

Corporate Report

NO: R190

COUNCIL DATE: September 8,

2003

REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: Mayor & Council DATE: September 3,
2003

FROM: General Manager,
Planning and
Development FILE: 4815-20

SUBJECT: South Fraser Community Services - Gateway
Homeless Shelter

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Council receive this report as information in relation to its further consideration of a motion dealing with the conversion of the "cold/wet weather" homeless shelter beds in City Centre to "year-round" homeless shelter beds.

BACKGROUND

At the Regular Council Meeting of June 23, 2003, Council considered the following notice of motion:

"THAT Surrey Council work with Surrey MLAs to provide year-round Provincial funding for the South Fraser Community Services Gateway Homeless Shelter beds".

Council deferred further discussion on the matter pending a report from staff. This report responds to Council's request.

DISCUSSION

A recent homelessness survey by the Surrey Homelessness and Housing Task Force, a consortium of 32 agencies, groups and organizations in Surrey involved in the delivery of programs and services for Surrey residents, estimates that between 200 and 300 people are homeless on any given night in Surrey and many more are in need of low-cost affordable housing or are at risk of becoming homeless. The "Surrey Homelessness Plan" is currently being prepared by Surrey Social Futures and the Homelessness Task Force, with the assistance of John Talbot & Associates and is expected to be finalized this fall. The plan identifies the need for more year-round shelter beds in Surrey as the first step in helping homeless persons to meet their basic needs and, possibly, begin rebuilding their lives. Subsequent steps in this recovery process include access to services, stable income and affordable housing options that enable homeless persons to make a complete recovery from homelessness to independence. The recently opened shelter on King George Highway in Newton, known as Hyland House, is helping to address this need, but there remains a need for additional shelter beds in the City. In particular, there is a need for more "minimal barrier" shelter beds, as provided by the Gateway Shelter, for persons that may not qualify to access other shelters due to their ineligibility for income assistance, personal history and mental health or substance abuse issues.

Overview of the Front Room Drop-in Centre and Gateway Shelter

At the Homelessness and Housing Forum, held at Kwantlen University College in June 2003, a number of homeless

persons told their stories. They spoke about what it means to be homeless and how grateful they were to have access to the Front Room, a drop-in centre for homeless persons.

The Front Room Drop-in Centre, located at 10667 – 135A Street, is operated by South Fraser Community Services. The Front Room is primarily open in the evening hours from 5 p.m. to early morning. At the Front Room, homeless persons find social support, a warm evening meal, television, telephone services, laundry services and shower facilities. Homeless persons are able to rest at chairs and tables in a room that is typically shared by 50 to 70 other persons. Between November 1 and March 31 of each year, homeless persons may also access the Gateway cold/wet weather shelter beds, which are located on the second floor of the building at 10667 – 135A Street, directly above the Front Room.

The Gateway shelter provides a total of 36 beds. This consists of 28 beds for men located in two rooms and 8 beds for women in a separate room. All beds are bunk beds with mattresses. The beds remain in place year-round, but currently serve clients as funding becomes available over the winter months. Funding for the shelter beds is provided by the Province on a seasonal basis between November 1 and March 31. The site's zoning restricts the shelter use to a "temporary" shelter. It is used for cold/wet weather beds in keeping with the Province's funding period and in accordance with the restrictions of the City's Zoning By-law and Business License By-law.

It should be noted that the motion being considered by Council is focussed on seeking additional Provincial funding for an enhanced social program in the City of Surrey. In this regard, the motion focuses on maintaining accountability at the Provincial level of government for this proposed enhancement to the homeless shelter program. This is consistent with the constitutional mandate of the Provincial government in relation to the health and welfare of the citizens of B.C., including those living in Surrey.

Alternatives with Respect to Addressing the Motion

1. **Adopt the motion** which could result in the conversion to year-round shelter beds of the Gateway cold/wet weather shelter beds in City Centre;
2. **Defeat the motion**, which will maintain the current status of the Gateway cold/wet weather homeless shelter beds in City Centre; or
3. **Adopt an amended motion** that encourages the Province to provide funding for additional "year-round" shelter beds in Surrey outside of the City Centre.

Evaluation of Alternatives

The following provides a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the above listed alternatives. A full discussion of each of the issues is provided under Alternative 1 whereas an abridged version of any issue identified in Alternative 1 is included in the points under Alternatives 2 and 3.

Alternative 1: Adopt the Motion which could result in the conversion of the temporary Gateway Shelter beds to year-round beds

Advantages:

- South Fraser Community Services is prepared to make the shelter beds accessible on a year-round basis if Provincial funding becomes available and, subject to the City approving a change in City's by-laws to permit year-round use.
- The need for shelter beds in the City appears to exceed the number of beds available and, as such, many persons continue to sit in the Front Room overnight. Opening the Gateway beds on a year-round basis could

improve the quality of life for some homeless persons and would reduce the demand on the services at the Front Room. Gateway Shelter users include the working poor who find it difficult to get sufficient rest sitting at chairs overnight in a noisy crowded room. Adequate rest is a key contributor to health and well-being. A good, or better, night's sleep improves their ability to secure and maintain employment as well as seek out the necessary medical and social support services and programs they need to improve their lives.

- Year-round use of the existing shelter beds optimises the use of scarce community resources and enables the community to better rationalize additional funding from senior governments for other needed social service facilities.
- Providing access to year-round shelter beds reduces the visibility of the homeless in the community and contributes to improving the image and liveability of the City Centre. Some business owners in the area have noticed a direct correlation between the homeless shelter beds being open and the number of persons sleeping out of doors, in front of stores, on sidewalks and in vacant properties.
- Providing a number of services at one location enables South Fraser Community Services to better serve people in need as the programs and services are inter-related. It also allows them to provide more assistance to the needy with limited staff and physical resources than may otherwise be possible. Significant funding constraints are a reality for most social service agencies. In addition, South Fraser Community Services advises that it could not provide the services it does without the on-going support of many social service and community volunteer organizations, the faith community and businesses that provide the shelter and Front Room with food supplies, hot meals, clothing and volunteer support.

Disadvantages:

- Concerns have been voiced that there is an undesirable concentration of social services and programs in the City Centre and the conversion of the cold/wet weather shelter beds to year-round beds may be viewed as exacerbating this concentration of social services. South Fraser Community Services operates a number of programs from the same building in which the Gateway Shelter is located. These services include the Front Room Drop-in Centre, Free-Medical Clinic, Needle Exchange, Youth Reconnect Program and the HIV/AIDS Support and High-Protein Food Bank. South Fraser Community Services has recently purchased an adjacent building that will enable the society to provide more space and better access for the HIV/AIDS food bank and medical clinic as well as provide some affordable housing units on the second floor. The zoning of this adjacent site allows for retail, office and community service uses. The South Fraser Community Services intends to continue the use of the second floor apartments as a legal non-conforming use. An over-concentration of social services in the City Centre is viewed by some as having a negative impact on the image of the area. This negative image may interfere with the City's objectives in relation to encouraging new business and residential development and investment in this area of the City.
- If the shelter beds are converted to year-round use, concern has been voiced that homeless persons shift from resting at the Front Room to sleeping in the Gateway shelter beds upstairs and that the vacated seats in the Front Room will simply be filled with more homeless persons, increasing the overall capacity of and demand on the facility and the concentration of homeless people in Surrey City Centre.

It is difficult to determine the exact impact that the shelter would have if it were to be operated on a year-round basis. South Fraser Community Services has indicated that operating the shelter beds on a year-round basis is not expected to attract more homeless persons to the facility. Their greater concern is the potential impact of reductions in the Provincial Income Assistance program expected to come into effect in April 2004. A rise in the number of homeless at the Front Room and the Gateway shelter will more likely result from such changes to income assistance, not because the facility is operated permanently instead of seasonally.

South Fraser Community Services, along with other shelter providers and housing advocates, stress the

importance of finding long-term solutions to homelessness that include the provision of safe, low-cost housing options as well as social and medical support services. Without more permanent low-cost housing solutions, the shelter beds become a permanent form of housing and the system designed to help those in need will ultimately fail to meet those needs.

- The site is currently zoned for a range of commercial and community service uses including a *temporary homeless shelter*. Surrey's zoning by-law defines a *temporary homeless shelter* as "a building to be used to provide temporary sleeping accommodation at no cost for persons in need". This is further defined through the business licence by-law as "temporary sleeping accommodation at no cost for persons in need during the period between November 1 and March 31". If Provincial funding became available to operate the shelter on a year-round basis, a rezoning process would be required to permit a year-round shelter facility. The rezoning of the site in 1999 to allow the temporary shelter resulted in the residents and business owners in the immediate community raising a variety of concerns. Some concerns were specific to the proposed operation, such as concern about the concentration of social services provided by South Fraser Community Services at this site. Others related to the broader social issues experienced in the City Centre. It is likely that similar concerns will once again be raised, if a rezoning process is initiated.

More frequent communication between representatives of South Fraser Community Services and the community may help to alleviate some of the community concerns. South Fraser Community Services could be encouraged to establish a Community Advisory Committee for its facility as a mechanism to share information and resolve issues with the neighbourhood with respect to the existing and expanded services provided by the society. A similar model has been used by Options Services to Communities Society in addressing community issues related to the development and operation of Hyland House in Newton. Such an Advisory Committee could meet on a regular basis to discuss issues and could include, among others, representatives from the Whalley Business Improvement Association, Whalley Community Association, Surrey RCMP, other residents and social service groups.

Alternative 2: Defeat the Motion, which will in effect maintain the status quo for the Gateway cold/wet weather homeless shelter beds

Advantages:

- Concerns about a further concentration of social services in the City Centre in general and at the South Fraser Community Services facility, in particular, will be avoided. As noted in Alternative 1, South Fraser Community Services already operates a number of programs from the same building in which the Gateway Shelter is located.
- There will be no incentive for an increased population of homeless persons at the facility and in the surrounding neighbourhood. As described in Alternative 1, providing year-round access to the shelter beds would in effect increase the overall capacity of the facility, as the seats in the Front Room that have been vacated by homeless persons using the beds may simply be occupied by more homeless persons. However, as previously noted, the full impact is difficult to ascertain.
- A potentially contentious rezoning process will be avoided.

Disadvantages:

- The existing shelter beds at the Gateway Shelter will remain unused for seven months out of the year and homeless persons will not be afforded the opportunity to marginally improve the quality of life they experience by having a more comfortable place to sleep.
- The number of homeless persons in Surrey exceeds the number of shelter beds available in the community. This problem will not be reduced in scale.
- Problems in the City Centre associated with homeless people sleeping outdoors will remain, particularly during the warm weather months.

Alternative 3: Adopt an amended motion that encourages the Province to provide funding for additional "year-round" shelter beds in accessible locations in Surrey outside of the City Centre

Advantages:

- The amended motion recognizes the need to improve the quality of life for homeless persons through the provision of more year-round shelter beds and responds to community concerns about an apparent over concentration of social services and special needs housing in the City Centre that have impacts on the continued growth and development of the City Centre area.

It should be noted that South Fraser Community Services, along with other shelter providers and housing advocates, stress the importance of finding long term solutions to homelessness that include the provision of safe, low-cost housing options as well as social and medical support services. Without more permanent low-cost housing solutions, the shelter beds become a permanent form of housing and the system designed to help those in need will ultimately fail to meet those needs.

Disadvantages:

- The Gateway shelter beds remain in use for only five months a year, a situation that does not take full advantage of the existing investment in these beds.
- Securing Provincial funding and finding a location for and constructing new shelter beds will require a longer period of time and a larger investment than would be required for the conversion of the exiting beds to year-round use.
- Providing a number of services at one location enables South Fraser Community Services to better serve people in need as the programs and services are inter related. It also allows them to provide more help with limited staff and physical resources than would be possible if the services were delivered from separate locations. Funding constraints are a reality for most social service agencies. In addition, South Fraser Community Services advises that it could not provide the services it does without the on-going support of many social service and community volunteer organizations, the faith community and businesses that provide the shelter and Front Room with food supplies, hot meals, clothing and volunteer support.

SUMMARY

Council approved, in 1999, the Gateway cold/wet weather shelter at 10667-135A Street to operate on an annual basis during the winter months (November to March). Council has before it for consideration, a notice of motion that, if adopted, could lead to the conversion of these shelter beds to "year-round" use. This report responds to Council's request for a report on the motion and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of three alternatives available to Council in relation to addressing the subject motion.

Murray Dinwoodie
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