

Report

Date October 7, 2025
Subject North Cowichan Draft SAFER Plan

File:

PURPOSE

To provide Mayor and Council with an overview of the draft SAFER Plan and information for how North Cowichan can respond to homelessness, mental health, and addictions.

BACKGROUND

In 2018, the issues of homelessness, mental health, and addictions became visible and prominent in the Cowichan region, especially in the area known as “the corridor” - the section of the Trans Canada Highway between Beverly Street and the Silver Bridge. Concerned about public disorder and public safety, North Cowichan and the City of Duncan hired a consultant to develop a SAFER Community Plan (the “Plan”). The Plan (Appendix A) was adopted by North Cowichan Council on July 17, 2019 and included a recommendation that the two local governments collaborate and coordinate with the RCMP detachment (“SAFER Working Group”).

In 2022, a review of the Plan was undertaken, and on May 4 of that year Council received a report recommending updates to the Plan. These recommended updates included closing of the Corridor Safety Office and enhanced support for a peer-based sharps pick-up program (Appendix B).

In 2024, at a joint meeting of the North Cowichan and Duncan Councils, direction was given to review and revise the original Plan.

DISCUSSION

The number of people without shelter in the Cowichan region has been steadily increasing since the Plan was adopted in 2019. This trend is not unique to the Cowichan region and reflects accelerating growth in unsheltered homelessness and a proliferation of encampments in cities across Canada.

Table 1. Year-Over-Year Changes in Enumeration across 56 Canadian communities

PiT Count Year Comparison	Change in unsheltered	Change in sheltered	Change in transitionally housed	Change in total enumeration
From 2018 to 2020-22	+95%	+3%	-22%	+11%
From 2020-22 to 2024	+107%	+71%	+62%	+79%

Source – *Everyone Counts 2024* – Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. (July 2025)

The social issue of homelessness and concerns about public safety are not contained to one jurisdiction and, as such, collaboration between the City of Duncan, Cowichan Tribes, and North Cowichan will be an essential part of an effective response. To that end, the first component of the North Cowichan

response focuses on actions undertaken in partnership with those entities.

**DRAFT SAFER PLAN – HIGH LEVEL PRINCIPLES
(NORTH COWICHAN, DUNCAN, and COWICHAN TRIBES)**

1. **SAFER Working Group – City of Duncan, Cowichan Tribes and North Cowichan Bylaw + RCMP**
That the SAFER Working Group established in 2019 continue to meet monthly and that the terms of reference be revised to allow for a range of community partners to attend on an invitation basis.

The SAFER group is an operational group made up of law enforcement staff from the various entities including the RCMP and the Bylaw functions of the local governments and First Nations. The SAFER meetings allow staff to coordinate joint patrols, share updates, and continue to harmonize their Bylaws and enforcement activity to lessen the impact on the community of public disorder and nuisance activities.

2. **Private security patrols in affected areas**
That the funding provided by the City of Duncan, Island Health, and the North Cowichan to the private security firm (Footprints) to patrol the corridor area continue.

The deployment of this resource should be flexible so that it can be redeployed in support of recommendations arising from the SAFER Working Group.

3. **Community Policing contributes to public safety**
That the Community Policing function serving the Cowichan region enhance the focus on public safety and align their activities with the recommendations of the SAFER working group.

The participation of Cowichan Tribes has been hindered by staff turnover in key roles, and as such staff anticipate working with the new CAO at Cowichan Tribes to incorporate their input. Going forward, they will be key partners in this work, and as a result the Plan is preliminary.

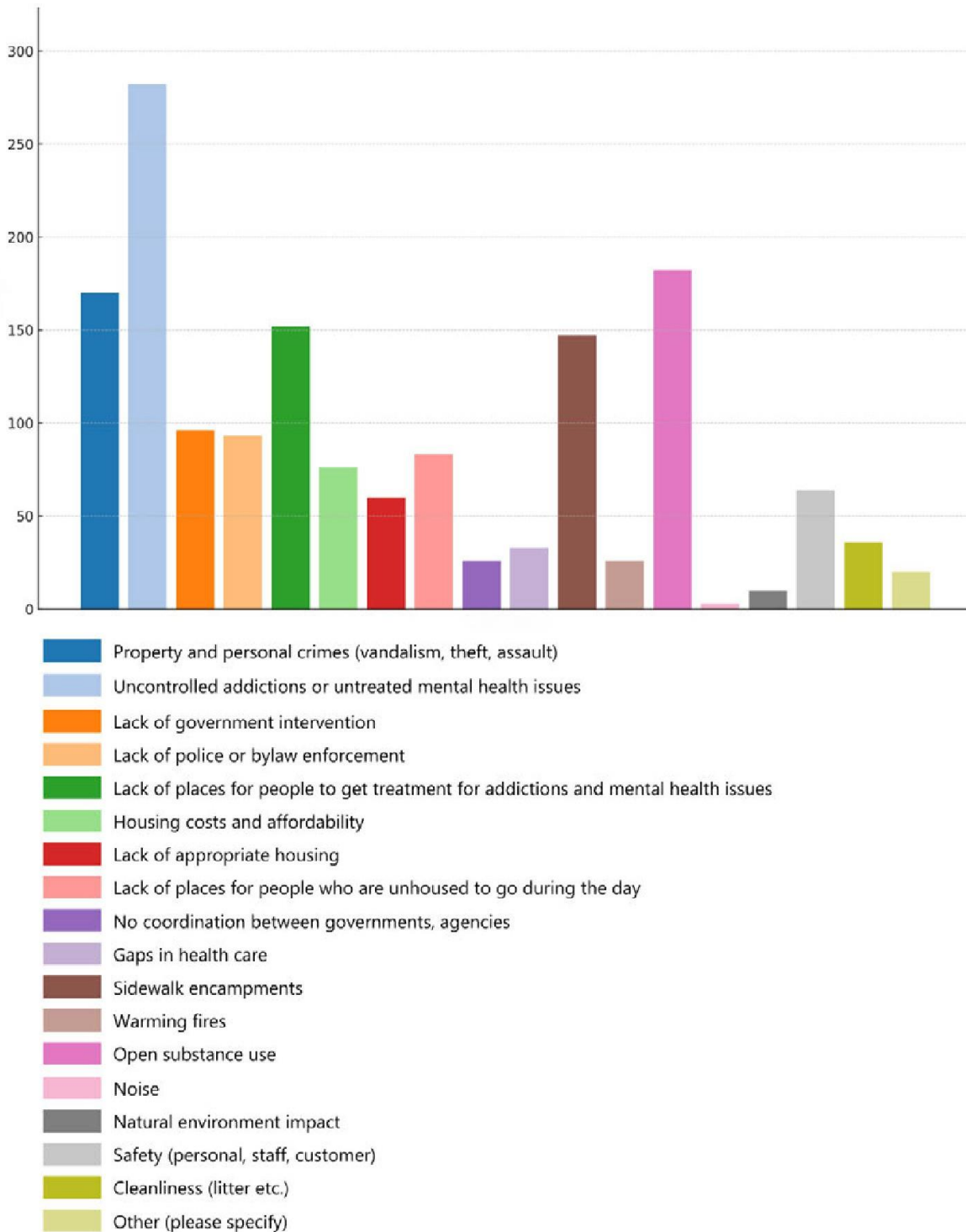
4. **Harmonize Bylaws across jurisdictions**
That all the participating jurisdictions further the harmonization of their Bylaws so that there is consistency in the rules and the application of those rules across the three jurisdictions.

NORTH COWICHAN SPECIFIC ACTIONS

Arising from the direction to review the 2019 Plan, a public engagement process was initiated in September 2023 that included a community forum (June 20, 2024) for those residents and businesses most impacted by this issue, along with an online survey for the broader community. The results were compiled in a "What we Heard": Report (Appendix B).

Survey respondents answered the question: "What, in your opinion, do you feel are the main problems in the corridor area?". A total of 398 people responded to the survey and 60 people attended the community forum.

Question 2: "What, in your opinion, do you feel are the main problems in the corridor area?"



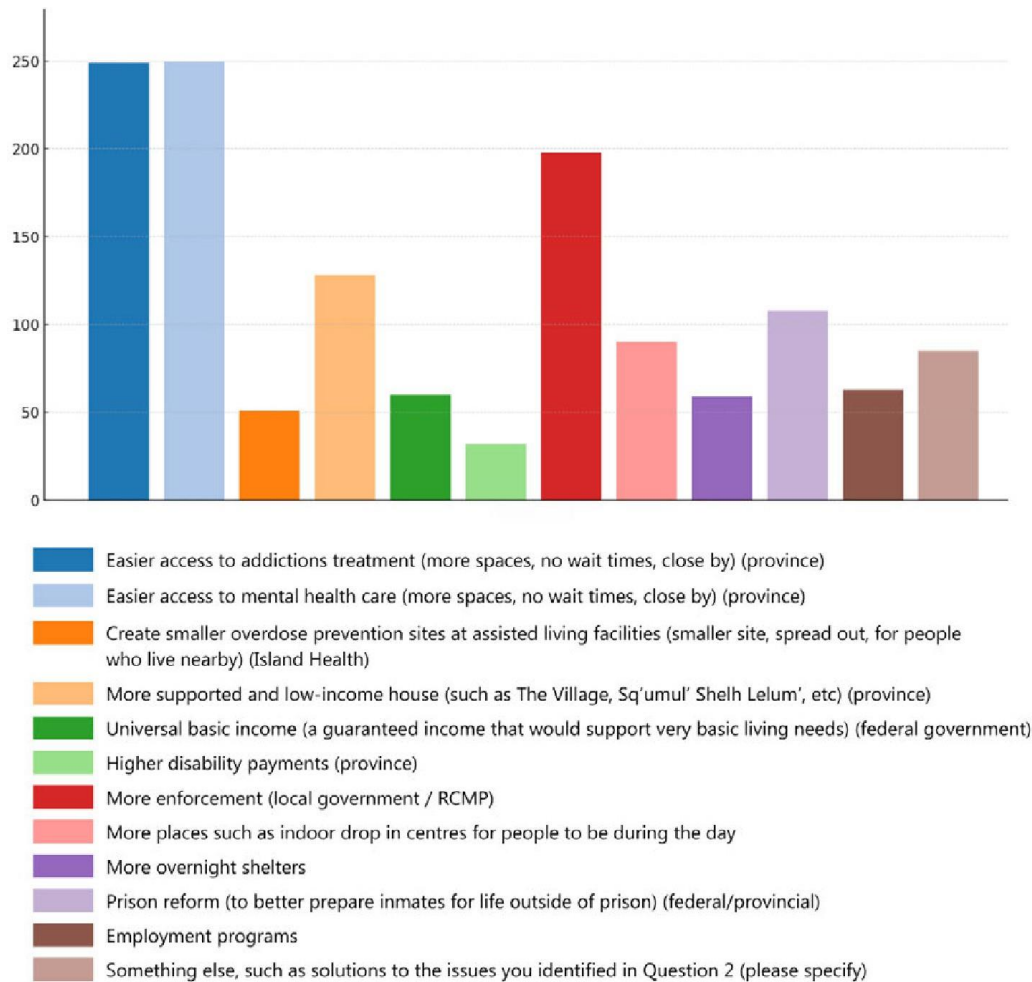
The top four issues identified were:

- Uncontrolled addictions or untreated mental health issues (282)
- Open substance use (182)
- Property and personal crimes (172)
- Sidewalk encampments (170)

A total of 20 people chose 'Other' and they were invited to specify. These responses are summarized into seven general themes:

- General disorder and vagrancy
- Drug use and paraphernalia
- Mental health and addictions
- Crime and safety concerns
- Policing and enforcement
- Public health and sanitation
- Government and policy failures

Respondents were also asked: *"What in your opinion do you feel are the best ways toward solutions?"*



The top four solutions identified were:

- Easier access to mental health care (more spaces, no wait times, close by) (250)
- Easier access to addictions treatment (more spaces, no wait times, close by) (249)
- More enforcement (198)
- More supported and low-income housing

A total of 85 people chose 'Something else' and were asked to specify a solution or solutions. These responses can be summarized in seven themes:

- Rehabilitation and treatment
- Criminal justice and law enforcement
- Housing solutions
- Public safety and sanitation improvements
- Drug policy reform
- Mental health care
- Community and social supports

The findings from the "What we Heard" report form the basis for the North Cowichan response to the public safety concerns identified by residents and businesses in the corridor and result in 11 key areas of focus, including:

- Addictions;
- Untreated mental illness;
- Open substance use;
- Property and personal crimes;
- Sidewalk encampments + lack of places for people who are unhoused to go during the day;
- Lack of Police and Bylaw Compliance Officers;
- Lack of appropriate housing;
- Public urination;
- Noise;
- Personal safety; and
- A voice for concerned businesses and residents.

1. Addictions

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Advocate for provincially funded residential substance use treatment beds for the Cowichan Valley
 - Additional resources required – none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2):*
 - Provide a post-treatment residential option for those who have completed a substance use treatment program and who would benefit from a sober living residential option ("second stage housing")
 - Additional Resources required – a residential site with 3–5 bedrooms provided to an operator at below market rates.

- *Very enhanced response (Level 3):*
 - Provide a site suitable for use as a substance use treatment facility and work with a society that provides substance use disorder services to make low or no cost residential treatment beds available at that site.
 - Additional Resources required – land and improvements provided by North Cowichan, advocacy for provincial funding of beds.
- *Very very enhanced response (Level 4):*
 - Provide two sites, one for men and one for women, suitable for use as substance use treatment facilities and work with a society that provides substance use disorder services to make low or no cost residential treatment beds available at those sites.
 - Additional Resources required – land and improvements provided by North Cowichan, advocacy for provincial funding of beds.

2. Untreated mental illness

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Advocate to the provincial government for additional mental health programs and services that will support residents of the Cowichan region
 - Additional resources required – none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2):*
 - Institute a “Car 40” program with a mental health outreach worker paired with an RCMP member from the North Cowichan detachment to respond to calls for service related to mental wellness.
 - Additional Resources required – Potentially the addition of one RCMP member to the current staffing level and advocacy for the provision of a mental health outreach worker by Island Health or one of its service delivery partners in the region.
- *Very enhanced response (Level 3):*
 - Advocacy to the provincial government for an involuntary care facility similar to the one in the City of Surrey.
 - Additional Resources required – provision of a site with an appropriate building that would have the architectural features of a medium security correctional facility such as Nanaimo Correctional Centre or Surrey pre-trial.

3. Open Substance Use

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Review and revise North Cowichan bylaws to enhance the ability of North Cowichan Bylaw Officers to respond to open substance use in the public areas of the community, including parks and open spaces, sidewalks, and roadways.
 - Additional Resources required - none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2):*

- Advocate to the Federal Crown Counsel for a more vigorous prosecutorial response to the use of illicit substances.
- Additional Resources required – this action would require a significant investment of time and energy as it would have application across the country. As it stands, the RCMP will not arrest nor forward charges for personal possession of illicit substances, nor will the Federal Crown prosecute those charges if they were brought forward. It is unlikely North Cowichan would be successful acting alone or in collaboration with regional partners in changing this.

4. Property and personal crimes

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Continued deployment of the North Cowichan RCMP Corridor Enforcement Unit to impacted areas
 - Additional resources required – none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2):*
 - Dedicate additional RCMP resources to the corridor area
 - Additional resources required – significant – each additional RCMP member costs the Municipality approximately \$250,000 per annum. There would also be implications for the administrative resources needed to manage the related files and disclosure requirements.

5. Sidewalk encampments + lack of places for people who are unhoused to go during the day

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Currently North Cowichan dedicates significant resources to this issue: 4 full time Bylaw Compliance Officers; a dedicated clean team of two half-time staff and a truck; and substantial spending on waste removal contractors. Nonetheless, this level of resourcing is not sufficient to eliminate encampments in our area.
 - Displacing a large encampment such as the one on Lewis Street into a number of smaller encampments is possible with existing resources but it would require that North Cowichan actively identifies locations where it would tolerate small encampments. Using current resource levels, Bylaw Officers could attend at those sites on a regular basis to support waste removal, ensure the tolerated encampments don't grow in size, and enforce an informal set of rules so that the adjacent neighbourhoods are not affected.
 - Additional Resources required – Provision of municipal lands (green spaces, road ends, vacant lands, etc.) for informal tolerated encampments.
- *Enhanced response (Level 2):*
 - Dismantling encampments and removing the unhoused from the area is difficult and dangerous work, and officers regularly assigned to this duty suffer from high levels of burnout and vicarious trauma. A minimum of three and usually four officers are required for even a modest encampment, as well as deployment of at least two RCMP members to assist.

- Additional Resources required – At a minimum, two additional Bylaw Officers would be needed to effectively address large encampments, and additional funds would need to be set aside for associated waste removal costs. In 2025, North Cowichan spent approximately \$110,000 on waste removal associated with homeless encampments. Practically speaking, if there is no realistic alternative for the unhoused, they will continue to congregate and form encampments in the public and private spaces of the community.
- *Very enhanced response (Level 3) + Very very enhanced response (Level 4):*
 - Providing unhoused people with a sanctioned and managed place to be is the most effective way to reduce or eliminate encampments in North Cowichan. Typically, these kinds of facilities are oriented to either a daytime function (drop-in centre) or a night time function (overnight shelter). These facilities require staffing and incur ongoing costs that add up over the course of a year.
 - Additional Resources required – For an overnight shelter for the homeless for the 6 month winter season, a 2025 budget would be in the range of \$425,000. While it is possible that BC Housing would fund the operation of a 6 month winter shelter, or a 12 month year round shelter (\$850,000), they require that the community provide the site, including an appropriate building. For North Cowichan, the provision of a site and a building suitable for a shelter would be the additional resource required to effect this change.
 - A daytime drop-in centre is not something that BC Housing typically funds, and there is not another provincial or federal agency that has a mandate to support this kind of service. A year around daytime drop-in function would require operational funding of approximately \$1 million per year and would also require that a site with an appropriate building be made available for this purpose.

6. Lack of Police and Bylaw Compliance Officers

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - To staff the Bylaw department - North Cowichan currently funds four full time Bylaw Compliance Officers (“BCO’s”) and one Bylaw Manager. The North Cowichan RCMP detachment has 41 civilian staff (15 full time, 2 part time and 24 casuals) and North Cowichan funds 33 of the 73 Regular Policing Members of the detachment. It is worth noting that a 2024 RCMP E_Division review of staffing levels indicated that the North Cowichan detachment is 8 RCMP Members short based on call volumes.
 - At current staffing levels, the North Cowichan Bylaw Team and the RCMP Corridor Enforcement Unit can at best temporarily disrupt large encampments on an intermittent basis. Currently, Bylaw services are not available outside traditional office hours, but weekday services could be extended into the evening if the department shifts to a 4 on/3 off schedule. This would mean that only two officers are available at least one day a week, limiting the team’s ability to address large encampments.
 - The RCMP Corridor Enforcement Unit works a rotating watch schedule - mornings one week, afternoons the second week, and evenings the third week. This scheduling limits their ability to support Bylaw encampment operations on a regular basis.

- Further, members of the Corridor Unit are sometimes deployed to other investigations or RCMP operations further reducing the amount of time they can spend in the corridor.
 - The outcome is that the current service levels will, generally speaking, deliver the results that we are currently delivering.
 - Additional Resources required - none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2) + very enhanced response (Level 3) + very very enhanced response (Level 4):*
 - Other communities on the Island and elsewhere in BC have taken the approach of adding Bylaw Officers, and in some cases adding a Community Safety Officer component to their Bylaw team. For example, the Nanaimo Community Safety Officer Program currently has 12 FTEs; 11 Community Safety Officers (CSOs) and one Senior Community Safety Officer (CSO) who oversees the team. The Community Clean Team Program has 4 FTEs (2 Clean Teams) and report to the Supervisor, Sanitation and Cemetery.
 - Nanaimo's Community Safety budget in 2024 = \$11,062,032.
 - Each BCO or CSO incurs annual costs of approximately \$107,000 exclusive of ancillary costs like uniforms or fleet costs. For reasons of safety in almost all jurisdictions that deploy Community Safety Officers, the minimum number of officers on a patrol is 3.
 - Each additional RCMP member incurs total costs per annum of roughly \$250,000, exclusive of costs associated with Municipal Employee support staff.
 - Additional Resources required – would be based on proposed staffing levels.

7. Lack of appropriate housing

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Currently, North Cowichan hosts one supported housing project on Paddle Road (Sq'umul' Shelh Lelum) with 52 bachelor apartments and 24 hour staffing support. The City of Duncan hosts one supported housing project on White Road with 48 bachelor apartments and 24 hour staffing support on site. This project is expected to be ready for occupancy at the end of 2025. An affordable housing project on Sherman Road (Curling Club) is slated to proceed this year, but this project does not include support staff and is not suitable for those with complex needs.
 - Additional Resources required - none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2) + Very enhanced response (Level 3) + Very very enhanced response (Level 4)*
 - The Cowichan Vision for Community Wellness identifies the need for rapid, supported, temporary housing solutions to address the immediate crisis being faced by the unhoused residents of the Cowichan region. The best example of this kind of response is the "Village" on Trunk Road - small, ground-oriented sleeping units with shared washroom and cooking facilities. This style of housing is culturally appropriate for the large number of Indigenous individuals who are amongst the unhoused population of this region, is very quick to build (modular construction), and is an excellent way to stabilize street entrenched homeless individuals and effectively move them towards health, sobriety, and wellness. The Vision for Community Wellness calls for 7 of these

sites, based on the numbers identified in recent homeless counts. North Cowichan could potentially attract funding for this style of rapid response supported housing but would need to provide sites for the "Villages".

- Additional Resources required – provision of 1-3 sites and related servicing. Advocacy for funding to the Provincial and Federal governments.

8. Public Urination

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Currently North Cowichan employs two half time staff as public spaces custodians. These staff will attend in support of Bylaw staff when encampments are dismantled and take away refuse as well as providing light street and sidewalk cleaning. Additionally, the mechanised street sweeper can be deployed by Operations in areas affected by encampments and congregations. These actions do diminish the impact of public urination and defecation.
 - Additional Resources required - none
- *Enhanced response (Level 2):*
 - The use of a power washer to provide deeper level of cleaning to sidewalks and streets is an option for the public spaces custodians. It does require additional equipment and water tanks etc. to provide this service on a mobile basis.
 - Additional Resources required – training, eye protection, and additional equipment for the public spaces custodians.
- *Very enhanced response (Level 3):*
 - These biological functions are intrinsic to being alive, so the use of public spaces as bathrooms will likely continue as long as there are unhoused individuals living on the streets of the community. One option is to provide portable toilets in areas of concern for use by unhoused members of the community. These are subject to vandalism and require frequent cleaning but can be rented so that capital costs are low. Other communities have created peer-based programs to manage and clean public toilets at relatively nominal cost.
 - Additional Resources required- Rental of porta potties and maintenance of same.

9. Noise

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - In our conversations with residents of North Cowichan, one common complaint we hear is that the unhoused population that congregates around Lewis Street and York Road are often noisy in the late hours of the evening. There are no Bylaw patrols at these times, nor would it be practical to staff the Bylaw function between midnight and dawn for this reason alone. Currently, RCMP members will respond to public calls for service related to disruptive activity late at night, but much depends on the availability of general duty members to respond in a timely way, and the consequences that can be levied on someone for being noisy at night are fairly minimal.

- Additional Resources required – none
- *Enhanced Response (Level 2):*
 - Providing sufficient overnight shelter beds for this group would go a long way to resolving this issue.
 - Additional Resources required – provision of a site and a building suitable for use as an overnight shelter for the homeless.

10. Personal safety

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Large encampments and open, visible substance use can affect residents and businesses by changing how safe people feel when they walk through the community or return from work or school. North Cowichan provides significant funding towards the RCMP function and wholly funds the North Cowichan Bylaw function. Uniformed officers from both functions regularly patrol impacted areas and engage with residents and unhoused members of the community. In addition, North Cowichan provides a financial contribution to the patrols by private security guards in the Lewis Street area (Footprints) and to the Community Policing function.
 - Additional Resources required – none
- *Enhanced Response (Level 2):*
 - Some communities on Vancouver Island have responded to this issue by creating Community Safety Officer programs that seek to enhance the perception of safety by the presence of CSO staff patrolling in the public spaces of the community.
 - Additional Resources required - This option would require an investment in additional staff and training.

11. A voice for concerned businesses and residents

- *North Cowichan response with existing resources (Level 1):*
 - Currently, members of the public, residents of affected areas, and staff/owners from local businesses are able to voice their concerns by calling the Bylaw department or the RCMP, or by speaking with or writing to elected officials. Some residents use popular social media platforms to share their thoughts and advocate for solutions.
 - Additional Resources required – none
- *Enhanced Response (Level 2):*
 - During the engagement process for the SAFER Community Plan, staff observed that people expressed a desire to have a voice in these matters and were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to articulate their concerns and propose responses to the powers that be. One option is to create a Safety and Solutions Advisory group made up of local business staff and residents who want to engage in a productive dialogue that leads to real solutions that have impact. This group could be convened and meet on a monthly

- basis with Social Planning staff from North Cowichan, with the intent of changing the nature and the tone of public dialogue on this topic.
- o Additional Resources required – Social Planner time and energy.

IMPLICATIONS

The homelessness, mental health, and addiction crisis faced by this community and others has no easy solutions. The expectations of the courts is that local governments will take proactive and effective steps to ensure adequate shelter options are available for unhoused individuals, but siting of these services can be contentious and difficult. However, if the unsheltered population continues to grow, the outcome will be large encampments of unhoused people who at the end of the day are just trying to meet their basic biological needs for shelter and rest.

The current response by North Cowichan to these issues is sufficient to blunt the sharp edges of this problem, but it is clear that the use of law enforcement personnel to address homelessness, mental health, and addictions is not going to successfully resolve all the issues noted in this report. These are deep-rooted, social problems and the most effective response will be a thoughtful approach to developing the social infrastructure that gets people off the sidewalks, out of the green spaces, and into appropriate, managed environments.

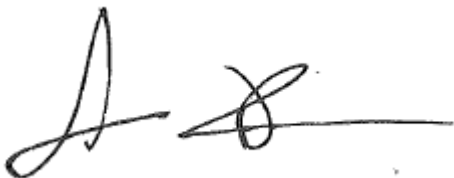
The role of law enforcement should be to continue addressing public safety concerns and upholding the laws of our community and, in doing so with this population, to always be mindful that the ultimate goal is to move people towards stability, health, sobriety, and wellness. Thus, the link between law enforcement and the social services needs to be strong and ongoing, with a coordinated and strategic approach to tackling this problem.

Effective advocacy by local elected officials and staff across the government and social sectors is key to attracting investments into the region by senior levels of government who have the jurisdictional responsibility for these issues.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council receive this report for information only.

Report prepared by:



John Horn
Director, Social Planning and Protective Services

Report reviewed by:



Bill Corsan
General Manager, Corporate Services and
Community Relations

Approved to be forwarded to Council:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ted Swabey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "T".

Ted Swabey
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments:

- (1) "What we Heard": Report
- (2) SAFER Community Plan – Recommended Actions