

DOWNTOWN



N'S DILEMMA

Victoria businesses are surrounded by street disorder. The problems are obvious to everyone. What's not so clear is how to fix them – and who will do it.

BY ANDREW FINDLAY

When a growing number of downtown Victoria's marginalized residents began rummaging through the back alley dumpster Michael Rodgers shares with his Fort Street neighbours, his first impulse was compassion over fear. But the risk of a fire from a carelessly discarded cigarette was always in the back of his mind. When a blaze finally broke out earlier this year, it was a nail-biter.

"There was a container of kitchen grease right next to the dumpster. If that had caught [fire], businesses could have been lost," says Rodgers, who owns The Papery and has worked downtown for 27 years.

It was a close call that also served as a powerful metaphor. To say that the downtown core is a dumpster fire of social problems might be too strong, but some people think it's not that far off. Many business owners fear the plight of addiction, homelessness, mental illness and poverty on city streets is beginning to spiral out of control. Add to that the lingering fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that provincial government workers haven't returned in their former sidewalk-filling numbers, and it's safe to say that small, bricks-and-mortar businesses have seen happier days.

Now, as more and more of them consider closing up shop and abandoning downtown, a growing number of players – from law enforcement, social agencies, civic organizations and all levels of government – are floating solutions and committing funds to this complex problem. But will any of these solutions work? Will they be enough? And most importantly, perhaps, will they be in time?

The city's small businesses are caught between the all-too-obvious street disorder and the people tasked with solving it, and

they are quickly running out of patience. As Keith Johnson, co-owner of Oh Sugar on Johnson Street, says, "I think we have five, maybe 10 years to save downtown."

Symbols of Urban Decay

Victoria's downtown is unique, its walkable streets lined with colourful heritage buildings and small, locally owned businesses that charm visitors and locals alike. But when it comes to the problems plaguing downtown, Victoria isn't unique at all, and doesn't have to look far to see what a dystopic future could look like.

Portland, Oregon, was once a destination city renowned for its craft breweries, bike-friendly streets, independent businesses

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— Jeff Bray, DVBA's CEO

and funky hotels. Today it's a sad symbol of urban decay that has this city of 619,000 grappling over how to deal with crime and the more than 5,000 people estimated to be living on the streets.

"Homeless camps represent nothing short of a humanitarian catastrophe. As a result, our community continues to suffer substantial public health, safety and livability concerns," Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler said in an official statement in May, just before his city council approved a policy outlawing makeshift camps in

the city core. It was a sharp departure for a progressive community that had traditionally taken a hands-off approach to homelessness.

Portland perfectly encapsulates what the School of Cities at the University of Toronto has identified as the major factors in downtowns struggling to recover from the pandemic. In its ongoing "Downtown Recovery" study, the school is following the progress of 62 major cities in the U.S. and Canada in the wake of the pandemic, tracking downtown vitality via three key indicators: office vacancy rates, public transportation ridership and retail spending.

The slowest to recover is San Francisco, whose downtown vitality in July was only at 32 per cent of what it had been in 2019. Portland (37 per cent), Seattle and Vancouver (tied at 46 per cent) are not doing much better. All have a higher share of factors that encourage remote work, specifically, employment in knowledge-based industries and/or more highly paid workers, as well as a shortage of affordable housing.

Add the mild weather, largely progressive attitudes and ongoing problems surrounding substance abuse, and they also sound a lot like Victoria.

Little wonder, then, that at the Downtown Victoria Business Association's June 15 AGM at the Hotel Grand Pacific, homelessness, addiction, parking and negative perceptions about downtown dominated discussion.

"We market from Sooke to Sidney to tell people that we are one of the most walkable cities in the world and visitors love to come here. We have to remind people of that," says Jeff Bray, the DVBA's CEO, even as he watched two men "obviously high on drugs" from his DVBA office on Centennial Square.

Bray hopes the provincial government will make good on promises it has made to provide complex-care beds so people with serious mental health and addiction issues can get the help they need. He also wants to see the courts get tougher on repeat offenders.

→ Michael Rodgers of The Papery has no plans to leave downtown, but suffers from "compassion fatigue."

Victoria Mayor Marianne Alto says she feels a responsibility to do what she can to change the heartbreaking situation of people struggling on downtown streets. But it's not all that easy.

"It's like a huge puzzle that requires many partnerships. If we had a magic wand that we could wave and build all the housing and get people all the care they need, then we would have already done it," she says. "We're talking about people who are residents of our city, many with very complex issues."

Meanwhile, time and patience are quickly running out. As Julian Daly, the CEO of Our Place Society, points out, "A lot of people forget that 10,000 people live downtown. Frankly, the DVBA has some members with leases coming up for renewal and they are taking a serious look and wondering if it's time to retire."

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— Marianne Alto, Victoria mayor

Compassion Fatigue

At The Papery and other downtown businesses, cleaning up discarded needles and trash from people sleeping in foyers has become a morning ritual. Petty theft is increasingly brazen. Employee security is another concern. Add to that the growing perception among some shoppers that downtown is no longer safe — or worth the hassle of finding ever-more-expensive parking.

"I see it every day when I ride my bike or walk to work. To have this kind of poverty, addiction and mental illness in a country as wealthy as ours is crazy," Rodgers says. "My fear is that things are going to get worse before they get better."

Still, he has no plans to leave. Johnson, who co-owns Oh Sugar with his wife Jenn Douglas, isn't so sure. He remembers hanging out downtown with his friends as a kid growing up in Victoria. "It was fun and vibrant and it was safe," he says. But these days he's not sure he'd tell anyone to send their kids downtown for an afternoon.

Recently, he says, a couple of guys entered Oh Sugar, looked him straight in the eye and said, "We're not going to rob you because we like you." He blames a lack of a coherent plan and resources to address addiction and mental illness,

JEFFREY BOSDET/DOUGLAS MAGAZINE



Julian Daly, CEO of Our Place Society, says it helps some 1,000 people in need each day, providing wellness services, housing support and hot meals.

coupled with a judicial system that's weak on repeat offenders.

"We were told by the previous mayor that we all need compassion, but a lot of people are running out of compassion," he says. "I talk to a lot of other business owners trying to put food on the table and fatigue is setting in."

Compassion may be running thin, but

it's not gone. Tessa McLoughlin, founder of the membership-based, co-working business KWENCH, has a deep affection for downtown, but shares some of the growing concerns. On a late June morning, she had to clean up human feces from the outdoor patio of her Store Street business.

"I come from a place of compassion. We have a philosophy that if someone comes

off the street and says they need the toilet, we allow them,” McLoughlin says. “The thought that there are people on the street that have no place to go to the bathroom is heartbreaking to me.”

KWENCH is on the periphery of downtown and for the most part insulated from its associated social problems — insulated, but not immune. McLoughlin says she’s watched the situation on Pandora Street four blocks to the south deteriorate over the last six months to the point that she routinely sees people openly shooting up whenever she walks down the street.

“I don’t have an answer, but we know that most of these people are coming from a place of trauma and abandonment,” McLoughlin says.

Health and Housing

In August, Victoria City Council endorsed Alto’s motion to create a community safety and well-being plan. Council has tasked a 10-member panel, which includes Fort Properties CEO Suzanne Bradbury, Victoria Fire Department Chief Daniel Atkinson, Songhees artist Brianna Bear, Our Place Society’s Daly and Jonny Morris, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association’s

B.C. Division, to guide the development of a plan by October 2024.

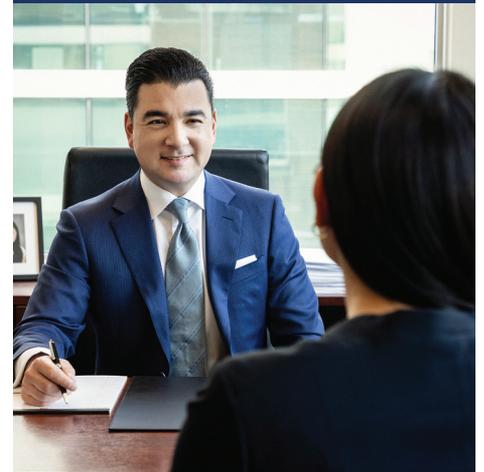
Alto likens the effort to a “reimagination of community safety and well-being.” She expects the plan to include actions that the city can take directly, for example, building on initiatives like the \$1-million downtown revitalization program currently underway and supporting bylaw enforcement teams in their interactions

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POSITIVE ACTIONS

In 1998, Canadian cities declared homelessness a natural disaster. Twenty-five years and a full-blown pandemic later, the problem is worse than ever in many cities, including Victoria. Here are three places around the world that have made positive strides, however tentative.

→ **Medicine Hat:** In 2021, this small Alberta city became the first in Canada to “functionally end” chronic homelessness. Advocates credit the city’s housing-first approach, in which the city has created rapport with landlords and initiated a number of reforms, including replacing one-size-fits-all programs with specific services designed to meet vulnerable individuals’ needs. However, despite these efforts, officials have begun to see a stubborn resurgence in homelessness and at least two homeless encampments.

→ **Montana:** An influx of well-heeled incomers starting in early 2020 nearly doubled housing prices overnight, creating a shortage so bad that full-time workers in cities like Bozeman are living in homeless shelters. In response, the state recently passed a massive bill — with rare bipartisan support — authorizing US \$225 million in housing spending.

The government also passed an array of regulatory reform measures to accelerate home construction by making it easier to build new homes, as well as a bill that earmarks US \$175 million for housing initiatives and an extra US \$50 million for low-interest loans to developers who build rent-restricted apartments.

→ **Helsinki, Finland:** In 1986, more than 18,000 homeless people were living on the streets of Helsinki; by 2017, the number had dropped to around 6,600 and in 2022, none. Under the country’s revolutionary Housing First plan, access to housing is unconditional, which means the unhoused don’t have to jump through hoops, such as promising to avoid drugs or alcohol, to qualify for a roof over their heads. Government agencies and NGOs created 3,500 new permanent homes and hired 300 support workers to support the program. And while the initial cost was steep — some 250 million euros — the government now says it saves more than 15,000 euros per year in emergency health care, social services and the justice system for every person in properly supported housing. The program is so successful that France, Australia and the U.K. are looking into similar models.



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with unhoused people seeking overnight shelter in city parks.

Just as important, says Alto, will be short-term interventions to address crime and public disorder and finding ways for the City to support the provincial government's delivery of much-needed housing and mental health and addiction treatment services.

In its 2023 budget, released in March, Premier David Eby's government

committed more than \$1 billion over the next three years for mental health and addiction treatment. As part of this funding, the Province is investing \$586 million into the health-care system, including the creation of 195 treatment and recovery beds throughout B.C.

Using the Red Fish Healing Centre in Coquitlam as a model for supporting people with "concurrent mental-health and addiction" challenges, the Province says it

In a random act of vandalism, the window of Jennifer Robinson's Adventure Clothing on Yates Street was smashed. She commissioned local artist Meaghan Crow to paint the boarded-up window, turning a setback into a positive message.



“Downtown is near and dear to my heart and we still have a beautiful city.”

— Jennifer Robinson, owner of Adventure Clothing

will expand to other locations in B.C.

This effort can't happen soon enough, says Daly.

On any given day, Our Place Society helps approximately 1,000 people in need, providing wellness services, supportive housing (in association with BC Housing and other partners) and hot meals at its Pandora Street community centre.

“The downtown business community has been very supportive of us and I totally understand the frustration,” Daly says.

He says the challenges facing downtown are serious, but not insurmountable. Daly has a four-point prescription for what he calls “compassion coupled with action.”

Foremost, he says, is having a dialogue with people to find out what it will take to get them off the streets. Second is providing a range of housing options. Third is access to treatment for addiction and mental illness, which at times might require enforcing involuntary treatment, a view he says is divisive in the non-profit community and particularly unpopular among what he calls the “harm-reduction fundamentalists.” “Yes, safe supply is important to keep people alive, but it has to be coupled with treatment,” he says.

Finally, Daly says, repeat offenders who target downtown businesses and prey on the vulnerable need to be incarcerated. “We need to support the judiciary. I'm talking about bad operators who are dangerous to people on the streets — the ones that small businesses are talking about,” he says.

Given recent provincial government announcements, he's hopeful. Earlier this year, Mike Farnworth, B.C.'s minister of public safety and solicitor general, announced the formation of 12 regional law enforcement hubs targeting repeat violent offenders.

“I'd welcome a bigger discussion around the root causes of addiction and more trauma-focused counselling,” Daly says, adding that he also fears things will get worse before they get better.

“But I don't think we'll ever become Portland or San Francisco. In Victoria, we're really talking about 150 or so people who are chronically homeless. Frankly, it will be an embarrassment if we can't deal with this as a society.”

Hope for the Future

Early in the morning of January 19, Jennifer Robinson, owner of Adventure Clothing, got an alarm notification that there had

been a break-in at her shop on Yates Street. She raced down to find one of the big storefront windows smashed. It was a random act of vandalism and nothing was stolen. Still, for Robinson it felt like a gut punch. When she learned the hole would be boarded up for a month, she was inspired to transform the plywood into an artist's canvas.

One of her employees told her about Meaghan Crow, and she was immediately drawn to the Victoria visual artist's whimsical, surrealistic paintings. Robinson approached Crow to ask if she'd be interested in taking on an unconventional

commission.

“She thought it was a great idea,” Robinson says. “It felt good to turn this into something positive.”

Staying positive is the mantra of all small business owners in downtown Victoria. Yes, there are problems and it can be crushing to see people struggling with mental illness and addiction, living rough on the streets. However, Robinson believes it's not all bad.

“I think there's a gap between perception and reality,” she says. “Downtown is near and dear to my heart, and we still have a beautiful city.” *

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