



Our Homeless

**An Account of the
UDI Victoria Conversation on Homelessness
2006**

March 2007

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Our Homeless

At the end of November and beginning of December, 2006, UDI Victoria hosted three three-hour ‘conversations’ on the subject of homelessness in Victoria.

At these meetings were housing providers and housing agency representatives, social and health service providers, development and homebuilding industry representatives, architects, community advocates, lenders, urban planners, and unaffiliated citizens—altogether, a group of seventeen, at its peak. (Their names and affiliations are shown on page seven.)

Participants were told the purpose of these sessions was to “bring fresh thought to the subject of homelessness” in the Capital Region. They were encouraged to think outside the box, about the box—if possible, to innovate about approaches, collaborations, partnership models, economic models, and strategies that would generate shelter.

While no boundary was placed around the scope of the conversation (why ask people to innovate and then tell them what they can’t talk about?), participants were asked to “try to solve the smallest problem”—shelter concern—rather than deal with the totality of factors and complexities that surrounds homelessness.

While the discussion was moderated, the intention was that the conversation would be self-structuring. That is, there was opportunity for ideas to live or die based largely on the group’s interest in them, and there was no requirement that the group reach any certain conclusions if, in fact, those could not be found.

Our group wrestled honestly and thoughtfully with complicated issues; and people were willing to make a heartfelt effort, proof of which was the tremendous amount of between-meeting email conversation taking place amongst the participants.

In the second section of this report, we have included four possible housing models, and these are followed by some of the myths and challenges examined related to homelessness.

In this introduction, it is worth bringing special attention here to three quite different points that were made in the discussions.

1. “Our Homeless”

The group had been talking for hours about “homelessness” and “the homeless.” One of the participants proposed that if we started to talk about “our homeless,” it might shift our perspective (our mental relationship to the realities of the condition), create a greater sense of shared responsibility, and a greater capacity for shared solving. This was particularly meaningful and helpful, as the group was trying to focus on the trigger points of local, community-generated responses.

This was an effort, in other words, to see our homeless as ourselves, and our responsibility. Our homeless come from all backgrounds, all communities, every family. This whole-community perspective adds weight to the intention to make solutions an immediate priority.

2. “Pressure Senior Government to Make This a Spending Priority”

One of the participants suggested on several occasions during the nine hours of discussion that rather than putting so much energy into trying to generate innovative local responses, we needed to acknowledge that shelter produced through existing federal and provincial housing programs actually works very well, and that the only problem is that we simply need a lot more of it. Arguing that it was a matter of spending priorities, this participant urged that business organizations in particular UDI, the Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Home Builders Association, and others needed to put more pressure on senior government with a powerful business-to-government message about the housing needs of the homeless.

The suggestion itself is not a novel one, and it is important to note federal initiatives about homelessness and affordability have, in fact, been forthcoming in January, 2007; and further that homeless housing appears to be a larger part of the provincial government agenda than before. From a local perspective, of course, the test of any policy is whether or not these initiatives will result in more housing on the ground in Victoria, and how much and when. For example, while the recent increase in shelter

allowance is a good thing, it remains an open question whether the increase will unlock shelter opportunities that were closed before.

3. “As a Community We Have the Desire. The ‘Kit of Parts’ is in Front of Us. We Just Have to Figure Out the Right Way to Assemble the Pieces.”

The one dominant group message coming out of our nine-hour conversation was: There is plenty of land and capacity. There are clever, creative ways of financing new housing. There are opportunities for the private sector to get involved profitably. There are opportunities for the non-profit sector to get involved in new partnerships.

Additionally, there are new hybrid arrangements and collaborations worth trying. Private sector landlording, property management by an existing housing agency, social and health management by existing service providers, more flexible land use policies by local government, more successful partnership with communities leading to greater buy-in, conventional financing backed up by adjustments in provincial shelter allowance policies so as to virtually assure steady cash flow and profitability...these are the key ingredients of a new collaboration. (Significantly, not one of these is out of reach.)

What’s missing is a comprehensive framework for action.

Five Conclusions From the UDI Victoria Conversation:

1. A missing ingredient locally is an opportunity and solutions broker.

It's a surprising discovery, given the staggering number of 'players' in the local housing scene, that there is a vacuum at the middle that could be filled by a 'brokering' entity to connect all of the energy, expertise and capacity in this community. It's our view that this entity (a person or small team, really, with a desk and a cell phone) would have a five-year mandate and specific new housing targets over and above, and separate from, existing housing-creation. This entity could be funded in the short term from existing housing trusts, and self-funding in the longer term.

2. There must be new ways identified for the community-at-large to speak with one voice in its appeals for larger federal and provincial housing commitments.

The conventional 'messaging' is having only limited results. We think the message needs to lead with a strong commitment by the regional community that we will end homelessness in Victoria, backed up by a demonstration of capacity for local initiatives and innovation.

In line with the shift brought on by talking about "our homeless," instead of "the homeless," the regional community needs to 'tell itself a different story.' There is a clear relationship between owning the problem and devising responses.

3. There needs to be more widespread understanding of the high cost of NOT housing our homeless, and action taken on the basis of economic arguments alone.

This cost is obvious in some ways (health and hospital services, emergency response, social services, policing, etc.) and hidden in others (business impacts especially downtown, community-wide sense of failure, image in media, etc.). The cost of services for a homeless person is in excess of \$40,000 per year according to a recent Vancouver study but the cost of services to a homeless person given supported housing is between \$12,000 and \$28,000 per year. All of these figures represent the expenditure of tax dollars. Sometimes the numbers speak for themselves.

4. More non-profit and faith-based organizations with available property need to be invited to participate in the supply of housing.

Many non-profits and faith-based organizations hold land and/or developable air rights and either have not thought about participating or just don't know how to take the first step. With help from experienced resources more of these groups could easily become full participants.

5. Local government needs to dig deeper to identify the full range of incentives that might ease basic housing costs and expedite greater production.

Just some of the ideas that could be considered are:

- the waiving of development cost charges where appropriate
- property tax holidays where and when they can be offered
- waiving of charges in lieu of park contributions
- pre-zoning where possible
- extra density where merited.

Very likely there are even more innovative ideas to be discovered.

Participants and Their Affiliations

Detlef Beck	Vancity
Jim Bennett	Victoria Real Estate Board
Barry Cosgrove	number TEN Architecture
John Crean	Cool Aid Society
Deb Day	Planning Director, City of Victoria
Martin Golder	Architect
Virginia Holden	Ministry of Housing, Province of BC
Jim Jaarsma	Builder
Henry Kamphof	Capital Region Housing Corporation
Lee King	CMHC
Mike Littrell	Systems Analyst
Gene Miller	UDI Victoria
Herman Rebneris	Cottage Grove Builders
Doug Rhodes	Community Volunteer
Marie Savage	UDI Victoria
Roger Smeeth	Architect
Jeremy Tate	Capital Regional District
Al Tysick	Our Place (invited but unable to attend)
Glen Wilson	UDI Victoria (invited but unable to attend)

HOUSING MODELS

We believe models other than those presently being considered can work more cost effectively and with greater social value. We explore four models in brief on the following pages.

Slowly but surely, the group organized its thoughts around a new homeless housing delivery model that could manifest in any (or all) of four different housing types: a ‘nouvelle rooming house’—a contemporary twist on the once-popular *roomification* of older single-family homes; a larger configuration in the 30-80—unit range, probably more appropriate to a vacant site or existing building close to the downtown core; an upper-storey downtown revitalization strategy, designed to ‘soak up’ existing but unused built capacity; and a modular, portable, low-cost-per-unit-of-shelter concept.

Common to all of these types was a new partnership model with these features:

- The private sector (developers, builders, investors, and existing housing agencies looking for income opportunities) can make money and manage its risk;
- The various service agencies and providers were able to plug in service provision—on an include-if-necessary/remove-if-not basis—and to recast their financial and human resource allocations to do so efficiently;
- The senior government funders could justify redirecting some of their resources, and are even willing to top up shelter allowances to make the financial model work—judging it ‘cheap at twice the price’ and ‘a worthy experiment that could pay big dividends elsewhere in BC;’
- Neighbourhoods can be cautiously supportive of an approach that balances shared responsibility with sensitivity to local impacts – and could be willing to take a chance, particularly with proposals that appeal by fitting into existing patterns of land use and built form.
- A large advocacy, including political champions, coalesces around these initiatives.

1. Small Building Model

Concept

Private-sector-built Single Room Occupancies (SRO's) in the 10-12-unit range, could be designed to look like single-family homes and fit well into neighbourhood streetscapes. In fact, some presently exist in the Capital Regional District and offer excellent service to clients without the disruption of neighbourhood.

We propose units of +/-150 sq. ft. and self-contained (individual bath/kitchen/storage). No common resident areas would be included. These structures would include possible live-in management and a common office for use by support services.

We could respond to some aspects of the housing challenge at a fraction of the current \$250,000/unit cost of providing housing. (Number based on recent a CRD housing proposal.)

What populations might this help?

This could be a housing solution for the “benign homeless,” or the hard to house who require constant support to cope with their mental or physical limitations.

Can land be found for the project?

Suggestions have been put forward that government holds land that could be made available for development, or that development may be feasible on pure “open market” terms. Further, it was also suggested land exists in the hands of non-profits and faith-based organizations and that with additional help from the community those lands could be used for housing. Given the modest footprint of the small building model (1,000-2,000 sq ft) and the relatively small number of suites proposed for such a model (+/- 12), this may be an appealing option for smaller non-profits and faith-based property owners.

Does it have to be built new?

Renovation of existing home(s) is possible as an alternative.

Who needs to buy-in?

Modest financial partnership on a few initial “test models” would greatly help this idea. This might take the form of a modest “top-up” of the shelter allowance to ensure profitability and/or guarantee against vacancy, thus reducing risk.

With respectful and timely education and consultation, neighbours of proposed SRO housing are more likely to accept it in their neighbourhood.

How does existing policy impact the pro forma?

We are unsure of all of the policies and standards affecting SRO housing. We are concerned that there may be standards in place that preclude cost efficient solutions. We need to know more about these policies and standards, whether or not they need to change, and if they do need to be changed, how that can be done.

Can a business case be made for purpose-built SROs?

It’s an irony that the substantial profitability of existing rooming houses (all converted single-family houses) is the best demonstration of the business case. We believe several developers have created successful SRO models and further study of the reasons for their success should be undertaken.

Where do the operating costs come from?

With the SRO model, the units are self-supporting through the monthly housing allowance sent directly to landlords.

2. Big Building Model – Changing the Use of An Existing Larger Building

Concept

Is there a business case for building housing that offers a larger number of individual units in one building, and also includes space for providing support services, support staff onsite, as well as retail space to help support the site?

What populations might this help?

This could be a solution for the working poor, families, and single parents. There could be daycare on-site, job-training, and it might operate with several communal spaces for residents and the public.

Who pays for it?

The unanswered question is can a developer make money on a combination of rent on the units, rent from retailers, and rent from service provider agencies.

Who needs to buy-in?

Possibly council and planning staff may need to be convinced this mixed model might work.

It would require at least one retailer with vision.

Where do the operating costs come from?

Rents pay for the space. Non-profits running services from the space have the same access to funds they presently have with regard to operating costs.

3. Existing Building Model – Renovation of Existing Downtown Space

Concept

Can housing be built on the upper floors of presently underused buildings in the downtown core?

What populations might this help?

Each building presents the opportunity to house any of the homeless populations. Some might be dedicated SROs. Others, small units for families, or buildings with mixed upper and lower income populations.

Who pays for it?

A previous effort to get this model working in the community, received the support of both CMHC and BC Housing. According to the proponent, a pilot project can be produced within 18 months resulting in 500 units at a very effective cost.

Who needs to buy-in?

Possibly council and planning staff may need to be convinced this model might work.

Building owners who might be holding property for eventual full redevelopment might need some convincing to redevelop their property to include affordable housing.

How does existing policy impact the model?

The city has concerns about seismic safety in these older buildings.

4. Odd Building Model – Innovative Design – Is There a Place for it Here?

Concept

Around the world, housing solutions have been found in retooling items from our constructed environment for other uses. For instance, cargo containers have become modular housing. Other modular designs that push the envelope of what “home” means to us flower around the world. Can it be done in Victoria?

What populations might this help?

Great for single, working people in need of housing.

Where can the buildings be placed?

Modular or container housing can be set up “anywhere” assuming services can be brought to the site. No foundations need to be created because the housing sits above ground.

Who needs to buy-in?

Community and/or neighbourhood needs to see the benefit of this kind of housing and accept its esthetic.

Where do the operating costs come from?

These units would have to be self-sustaining.

Myths and Challenges

The Times-Colonist is regularly filled with news articles and letters, disturbing photos and opinion pieces concerning the homelessness problem. We believe Victoria is a community genuinely concerned about the implications as well as the social and economic impacts of homelessness.

For many, perhaps half or more of our homeless, lack of money is not the only or even the primary reason for their not having a home. Included in the myriad reasons for being homeless are issues that limit employment including, but not limited to, mental illness and substance addictions.

The greater Victoria area has some, if not enough, programs, senior government funding for housing, professional resources, a network of agencies and community-based resources. Nor is there a complete lack of community concern or sympathy. Putting aside the small minority who tend to blame the homeless for their own plight, many people in Victoria understand that various and often compound marginalizing conditions—health and addiction problems, mental health problems, lack of life skills, lack of education or training, employability challenges, abuse issues or some genuinely bad luck can render individuals homeless. Providing those supports needs to be a priority that goes hand-in-hand with housing.

Embracing the idea of ‘our homeless’ helped shift people away from the idea that some magical ‘they’ would solve the problem and toward the idea that the only productive response would come from innovative, home-grown solutions.

“Our homeless” expresses that we are all in this together, no “us and them”, and provides an opportunity to get past objectifying the people who merely exhibit the symptoms of wider societal problems.

In conversation we examined both myths and challenges with regard to the issues facing “our homeless.” What follows are some of the points raised.

Myth 1: The problem is too big to fix.

It is if we choose to believe it is. The reality is there are hundreds of people working on this issue. The key to progress lies in collaboration, determination and common direction.

Solving the problem means looking at it in pieces and addressing those pieces one at a time.

Myth 2: The homeless are hard to house.

We agree some populations suffering from mental health issues or addiction need specific supports. We also agree this does not apply to all homeless in the Victoria area. Many of our homeless could be housed without significant supports in place.

Myth 3: Government doesn't care.

We agree government acts like a corporation, looking for the best bang for the buck and responsible to its shareholders for that bang. We agree government does a bad job of explaining to the public why investing in housing for the homeless is a good investment. We also agree there are many people working with real caring on the issues facing our homeless. Government sets priorities based on whether or not the public cares

Myth 4: Government doesn't understand the financial benefits of housing our homeless rather than providing emergency services for them.

Government does understand this and several ministries are now working on a collaborative support model based specifically on the idea that providing services is cheaper than leaving people on the street. The "Housing Matters" strategy states, "the cost of homelessness to government health care, social and justice systems [is] \$30,000 to \$40,000 per person per year." Helping them, through supported housing, costs significantly less. Although the provincial government has as a policy prioritized housing the homeless, significant results of that policy are slow in coming.

Myth 5: Developers Don't Care

In Canada, changes to the tax laws about twenty-five years ago absolutely destroyed the incentive for the market sector to produce any rental housing, so an entire generation of market rental stock is missing from the city's accommodation 'life-cycle.' In today's market, there are further

aggravations: a relatively sudden spike doubled land and building costs in the past three years.

Developers welcome the opportunity to work and to add value to their communities. As for all business people, decisions are based on the best return on an investment. Developers are not self-financing, where a business case can be made for building, lenders will lend the money needed to build. If the business case can't be made to the lenders, no new social housing will be built.

Myth 6: NIMBYism is a HUGE problem.

If we stop telling the story of how hard it is to get something approved and start looking at what *has* been approved, we might prove NIMBYism is a myth. Providing the community with information and allowing input can empower the community to leave fear of the unknown behind and embrace solutions for our homeless that work in our neighbourhoods. Successful models now exist in Victoria and we believe this is repeatable.

Myth 7: Everyone Has the Right to a One-Bedroom Apartment.

In North America, there is an assumption of privacy, comfort, and individuality as rights rather than privilege. As a group we do not agree on whether or not this is truly an inalienable right.

One participant pointed out that we house university students in small residence rooms similar to SROs for four years at a time around the world.

Myth 8: The Public Doesn't Care.

We reject this idea. It is possible the public doesn't understand the myriad reasons individuals become homeless but whether the public wants to help with support services and housing or merely wants "the problem" fixed to relieve its own discomfort – it cares.

Creating sympathy and a charitable response is much different from creating empathy and understanding. We are interested in the latter. For any solution to be successful, the whole person and not just the "problem" of housing needs to be addressed. Finding ways to connect the public-at-large with our homeless and their issues is a project screaming for imagination and creativity.

Myth 9: Our Homeless Love Hanging Around Downtown

We feel comfortable saying that our homeless would rather be in homes. There is nothing to love about hanging out on the street all day, walking endlessly, having few choices about what you eat, wear or do. Our homeless would be pleased to be adequately housed anywhere on the island.

Challenge 1: The Public Would Invest In Affordable Housing Even If The Returns Seem Lower.

Government could create favourable tax incentives for investment in affordable or rental housing. If there were considerable tax advantages associated with such an investment vehicle it could draw funds that appear to be discounted but really are equal or better. However, the stability of the housing market is a key and unpredictable factor in this investment plan and the timelines could stretch from 8-15 years reducing the interest in investment considerably. We are unsure if an investment vehicle like this could be successfully created.

Challenge 2: We Could Create A New PR Campaign To Bring Government And Community Together For Our Homeless.

Idea #1: Have the media follow the story of several homeless people for a year to show what the costs related to care are over that time period. Show the comparable costs if those persons had been permanently housed and had proper supports in place. This idea is based on an article called, "Million-Dollar Murray," by Malcolm Gladwell, that appeared in "The New Yorker" in February 2006.

http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060213fa_fact

Idea#2: Have community leaders talk about people in their own lives who have needs to diminish the recurring "us and them" aspects of talking about our homeless. Recognize we all know someone with needs.