



## **Addressing homelessness in Saanich**

### **Position Paper, Gorge-Tillicum Community Association**

**April 2016**

This Position Paper presents the views of the GTCA Board of Directors, to be communicated to our community, other Community Associations in Saanich and to the Saanich Mayor and Council. It draws heavily upon the attached discussion paper prepared by Eko Goldberg, but provides local context and the Board's view.

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The GTCA has been concerned about homelessness in our community and more generally in Saanich and the Capital Region for some years. This fear was brought into sharp focus over the summer and fall of 2015 by numerous reports of campers in Cuthbert Holmes Park, and worries about this situation expressed by local residents. These concerns ranged from the wellbeing of the campers themselves to their interactions with other park users, issues of hygiene and sanitation and drug paraphernalia, and the campers' impact on environmentally sensitive areas of the park.

While we recognise these are real problems, and that it is reasonable to expect that issues of sanitation, public safety, environmental damage and illegal activity will be appropriately addressed, this Position Paper seeks to address the deeper underlying issues that contribute to homelessness in Saanich and the surrounding area.

Our concerns led to a series of meetings with local residents, Saanich police and Parks staff and other affected community organizations and individuals. We learned that there are campers in many Saanich parks – the police estimated about a dozen known campers in Cuthbert Holmes and Gorge Parks at the time, as well as campers in Mt. Doug Park, Mt. Tolmie Park, on beaches from Cadboro Bay to Cordova Bay, along the Galloping Goose and Lochside trails, around the Cedar Hill Golf Course/Rec. Centre, the land bordered by Blanshard St., Saanich Rd and Vernon Ave, at the McKenzie and Highway 17 overpass, highway underpasses, the southwest and northeast corners of TCH and McKenzie, and at a number of businesses, sheltering under the outside awnings and eaves. In his report, Eko Goldberg also references anecdotal reports of people living in Cadboro-Gyro Park, Panama Flats and the forested area adjacent to Colquitz Creek.

In addition to the more obvious homeless people who are camping or in shelters, there are many 'hidden homeless' in Saanich, as elsewhere in the CRD; people who are sheltering informally with family or friends or living in cars, garages and sheds.

We also learned that the police are doing the best they can, with limited resources, to handle the situation in a way that is helpful to the campers while responding to community concerns, and in the light of recent court rulings about the right of people who are homeless to shelter themselves in public parks. We appreciate and support their humane approach.

Clearly, homelessness is a significant but largely hidden problem in our community and across Saanich; the discussion paper by Eko Goldberg provides an excellent summary of what we do know about the numbers, the factors that lead to homelessness and the extent of the (inadequate) response thus far, as well as a number of recommendations for action. Here we lay out our position.

1. Housing is a right under Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
2. Few people actually wish to be homeless; the vast majority become homeless for a variety of reasons, including poverty, unemployment or low-waged part-time employment, mental health, disability and addiction issues. Frequently, it is a combination of several of these issues (see the report by Eko Goldberg).
3. Those who are homeless, for whatever reason, are people who deserve our compassion and support; life is already tough, we should not make it tougher.
4. As the largest municipality in the CRD, we believe Saanich has a responsibility to support people who are homeless in our community; a basic principle should be 'we look after our own'.
5. In fact we should 'walk our own talk' as laid out in the Saanich Strategic Plan, which includes as part of its Vision of Social Well-Being that "Housing, public services and amenities are affordable, accessible and inclusive" and sets a number of targets (see the report by Eko Goldberg).
6. We support the recommendations in Eko Goldberg's report, which are:
  - Ensure a coordinated, comprehensive community response to homelessness
  - Increase the supply of safe, decent, affordable, permanent housing, including supported housing
  - Prevent homelessness and assist people at risk of homelessness
  - Support people while they are experiencing homelessness
  - Build public and political support to end homelessness
7. Specifically, we recommend:
  - Creation of a position titled "Senior Planner: Homelessness, Affordable Housing, and Poverty Reduction" that would be a Saanich employee under the Planning department. This person will conduct environmental scans, do gap analysis and generally be responsible for coordinating the action plan's development and implementation. This person would also have meaningful involvement in community area plans with respect to affordable housing (to correct current under-supply of affordable housing and over-supply of high-end homes for private ownership).
  - Funding an outreach/social inclusion worker to engage with people who are homeless in Saanich (either directly as a Saanich employee under Planning, or contracted through a not-for-profit agency) to build relationships, get input on priorities, and provide feedback on diverse needs within Saanich.
  - Establishment of a Community Task Force on homelessness and housing affordability, with a mandate to develop and oversee a strategy to address this issue.
8. We recognise that these recommendations require expenditure by Saanich Council, which as tax-payers we support. We believe this is a modest expenditure in a large and wealthy community such as Saanich, and is fully justified. As US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked a century ago, "taxes are the price we pay for a civilised society".
9. We call on other Community Associations, community organisations, faith communities and others in Saanich to review the report by Eko Goldberg and support this position paper.