers better operate their buildings and explain the expectations of required standards. Incentives could be offered to landlords who choose to improve the living conditions of their SRO hotels. Guidelines and expectations should be recorded and used as a benchmark for all inspections.

In May 2004, the Vancouver Agreement provided funding for an SRO Management Training Program in order for SRO hotel managers to receive instruction in the specific knowledge and skills needed to be competent and effective building managers who regularly deal with high-risk tenants. The program also helped identify gaps in tenant relations, building management and

community resources. Participants attended the Vancouver Community College Building Managers Certificate Program and attended additional workshops offered by Watari Research Association on social issues related to their working environment. Issues covered included physical health issues, mental illness, addiction and dual diagnosis, and anger management. Watari also produced a Resource Guide for Housing Providers, supported by the Vancouver Agreement and Vancouver Coastal Health, which was requested by SRO hotel staff. The program is currently being revised and will be relaunched in May for staff of privately run and non-profit SRO hotels and residences.

10. **Encourage hotel managers to develop rental agreements that provide rights and responsibilities for both tenants and landlords.**

Currently in most SRO dwellings, staff only issue Intent to Rent forms which do not contain any rules and regulations.

11. **Written orders issued against premises should have clearly described expectations for required remedies and timelines for completion. Additional orders and charges could be issued if the maintenance work is not kept up to standard.**

Inspections need to occur on a regular basis, with information provided to hotel owners/managers on what exactly needs to be done and by when. Follow-up may be required to ensure that the orders are being addressed.

12. **Develop a strategy to better manage pest infestations, which are found in the majority of SROs. All buildings should have an Integrated Pest Management Program in place.**

Eighty percent of the buildings reviewed had bed bugs and rodents and/or cockroaches were found in 77 percent of these buildings. A transient population allows for the spread and transportation of pests from one location to the next, making the problem difficult to solve. A strategy to better manage this situation must be undertaken.

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13. **Perform routine and continual Environmental Health inspections, similar to those undertaken by Property Inspectors, of SROs in the Downtown Eastside, instead of only conducting inspections in response to complaints or referrals.**

Many tenants are not in a position to complain as their complaint may impact negatively on the security of their tenure in the hotel. Given the extent of environmental health concerns identified during this project, inspections and follow-up enforcement need to become routine.

14. **Encourage the federal government to continue the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), simplify the application procedures and review eligibility criteria.**

Many of the SROs reviewed were in need of repair and upgrading. Some of these repairs could be undertaken through the RRAP program. Some landlords and managers in the Downtown Eastside, however, find the application process cumbersome and confusing and therefore do not request assistance through RRAP to make appropriate repairs. Further, the eligibility criteria should be reviewed to make the program more attractive to SRO owners who want to do small but necessary repairs that would improve living conditions in the short term. On December 19, 2006, the Federal government extended the RRAP to March 31, 2009, with \$256 Million over 2 years. Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) recognizes that private owners have difficulty with the application process and will work very closely with them.

15. **Establish a set of guidelines and expectations to help SROs improve their operations.**

Relevant agencies with overlapping compliance criteria should come to a common understanding of what constitutes a safe and healthy living environment. Guidelines and expectations should be recorded and used as a benchmark for all inspections. These should be shared with landlords and tenants.

16. **Create a pool of local trades people to provide timely maintenance services to Downtown Eastside buildings in conjunction with non-profit organizations and the Building Opportunities with Business Inner City Society (BOB).**

#### **D: EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS**

17. **Investigate employment practices among Downtown Eastside SROs on a proactive basis rather than conducting reviews only in response to complaints.**

Based on the percentage of hotels that were non compliant with Employment Standards, reviews should be conducted systematically among the SROs in the Downtown Eastside.

#### **E: INCOME ASSISTANCE**

18. **Raise the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance rates to ensure that recipients have sufficient funds to meet their shelter needs.**

Although people on income assistance occupied 57 percent of the rooms reviewed in the Hotel Analysis Project, 85 percent of the SRO hotels charge rates in excess of the \$325 per month income assistance shelter allowance. These residents therefore



must take money from the support portion of their income assistance, leaving little for food, clothing and incidentals. For private hotel owners, the rental of rooms at current shelter allowance rates is not sufficient to maintain the buildings appropriately, further compromising tenants' living conditions.

On April 1st, 2007, shelter rates will be increased for all British Columbians on income assistance by \$50. Income Assistance recipients under the Expected to Work category will also receive an increase of \$50 to their support payment levels.