

# **City unveils \$1-billion plan for Vancouver's Downtown Eastside**

## **Anti-poverty critic fears low-income community will be 'demolished'**

By John Mackie, Vancouver Sun February 27, 2014

Vancouver's troubled Downtown Eastside is about to get a facelift.

The City of Vancouver unveiled an ambitious, \$1-billion, 30-year plan for the neighbourhood Thursday.

The complex, 183-page proposal would see 4,400 new or replacement social housing units built in the area. There would also be a dramatic increase in condos near Clark and Hastings, where buildings could be 12 to 15 storeys high.

The city said it hopes to revitalize Hastings as a retail street, yet retain the low-income character of much of the neighbourhood.

It projects that housing units in the area will rise from 15,300 to 19,850 in 10 years, and 27,950 in 30 years. The population would rise from about 18,000 today to 30,000 to 35,000 in 2044.

"The plan over the next 10 years will be an increase in the number of these mixed-use projects that we're trying to achieve in the Downtown Eastside," said Brian Jackson, Vancouver's general manager of planning and development.

"It will include affordable housing, it will include a number of opportunities for market rental, and market condos. You're going to see a mixture."

The controversial part of the plan looks to be a condo-free zone that stretches along Hastings from Carrall Street in Gastown to Healey Avenue in Strathcona.

Any new structures in the rental-only area have to be at least 60 per cent social housing.

The no-condo zone extends to historic Japantown around Oppenheimer Park.

Jackson said the aim is ensure that low-income people in the Downtown Eastside won't be displaced.

“The plan is attempting to achieve balance,” he said after a media briefing.

“We have to provide the assurance that through the plan we are making sure the people who want to continue to live in the Downtown Eastside have that opportunity. But it has to be in improved forms of housing.”

In the plan, the Downtown Eastside isn't just the area around Hastings and Main; it includes surrounding neighbourhoods such as Gastown, Chinatown, Victory Square, Strathcona and Thornton Park.

It was put together during the past two years by city staff in tandem with a city-appointed committee that was mandated to have at least half of its members from the low-income community.

Asked where the money for such an ambitious plan will come from, Jackson said the city will “need partnerships in order to achieve it.”

“We need the other levels of government, we need the non-profits, we need the faith-based groups,” he said. “And we need the development community to help make this real.”

But getting the money to build the social housing called for in the plan may not be easy.

Rich Coleman is the provincial minister in charge of housing. Asked if the province has the money to build 4,400 social housing units in the Downtown Eastside, he said: “No, we don't. And we don't do housing that way anymore, either.”

Coleman said the province's strategy is to “diversify” the way money is spent on low-income housing, such as providing rent assistance for about 10,000 families around the province. “We don't build ‘social housing’ anymore,” he said.

“We invest in housing that is for (people with) mental health and addictions, and people that are homeless or at risk of (being) homeless. That was the investment we made in Vancouver; it's about \$300 million, and that was only for about 1,500 units. So if you're talking about over 3,000 you're talking \$600 million/\$700 million.”

Anti-poverty activist Wendy Pedersen was co-chair of the committee that came up with the plan, until she had to resign for health reasons. She is not optimistic the new Downtown Eastside plan will save the low-income side of the neighbourhood, even with the no-condo zone. She argues if you break the social housing part of the plan down, only one third of the social housing units will be rented at welfare rate.

“I think the low-income community is going to be demolished and displaced,” she said.

“And there will be a few people left that can hang on, in some token units, because there's not enough in the plan for people at welfare rate, which is what we need. There's a problem. We

need 5,000 SROs (single-room occupancy accommodation) replaced with housing at welfare rates.”

Pete Fry of the Strathcona Residents Association thinks the plan tries to address so many issues, there wasn't enough consideration given to key areas. And it's so complex, even people who were on the planning committee aren't sure about what it all means.

“It's as clear as mud,” said Fry.