

City Council Meeting Monday September 12, 2016

**Non-Agenda Item Presentation-  
Rental Housing in Richmond for Homeless and At Risk Population**

My name is Deirdre Whalen and I live at 13631 Blundell Road in Richmond. I am speaking to you this evening as chair of the Richmond Poverty Response Committee (PRC). We are “a coalition of Richmond residents and agencies working together to reduce poverty and the effects of poverty with research, projects and education.” Agencies look to us to educate people about Richmond’s most vulnerable citizens, people experiencing poverty.

I want to bring the Mayor and Council up to date on some troubling information concerning some of Richmond’s most underserved residents, our homeless and at risk population. Local service providers have been quietly and diligently going about their work while the social safety net unravels around them. When people come into their offices, the first thing they usually need is safe and affordable housing. Once they have a roof over their heads, then clients and workers can sort out necessary referral services and resources. But the fact is, here in Richmond it is near impossible to find affordable rental accommodation.

Vacant rental suites are subject to bidding wars. People that need mental health or addictions supports get cut out of the running from the start. People on income assistance or persons with disabilities have a pitiful rent allowance that covers less than half of an average monthly rent in Richmond. And BC Housing’s rental registry for subsidized housing has a Richmond waiting list of over 600 families. There is no compunction for landlords with secondary suites to rent them out. Illegal boarding houses are rampant and unscrupulous landlords are preying on our newcomers and charging for a bed by the day. Vulnerable youth are exchanging sex for a place to crash.

Richmond’s four outreach workers know of about 130 homeless or at-risk individuals residing in Richmond. They see them regularly and try to hook them up to resources and give them food and clothing. Some homeless Richmondites are living in tents or in their cars. Some couch-surf from friend to friend. Many spend all day in the library or at community centres until they are kindly ushered out by city staff when they close. Some, desperately squat in vacant buildings. The men’s shelter is always full and there is no women’s shelter. There is no drop in centre. VCH mental health has downsized two managers that dealt with housing the mentally ill.

In the last two weeks, one agency has seen three homeless single parents and their families as well as five homeless individuals in wheelchairs. The single parents are the victims of demovictions. This is when buyers of rented homes give notice the house will be torn down and tenants have 60 days to find new accommodation. The individuals in wheelchairs can’t find accessible housing they can afford. Although our bylaws say all new apartments must be accessible, how can someone on a disability allowance afford them?

Some clients, regrettably, have been given the Greyhound treatment, which is a bus ticket to a Vancouver shelter or to subsidized housing elsewhere. Why do we have to send our residents to another city to find housing? The fact is we have a deplorable lack of accessible and affordable rental stock. This is Richmond’s problem and it requires a Richmond solution. Our Richmond support workers are at the breaking point and they need the City’s help now.

You may recall that back in December I came to you to speak to the Affordable Housing Strategy update. We tend to pat ourselves on the back for a few affordable housing openings. The 296

seniors units in two Kiwanis Towers? Full in the first month and the developer said they could fill another tower easily. The Storeys? 129 units opening in 2017 that would be full today with the numbers I just spoke about. All commendable projects, but at this rate we will never catch up with the dire need. In December the Richmond PRC asked the City to:

- Lobby the BC government to increase rent supplements and increase the income ceilings for these supplements.
- Prioritize and build purpose-built affordable rental properties that will stay rentals in perpetuity.
- Establish a local Housing Authority or similar entity.

The PRC still stands by these recommendations for action. But since then, in the last few months, things have changed drastically and more immediate measures are needed. At this point I want to tell you that city staff has been doing excellent work to date, within their scope. But perhaps their mandate needs to be expanded.

In closing, the PRC urges the City of Richmond to:

1. **House** these families and individuals in Richmond as soon as possible, the ones I spoke about. Chimo Community Services can give you their details.
2. Provide access to **Brighthouse Pavilion** for our homeless/at risk folks from the drop-in centre so they can touch bases with their worker, gather socially and share lunch through a mobile lunch program.
3. **Contract with a Housing Provider** to coordinate rental accommodation with local service providers and create a central registry of units by working with landlords, property management companies and developers. RainCity Housing [www.raincityhousing.org](http://www.raincityhousing.org) or MPA Society <http://www.mpa-society.org> are two non-profit societies that come to mind.
4. **Find Funding** for additional support/outreach workers so local agencies can provide timely and appropriate resources and referral services to our homeless/at risk population. The VCH funded program that supports families with parental mental illness is a good model to follow.

The Richmond PRC looks forward to talking with the City on these important requests and moving into action quickly. There is nothing new here, we are not asking for anything extraordinary. Other smaller cities-Maple Ridge and Abbotsford have already taken these measures. Surely Richmond can do better.

Thank you.