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Red Deer Emergency Shelter Engagement

Meetings with Key Stakeholders

What We Heard Report

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Project Overview

A potential permanent emergency shelter is being considered at 4934 54 Avenue. The site requires a Land Use Amendment and the creation of a new Direct Control District to accommodate a future integrated emergency shelter facility. Prior to taking the proposed site to Red Deer City Council for approval, Administration engaged adjacent property owners, businesses and service providers to seek feedback on their concerns and ideas about the proposed permanent shelter location.

The City of Red Deer also acknowledges the standard legislative process used to communicate and engage about the proposed site is not sufficient in fully understanding stakeholders' concerns, so an enhanced engagement program was implemented to better work with potentially impacted stakeholders.

Engagement Overview

Engagement with key stakeholders included a series of seven small-group meetings. These meetings did not include all potentially impacted stakeholders, but rather a representative sampling of those who have engaged in the process thus far. The number of participants invited to each meeting was kept small so the project team could engage in meaningful and complex conversations while having the opportunity to ask questions and fully understand different perspectives. The objectives of the meetings were:

- share information about the site selection process.
- learn about stakeholder concerns as well as thoughts on opportunity with the proposed site.
- get feedback about how stakeholders may want to participate in future conversations and processes related to the permanent the shelter.

In all, seven meetings were held with twenty-eight stakeholders, from February 16 to 23, 2022. Five meetings were held in person and two meetings were held virtually. Of the seven meetings, two meetings were with service providers and five were with adjacent property owners and businesses. In each of the meetings, participants were invited to share their concerns/opportunities about the proposed permanent shelter location as well as their comments about the communications and engagement process to date.



What We Heard

While adjacent property owners, businesses, associations and service providers shared different perspectives about the proposed site and their concerns, there were some common themes among all participant groups.

Both service providers and the business community feel:

- their perspectives are not being truly heard or understood by each other or the City.
- decisions are being rushed and engagement with all parties has been lacking.
- the process has not been transparent. People feel they have not been given enough information to make an informed opinion about the shelter in general, including a location.
- trust and relationships are broken in the community, and we need to find a way to come together to move forward at find a solution.
- uncertainty in the future in terms of the how the business community can continue to operate, the vision for downtown and the future of the services that are needed.
- a lack of clarity about what an integrated shelter really is and how it will be better than what the City currently has.

Participants in both groups expressed a desire for and the need to work together collaboratively to find the best solution for all involved. Several participants expressed a desire to work together in a committee format as long as the work and conversations are meaningful.

In addition, many participants in both groups also all acknowledged the need for an emergency shelter in Red Deer and did not question the complexity of associated challenges in the community.

Adjacent Property/Business Owners - What We Heard

Twenty-two property and business owners attended five meetings from February 16 to 23, 2022.

An overarching theme among the property and business owners are that businesses don't feel heard by City Hall, they feel their value in the community is not acknowledged and feel they have to shoulder an unfair amount of the impacts the homeless and drug-addicted population bring to downtown.

Business participants are strongly opposed to the proposed permanent site, citing the current issues they experience with the temporary shelter would make them permanent issues in the business community. They feel the decision has already been made and that this engagement is not genuine.

All business representatives indicated their businesses can't co-exist in close proximity with the emergency shelter and overdose prevention site.



They shared that their clients don't want to come to their businesses for fear of personal safety and worry about vandalism to their cars. For these businesses, less clients coming downtown means less revenue. Business owners indicated property values are decreasing, rental income is decreasing, revenue is decreasing, tenants are leaving, and taxes are going up.

Some business owners stated they made business and property decisions based on the City's revitalization plans for downtown and the promise of an upscale Capstone development. With the proposed permanent shelter site, they feel that the vision has changed, and they feel blindsided. Some questioned what the vision for downtown is and if it has changed. They expressed that the site is prime river front property and that a permanent emergency shelter there doesn't fit with the downtown vision they were promised. Almost all participants said they don't feel that Capstone will attract developers or will be able to successfully achieve its vision if the proposed permanent site is approved.

Many participants stated they are left without options to feel good about their businesses moving forward and feel they must move. Some indicated they are now left with properties they can't sell or rent out. The businesses who indicated they are either left with no option but to move or have already decided to move, shared they will move their businesses outside of the city, even if it costs more. Most mentioned Gasoline Alley as an alternative location.

Business representatives shared they are dealing with the impacts of the drug community on a daily basis. They experience vandalism to their properties and are having to pay for repairs and extra security out of their own pockets as their insurance premiums have become too expensive. They expressed they are left with having to clean up the garbage and needles from the patrons of nearby services

Participants cited a lengthy list of offensive and criminal behaviours that are impacting staff, clients, tenants and their own families. They shared that these behaviours take place both inside and outside their buildings, and include activities like using drugs, having sex, defecating, and vandalism, which they indicated are responsible for driving business away and making staff and family members feel unsafe.

Many participants mentioned the route between the homeless shelter and the overdose prevention site plays a significant role in which businesses are impacted. Travel patterns among the various services and food establishments were also mentioned several times as a significant concern.

A few of the businesses shared they have been around for many years and that some are multi-generational businesses, but they are not sure their businesses are going to survive because of the activities that are keeping their clientele away.

Some participants indicated that the City should not be driven by the \$7 million in funding from the Province as the tax revenue from a vibrant and populated downtown area will provide more revenue and benefit in the long-term. Some also expressed that the City should not be making a decision that will negatively impact businesses and all citizens of Red Deer on housing for 65 – 80 people.



One of the options shared by some participants included keeping the temporary shelter open while working to get the permanent shelter located in a more acceptable location. However, many would like to see a time limit for how long the temporary shelter can remain operational.

Several participants suggested moving the shelter to the City's newly annexed lands.

The business representatives wanted to acknowledge they recognize a need for the shelter, they just want separation from the homeless and drug-addicted community. They indicated that something needs to be done, but they want it done right. Some suggested looking at best practice from other cities.

As for next steps, participants indicated they want to keep talking to the City and would like the opportunity to work together. They want to be engaged and kept informed going forward, as long as their feedback wasn't falling on "deaf ears".

There were several suggestions that a committee or group of people with a diverse range of interests should be brought together to come up with options for a location and to determine what the project should look like, noting the decision is too big to just be a Council decision.

Business representatives asked that the City expand the 100 m notification radius to include all downtown businesses for the upcoming public hearing.

Non-Profit/Service Agencies - What We Heard

Six representatives from the service providers participated in two meetings that took place on February 17 and February 23.

One of the overarching themes from the service providers is that the services have been around for years, and that some of these agencies have been working for ten years to get the funding from the Province.

Agency representatives indicated they are tired and are frustrated with the constant starting and stopping of this process over the last number of years. They shared they don't want to keep having the same conversations without results.

Most of the service providers feel like the proposed site is the right one for their clients. They feel that once the site is approved, they can design the facility to minimize the impacts and will then be able to better work with their neighbours. One agency shared that the site of the existing temporary shelter would be a better site, and that the City should look at purchasing the adjacent properties to that site.

All agencies indicated they are concerned about losing the \$7 million in funding if the decision about a permanent site gets delayed. Some indicated they would rather go ahead with approval of the proposed site, get the funding and figure out the details later. Others feel that working with the Province to



maintain the funding while the City delays the decision is the best way forward in order to be fully informed and make the best decision about the facility. Some expressed concern about delaying the decision; particularly if there is a change in government, they worry the funding will completely disappear.

There was a lot of discussion about what an “integrated facility” would look like and who it would involve. One representative suggested “integrated” was a political term and not fully thought out. There were differing opinions about what best approach is and what services should be grouped to best serve the clients.

If proposed site is not approved, some participants mentioned they are concerned about the fate of the temporary shelter. The temporary shelter only has temporary contracts for their staff, and representatives are worried about the ongoing renewal of short-term contracts with out promise of more stable, long-term employment.

Almost all service agencies indicated they need more information about the Therapeutic Community in order to make decisions about the permanent facility. They feel they are left in the dark with some of the decisions being made by the City and they are not being consulted.

When speaking about the agencies’ relationships with businesses, participants talked about an us vs. them mentality. They expressed that the business owners are angry and are now not willing to listen, and it has been a frustrating experience to deal with some of the angry business owners. They see lessened empathy and willingness to become more informed on issues and challenges surrounding the homeless population. Participants indicated they understand the businesses are being impacted and that better communication, being transparent and reasonable interactions are what is needed to work together in the future.

One representative stated that the service providers are being judged on running temporary facilities and that they have not been given the opportunity to run the facilities in the way they know they need to in order to be successful.

In general, these agencies stated they want to do what’s best for the vulnerable population and that knowing where the permanent shelter is the key to moving forward. They also indicated they would still want to continue working with the City if this site is not approved but noted it would feel like a repeat of previous conversations.

Stakeholder Input by Theme

A breakdown of the overarching themes is provided for each stakeholder group below, along with example statements shared by participants. This information reflects participants’ comments to the best of the notetakers’ ability. Some minor editing of statements has been done to provide clarity for the reader.

Shared Themes Among all Participant Groups

The site selection process and engagement with stakeholders has not been transparent and is being rushed

- There are reasons why some decisions are being made. The business community doesn’t know the reasons.
- The Province won’t feel the effects of it, the people in this room will. It’s bigger than any one group.
- The City has kept a lot of this information away from us for a long time. We have not been privy to the information or process.
- This decision needs to move ahead quickly, but agencies are in the dark with information. We need good intentional community engagement to be successful, but we are in the dark.
- We are going to public hearing in a month - it’s unfortunate there’s not enough time to get behind this. There are still questions about the Mustard Seed involvement. The first reading is too soon. We don’t have any information. The community engagement work we have done has taken years and we are happy with it. That’s now at risk.
- Why aren’t we moving forward with five sites? If we are just looking at one site, the decision has already been made. Why can’t the public have feedback on the five sites?
- I feel like this is a waste of time. We are listening to the same people say the same things. I disagree with City Administration. The decision has been made. I don’t think it’s going to be any different.
- I have an issue with the scope of the invite – the 100 m. The last Council meeting for the temporary shelter only notified the 100 m radius. There are no businesses within 100 m. The closest business is 200 m. It should be the whole downtown.
- You are building it there and want us to say, ‘put some shrubs there and it will be all good.’ You are disregarding everything that has happened in last five years. Now you’re trying to ram it through. It’s a foregone decision.
- I like that the City has admitted they have done a poor job communicating. They should communicate with everyone in downtown and give them a say, not just those within 100 m. It makes a difference if we have a voice/chance to speak.
- We realize this is a complex issue. The hearing process is altered because of timing and funding issues. If that’s the case, it’s understandable why we are here.

Siloed approach and frustration with not having a collaborative process with all parties involved

- Let's investigate and look at solutions to make the best decision we can – with the whole community involved. We will then get support and understanding.
- It's easier when you are in the same room and have to come to consensus. Facilitated discussions will find some common ground.
- We understand business owners are frustrated. They aren't interviewing, they are interrogating. Instead of being part of the solution, they walk away from the table.
- Explore the options with everyone, then at least citizens feel like they are contributing.
- Put this to a committee to decide where to go. People who have vested interests across a diverse range would come up with options on location, what the project would look like, and would understand impacts.
- City never took us up on a meeting. We offered a natural network. If they want to build a building – we have connections. No one ever called. We could have set up a meeting, discussed strategy, brought banks in to work with the City. Resources are always there. It's baffling why the City would not take advantage of it. The offer is still open.

Desire for continued involvement

- Personally, I would like to be involved if it's meaningful.
- We need to take the time to do this properly. This is going to be permanent.
- I would like to talk about the design of the facility – fencing, lighting, security. I want to be part of that conversation going forward.
- I would participate because I would rather know than not.
- Yes, would still want that conversation going forward.
- I'm Interested – but don't want to put more of my time onto something that falls on deaf ears.

Common Themes Shared by Business Representatives

Business interests have not been considered in decisions to date

- There is no representation of the business community on Council. This Council doesn't understand what businesses are going through. There's a reason some of us have been successful – we know what we are doing. I suggest a business advisory council.
- It's frustrating because it seemed like the City was trying to revitalize downtown. We could get behind that improvement and moving things forward. It's not the Province giving \$7M, it's our businesses giving our tax dollars.
- The City has disregarded the burden put on the business. They came with a peace offering of \$50K but a new fence costs \$12K. One person could use it up.
- The City hasn't taken the shelter into account in property assessment.



Businesses and these specific non-profit services can't co-exist side by side

- We are seeing a hollowing out of downtown, and this won't solve that.
- The proposed location is just convenient. You promised to deliver, so you made the decision. It's not a choice. It's an imposition. You cannot have the park and shelter together. It seems ludicrous that \$7M is what is driving this decision.
- The business community and drug-addicted community can't co-exist. Female staff don't want to leave the building. We will lose staff and clients.
- The path by the river is a highway for criminals. When stuff gets stolen, they take off down the path. The proposed building is right on the path.
- I called the RCMP just this morning because of someone doing drugs, fentanyl. I was with my 8- and 10-year-old – we are exposing them to this. The person was inside our building. The residue of the drugs is left in carpet and walls. We are exposed. We come there on a daily basis with my kids. What does safety mean? They have machetes, they're throwing stones at elderly couples, stealing bikes, doing drugs all the time, stealing bags, throwing branches, and people are walking around screaming. This is a daily occurrence.
- People are hiding drugs in the bathrooms and breaking toilets having sex on them. We spent \$50K locking our building up. We put a commissioner there and the doors are locked. We now need a code to get in.
- There is so much criminal behavior. They are openly selling drugs and there's prostitution. They're not hiding it and we turn a blind eye.
- I saw fifteen broken windows at one time, defecating, urination, vagrancy, fires from burning garbage. I had to take away my dumpster because of activities happening in there. I had to add buzzers to allow staff and patrons in. It has become a disaster.



Negative impacts to businesses and the City are significant

- Staff have to walk each other to their vehicles in the morning and evening. We strategically park vehicles right next to door for those who leave latest at night.
- We used to have 800 students come downtown for our business. Now we have one music teacher left. Families don't want to come.
- Our tenants are now going to a month-to-month lease, waiting to see what the City is going to do. If the shelter goes ahead, they are gone.
- Our retirement is wrapped up in those investments. In one fell swoop, you reduced our ability to capitalize on investment.
- People are on the cusp of no return. We don't have a lot of time.
- Property values are going down but we are still paying high taxes. We are seeing higher assessments. I spent \$6K in glass replacement last year alone. There is not enough grant money for everyone. We pay for repairs out of pocket. We don't claim on insurance because the premiums are too high. Higher taxes, lower leases.
- I feel like an idiot. I bought a property near Heritage Village because of Capstone – purchased it this summer. It was planned to be a non-surgical facility. There is a need and an interest for the service. We have drawn up plans and gave notice on leases. I'm frustrated that it's no longer a high-end community - now it will be dead. No one is going to be there. I drove the streets to see what it looks like. No one with any choice would put their business there.
- What would you do in my situation? Tenants are leaving. I have ceased all planning and am losing my deposit of \$20K. If a decision is made to build it there, please purchase my property.
- Clients are worried about their vehicles. Just the other day my staff held teens held inside our doors because they were scared to go outside because of the people standing outside. Because they shot up at the OPS site then were released onto the street. They are released to terrorize whoever they want.
- Everyone's revenue is dropping. We have no choice but to shut down and move out. Establishments aren't busy – people don't want to drive downtown, park and deal with the transient population.

Concern over the future of Capstone and uncertainty about the vision for downtown

- Capstone was exciting. This site is squashing that.
- Capstone was exciting. By putting the shelter there you've made it an overdose prevention site. Bower ponds now won't be family friendly. Capstone will not happen. You might as well say it's the extension of low-income housing and put all services there. Be honest about it. Then people won't have spent money, borrowed money to purchase property there.
- People want pride in their property and city. I get it – the City owns the property, so it's a convenient location. But it's right beside the most beautiful park. Right adjacent to Capstone and \$42M the City has spent so far. Doesn't it seem like a better investment to do something else there?
- Until there is a plan, no one in their right mind is going to invest in Capstone.
- Capstone looks very appealing in the marketing. But they don't show the drugs, people sleeping in hallways, shooting up.
- Taylor Dr, Bower Ponds, Capstone – do we really want that facility right on the path system? I would rather it stay where it is than move it and put it more in the public eye. It will be more problematic for citizens of city. I've given up all hope.
- We have a unique opportunity – we are sitting on what should be most valuable piece of land in the whole city. We have Capstone; we've spent over \$50M on infrastructure so far. No land developers will develop there if the permanent site is picked across the bridge.
- A part of the city has to be sacrificed. Why would we sacrifice the property where we just invested?
- We just spent a generation of tax dollars on Capstone, and we are going to put the shelter right next to it.

Common themes shared by service agencies

Indecision on direction leads to challenges in providing optimal services to population in need

- Provincial funding is a result of (agency) advocating for that funding for 10 years. Multiple architectural drawings have been done. It's been a long process.
- I'm anxious to get this moving. Please let this be it.
- It's been life-draining. The inability for people to hear what is being said is what is most draining.
- It's time to do things differently. The one thing missing from all these years and from all conversations is giving services providers the opportunity to do what they want to do. We are being judged on an Atco trailer in a parking lot. We can't demonstrate our success if we're not given the opportunity to be successful.
- Talking is the exhausting part. We need action. A building.
- Everybody loses if we don't keep moving ahead and we allow this opportunity to pass us by.
- I think it's fair to go ahead with site selection while being clear we don't have the answers. We need the location so we can plan how to move forward.

Unclear on what the vision for the shelter really is

- We want a permanent solution – we can design the inside and outside so that will help some, but people are still free to go. Businesses want to see zero people. We know they are never going to see zero. In reality, how do we design it to minimize the impact?
- Integrated services will be the key to success. I'm interested in talking about that more.
- "Integrated" – is a political term.
- People have asked why we would have drunk guys and guys who are trying to get sober together. We need to separate them – it's a definite benefit to client that they are kept separate.
- The most logical integration and best outcome would be supervised consumption site inside the shelter.
- The Therapeutic Community – the new service delivery – no one knows what that is yet. We need that information before we can design permanent shelter.
- Does it have to be designated as integrated at this point? Can we figure it out later?
- What would the discretionary uses that would be allowed – a supervised consumption site?
- The City is in better position to get answers around other services. AHS can't even get answers.

Fear of losing funding

- We don't want to miss out on the funding. We still want to talk if the facility went to new location, but it would be terrible to not go ahead with this location.
- I would hate to move the date – I don't want to miss the funding. Some of the conversations should be accelerated asap.
- We can talk about what integrated means after the deadline and when we have money.
- I sense Province is frustrated. I worry that if there is change in government, we might not have that money anymore.

Next Steps

The project team will use the input collected at these meetings to decide on next steps in the planning process for the shelter. The What We Heard report will be shared with meeting participants, Red Deer City Council and the public.