

**Input from Richmond Poverty Response Committee on  
The Official Community Plan Review  
November 24, 2010**

The City of Richmond has requested citizens' input to the update of the Official Community Plan (OCP). The Richmond Poverty Response Committee comprises volunteers representing the faith community, community organizations, local social services, and members of the public who wish to help alleviate the effects of poverty in Richmond. We are pleased that the City has chosen to update the OCP with a focus on sustainability, because many recommendations and considerations for sustainability will also assist lower income Richmond residents to meet their basic needs, remove barriers, and facilitate social connectedness.

Of all jurisdictions in British Columbia, Richmond has the second highest rates of general poverty and of child poverty.<sup>1</sup> Its groups most at risk of poverty include families with children, immigrant newcomers, women, seniors, and people with physical or mental disabilities. Their poverty affects their health and well-being by restricting access to affordable housing, safe neighbourhoods with public amenities, transit, and social activity. These adverse effects can be mitigated by land-use plans and community planning that address the needs of lower-income residents through sustainable strategies for affordable housing, community wellness, and social services.

In the 2000 report *Poverty in Richmond: a Sense of Belonging*, focus groups of people with low income indicated that living in poverty has two major impacts: an overwhelming exclusion from life in the community, and a limiting of choice in the decisions they had to make. Reported most frequently were constant juggling between basic expenses and emergency expenses and cutting back on social contact as a way to make ends meet. The focus groups said that reducing the costs of housing and increased access to transportation would make their life easier.

The Official Community Plan 2041 Update circulated by City Council reflects the idea that liveability of neighbourhoods is enhanced through healthy built environments.<sup>2</sup> This idea has also been advanced on behalf of low-income residents by the BC Healthy Living Alliance. Their recent report recommends changes to the built environment such as increasing housing density, more mixed land-use patterns, improving connectivity between urban streets for easier and shorter walks between locations, and better public transit. Similarly, the Richmond Wellness Strategy points out that the physical environment and land-use can affect physical well-being by providing healthy choices for transportation (walking, cycling, and transit) and can help residents know their neighbours and feel part of their community.<sup>3</sup> It is the view of Richmond Poverty Response Committee that creating neighbourhood centres that allow for a range of housing sensitive to a range of income

---

<sup>1</sup> Local-Level Data On Income and Poverty for BC from 2006 Census, Provincial Health Services Authority, Health Officers' Council of BC and Vancouver Coastal Health October 2008

<sup>2</sup> Health Inequities in British Columbia A Discussion Paper, BC Healthy Living Alliance, November 2008

<sup>3</sup> Richmond Community Wellness Strategy, Living Well in Richmond 2010 - 2015

needs, provides increased access to affordable transportation alternatives and fosters social connectedness will enhance the quality of life of low income residents.

### **Affordable Housing**

The OCP document has identified a need for 41,000 housing units to accommodate population growth forecasts up to 2041. It recognizes the importance of planning to ensure that Richmond will have adequate and affordable housing for the full range of incomes and needs. It also points out the opportunity to add more housing choices within neighbourhood centres and along transit routes, providing for a diversity of housing types to suit all ages, incomes, and family composition.

When developing the Regional Growth Strategy and examining the issues of affordable housing, the Metro Vancouver Board estimated the housing demand, for various incomes, of each Metro Vancouver community over the next ten years. It projected that Richmond will need 1,800 units of low income housing (which includes subsidized housing) and 2,200 units of moderate income housing.<sup>4</sup> To meet this demand, an average of 400 units of low/moderate income housing needs to be added each year. However, according to a recent progress report on the city's Affordable Housing Strategy, just 645 such units have been secured over the last three years. At that rate, it would appear, there will be a significant shortfall to meet the affordable housing needs of Richmond residents.

Understanding and meeting the challenge of providing affordable housing is a complex issue. A recent report from the Conference Board of Canada<sup>5</sup> stated that 67% of Metro Vancouver households struggle with the high cost of housing, making Metro Vancouver 22<sup>nd</sup> on a list of 25 least affordable communities. Using CMHC data, the report concluded that a lack of affordable housing supply left one in five Canadian households (3 million) spending too much on housing. It also pointed out that when a household over spends on housing it threatens the health of individuals who cannot also afford nutritious food, other healthy pursuits like sports and recreation, or education that could lift them out of poverty. High costs have led developers to build homes predominantly for upper and middle incomes. It suggests that governments, the private sector, and the non-profit housing sector should combine their efforts to increase the supply of affordable housing. Each sector has its unique expertise – governments have planning and development-approval powers to encourage private-sector developers to include affordable units in their developments. Private-sector developers are best at building such units because of their ability to find ways of reducing construction costs, and the non-profit sector can operate social housing developments and advocate for addressing poverty issues.

A report<sup>6</sup> prepared by Will Dunning for the Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada put a price tag on eliminating the affordability gap. Using CMHC data from 2006, it determined that almost 4 million people, including 750,000 children, were living in accommodation that was in a state of disrepair, or was unsuitable for the number of people living there, or cost more than 30% of the household's pre-tax income. The report calculated that it would cost \$4.7 billion a year (\$1.10 per

---

<sup>4</sup> Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping Our Future. Metro Vancouver Board, November 10, 2010, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Building from the Ground Up: Enhancing Affordable Housing in Canada, Conference Board of Canada, March 2010

<sup>6</sup> Dimensions of Core Housing Needs in Canada, Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada, November 2009

day for every Canadian household) to ensure that core housing needs were met for the 1.5 million households in need. It also identified British Columbia as one of four provinces where the incidence of core housing is greatest.

These findings are supported by other research. A background report prepared in January, 2007 for the development of the Richmond affordable housing strategy noted that based on CMHC data for 2001 16 % of households were in core housing need.<sup>7</sup> A CMHC report of 2009 placed 18% of Metro Vancouver households in this category.

Two other reports, one by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities<sup>8</sup> and the other by the Canadian Senate<sup>9</sup> raised related concerns about housing in Canada. The Federation noted increases in the wait time for social housing and in the number of shelter beds. The Senate report on poverty stated that governments must commit to a strategy of core poverty eradication which would entail designing all housing and income support programs to “lift Canadians out of poverty rather than make living within poverty more manageable.” It urged the development of a national housing strategy.

In Richmond, wait lists for subsidized housing are still high and shelter beds have not increased. In 2007, BC Housing provided the following information to Richmond Poverty Response Committee. On their wait list at the time were 692 applications from Richmond, including 417 families, 185 seniors, and 90 people with special needs. Between 2000 and 2007, only 74 units of non-market housing were built in Richmond. The homeless count of 2008 showed 56 homeless people in Richmond, up 60% from the 2005. The Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness<sup>10</sup> provided a snapshot of who make up the homeless population in Richmond. They range widely in age range: six accompanied children under 19 years of age, one unaccompanied child under the age of 19, one youth aged 19 – 24, 34 aged 25 – 54 and 7 over 55 years of age. Twelve were women and 32 were men. Half reported having multiple health conditions. Today, in Richmond there is one 10-bed shelter for men only and one temporary shelter that is open from November to March.

It is clear from the information above that providing affordable housing is a complex proposition. By experience it is known that solutions cannot be left to market forces and that solutions require the involvement of the many sectors – developers, government, and non-profit organizations and community working together. Richmond City is to be commended for adopting an affordable housing strategy that provides a framework for finding solutions for the provision of affordable housing including secondary suites, preserving and maintaining rental stock as well as low-end market home ownership. The OCP envisions adding more housing choice within neighbourhood centers to suit a range of ages, incomes, and family composition which may allow for more proactive implementation of the affordable housing strategy. In addition, as the affordability gap

---

<sup>7</sup> City of Richmond Affordable Housing Strategy: Background Indicators and Key Measures and Indicators. McClanaghan and Associates, January, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Mending Canada’s Frayed Social Safety Net: the role of municipal governments, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, March, 2010

<sup>9</sup> In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness, Canadian Senate Report tabled December, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Homeless in Metro Vancouver: A Comparative Profile, Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, March 2010

widens to include more people, and people with higher incomes, it is important to also plan for housing needs of the most vulnerable, those who are living in inadequate and unsafe housing and people who are hard to house due to medical and behavioural problems. The homelessness and those at risk of homelessness are no longer the stereotypical single adult male; it includes families and women and seniors.

### **Affordable Housing Recommendations:**

1. Give priority to non-market and low-end market rental units within neighbourhood centres, near transit transfer points, services, and amenities.
2. Increase the city's efforts to implement Policy Areas 5 and 6 of the affordable housing strategy. Area 5 focuses on building capacity through targeted strategies as well as through partnerships brokered in the community and Area 6 focuses on advocacy aimed at improving the policy framework and funding to resources available for responding to local housing needs. Both are important tools for ensuring the development of non-market and low-end market rental units.
3. Promote the redevelopment of existing social housing. Some social housing in Richmond was built 30-40 years ago and needs upgrading or maintenance. Many of these projects may be redeveloped with increased density. The BC Housing Service Plan for 2008-2011 includes strategies to work with the private and non-profit sectors to redevelop their lands into mixed-income communities in which subsidized housing is more fully integrated. The Co-operative Federation of Canada has been also exploring ways through its 2020 Vision discussion to redevelop co-op lands (already by definition mixed-income communities) to increase density and to better serve the needs of their residents. Opportunities will undoubtedly exist where the City of Richmond could provide support and leadership in promoting redevelopment projects that build on existing resources.
4. Help the homeless. While Richmond's affordable housing strategy addresses three broad areas of affordable housing (affordable ownership, affordable rental and subsidized rental), it glaringly neglects to mention the homeless and supportive housing. Indeed, while the city wholeheartedly endorses the recommendations of the 2002 homelessness report "It's My City Too", little effort has been made to implement the recommendations. The affordable housing strategy needs to be broadened to include supportive housing and homelessness initiatives and the OCP should acknowledge our responsibility to provide accommodation to those on the margins of our society.

### **Food Security**

Food security means having access to enough food for an active and healthy life without having to resort to emergency food assistance, begging, stealing, or scavenging for food. Professor David Holben, a Canada-U.S. Fulbright Scholar, who spent 2006-2007 exploring the food security, health status, social capital, and characteristics of emergency food program users in the Lower Mainland, observed that a significant number of Richmond residents do not have daily access to affordable and nutritious food. The Food Security

Task Force of the Richmond Poverty Response Committee completed a Richmond Food System Assessment<sup>11</sup> in 2006 identified specific challenges to food security for people of low income: insufficient community gardens (only one was accessible by public transit), a lack of groceries and fresh produce in East Richmond, and the ad-hoc nature of food programs in schools (which can be an effective way to provide nutritious food to children and youth). A 2010 UBC student project found that Richmond is only eight percent self-sufficient in vegetable production.

Many factors contribute to the lack of food security. The sagging economy has increased unemployment and swelled the numbers of those accessing social assistance. Yet despite rising costs for food and rental housing, social assistance rates and the minimum wage have remained static.<sup>12</sup> Hunger Count 2009<sup>13</sup> showed 89,886 individuals were supported by food banks in BC in March 2009, a 15 percent increase from March 2008. The Richmond Food Bank assists 480 households in an average week—more than 1,200 people, 30 percent of whom are children—a 55 percent increase over the previous year.

Richmond's Official Community Plan 2041 Update recognizes that the viability and use of agricultural land for food production is a challenge facing Richmond now and in the future and refers to food as a basic survival service in the context of a healthy ecosystem and environment. But it fails to address food security as an immediate requirement for healthy individuals and a healthy community. To achieve a healthy and complete community Metro 2040 Shaping our Future Draft Regional Growth recommends supporting urban food production and distribution by encouraging roof-top gardens, green roofs, and community gardens on private and municipally owned lands, and by encouraging the location of healthy food retailers and farmers' markets near housing and transit services. Although Richmond's Parks and Recreation Department is actively supporting the development of community garden sites—where people of low income will be able to have access to healthy, affordable food – there is currently a three-year wait list for garden plots.

The following recommendations are made to support and reinforce current City initiatives:

#### **Food Security Recommendations**

1. Make city-owned agricultural land available for local food production.
2. Show land designations accurately on City maps, to help preserve agricultural land for current and future food production.
3. Include healthy food outlets as components in the OCP Update.
4. Decrease impediments to food-related enterprises like farmers' markets and green grocers, and encourage them to locate within neighbourhood centres by providing incentives and staff coordination time.

---

<sup>11</sup> Richmond Food System Assessment: Environmental Scan and Action Plan, Richmond Food Security Task Force, September 2006

<sup>12</sup> Cost of Eating in BC 2009: Low income British Columbians can't afford healthy food, Dieticians of Canada, BC Region and Community Nutritionists Council of BC, December 2009

<sup>13</sup> Hunger Count 2009, Food Banks Canada, November 2009

5. Provide community gardens in better proportion to the City's population, improving the current ratio of one garden plot for every 900 people in Richmond to down to at least one plot per 500 people, including plots in the City Center, where population growth is greatest.
6. Acknowledge the links between income, housing, and food security, and consider the affordable housing recommendations, above, in the context of food security.

## **Transportation**

Anticipating continuous population growth within Richmond's limited land base, The Official Community Plan 2041 Update has identified access to public transit and alternative modes of transport such as bicycling and walking as important priorities to ensure that citizens' quality of life is not diminished by increased traffic congestion and loss of access to amenities such as parks, recreation, libraries, etc.

This access is especially crucial to low-income individuals and families. They need convenient transit and safe walkways that are well connected to schools, employment, recreation, medical care, and government services. Many will also benefit from a comprehensive network of on-street cycling routes that connect to local destinations and regional bike routes, as well as other supports that encourage the use of bicycles, such as the co-op program used during the Olympics, safe bike lanes, and storage.

The Canadian Federation of Municipalities<sup>14</sup> concluded from an analysis of commuters' income data that lower-income households are disproportionately dependent on transit for their commuting needs. A good transit system that provides mobility to persons with low income can help increase their prospects for employment and for social interaction. Richmond should explore options, investigated by some other Canadian cities, for keeping transit costs affordable, such as by providing transit subsidies or discounts in the form of community passes.<sup>15</sup>

## **Transportation Recommendations**

1. Through mixed-use zoning in the centre of each neighbourhood, ensure that most residents are within a ten-minute walk of jobs, schools, services, amenities, and parks. Maintain and light walkways, and ensure that crosswalks are safe for crossing.
2. Plan to provide appropriate levels of transit between neighbourhood centres as well as to external destinations, and encourage more bikes on transit, to give residents a workable alternative to car ownership.

---

<sup>14</sup> Mending Canada's Frayed Social Safety Net: Role of Municipal Governments, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, March 2010

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance the description of the Municipal Fee Assistance Program in Kingston, Ontario, at <http://www.cityofkingston.ca/residents/transportation/transit/fee-assistance/>

3. Increase accessibility and use of transit by providing transit fare subsidies for low-income residents.
4. Ensure the safety of new and existing on-street cycle routes; develop an expanded comprehensive network for cyclists, in part by using municipal rights-of-way and parking lanes; encourage implementation of a “co-op bike” program; increase the number of secure bike storage lockers at strategic points.

### **Social Inclusion**

As mentioned in the introduction, our poverty report of 2000 recorded that low-income residents felt excluded from full participation in community life and had few choices in the decisions they faced. In considering land use and planning, it is worthwhile to look at how the physically built environment can facilitate social inclusion.

In a backgrounder completed for a community development project by the Laidlaw Foundation<sup>16</sup> social inclusion is described as extending beyond bringing “outsiders in”. It is about closing physical, social and economic distances separating people, rather than eliminating barriers between “us” and “them.” In other words, social inclusion and preventing social exclusion are not synonymous. Preventing social exclusion focuses on getting individuals to change their attitudes, while promoting social inclusion rallies a whole community to work together. Looking at social inclusion as a process as well as an outcome, the report concludes that local governments can do much to lessen aspects of social and physical distance among people, and that citizens have great confidence in their local government’s ability to understand and respond to the social needs of the community. But at the same time a subtle form of exclusion can arise in the political process itself, when support programs and services are developed by upper- and middle-income portion of the population, because vulnerable members of the community are alienated from the development of policies and programs that affect their lives.

Social inclusion is not formally addressed in the regional growth strategy or the Richmond OCP update. However both documents provide tools for addressing social inclusion. In the discussion of developing complete communities, the regional growth strategy speaks to the importance of ensuring an appropriate mix of housing options to respond to diverse and changing needs of the community. Strategy 4.2 of the Regional Growth Strategy specifically recommends that municipalities provide public spaces that offer increased social interaction and community engagement. The OCP Update adopts this recommendation to an extent, by advocating neighbourhood centres with a diversity of housing types to suit all ages, incomes, and family types. Additionally, the Richmond Wellness Strategy points out wellness cannot be achieved by activity alone and must be linked with residents having a sense of connectedness to their community and a commitment to wellness and well-being.

### **Inclusion Recommendations:**

1. Redouble efforts to support the participation of low-income residents by removing financial barriers to city programs and by providing opportunities for low-income residents to give back to their community through volunteerism by providing

---

<sup>16</sup> Poverty, Inequality and Social Inclusion, Perspectives on Social Inclusion, Laidlaw Foundation, December, 2002.

reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses (including transportation and childminding costs).

2. Ensure that public consultations are inclusive by continuing to facilitate the participation of low-income residents. The recent use of study circles and on-line discussions are recent City initiatives that are to be encouraged as examples of ways to include all residents in the policies and programs that affect their lives.
3. While developing neighbourhood centres, examine ways to decrease the physical and social distances separating people through inclusion of mixed affordable housing options and creation of public spaces that facilitate engagement and connectedness within these hubs.