

Poor priced out of their neighbourhood

New business investment is important to the Downtown Eastside but it needs to be part of an economic plan that benefits local residents

BY MIKE HARCOURT, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MARCH 2, 2013



Protesters such as DTES resident Bud Osborn chant and make speeches as they protest outside Pidgin restaurant in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. **Photograph by:** Arlen Redekop, PNG, Special To The Sun

The Pidgin restaurant controversy in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) is part of a much larger issue for the area and for the city as a whole.

Data from the City of Vancouver housing department and from the Carnegie Community Action Project show that market housing is developing significantly faster than affordable and non-market social housing in the DTES.

Yet the majority of the people are poor and can't afford market housing, whether rental or owned. As well, commercial and retail activities providing affordable services are in decline, replaced by higher-end stores and restaurants.

That's why people are standing out in front of the restaurant. They're worried they are being priced out of their own neighbourhood. And while one restaurant is not going to tip the scale, they have good reason to be worried.

It's an issue that concerns us all. After so many people have done so much to overcome the tragedy of homelessness in our city, there's another homelessness crisis brewing, brought on by the rapid loss of affordable and social housing that threatens to undo all that has been done.

According to the city, approximately 5,000 single rooms in privately run hotels (SROs) are going to be lost and need replacement over the next few years. Many of these are candidates for demolition or are being converted to hostels and higher revenue uses. Most tellingly, the city reports that 24 per cent of these units are at the welfare rate of \$375 per month (2011). This means people are doubling up in rooms without a toilet or a kitchen or a second bed. It means that people are using what money they have remaining for food to meet their shelter costs. This is the next wave of homeless unless we act.

Too many people are one missed rent payment away from being on the street. And every time a cheap unit is lost or renovated, ask yourself: Who lives there? Where do they go? We should not be surprised that we are in this situation.

The termination of the federal government non-market housing programs in the 1990s and the decentralization of former mental institutions without adequate replacement support systems have led directly to where we are today. Ottawa shows no interest in restoring those programs. The community, the development industry, the province and the city and philanthropies like Street To Home (which have been making important contributions to housing for homeless people) must work together to address the situation within their own capabilities, but all must come together to make the case to Ottawa.

To the city's credit, it has launched the Downtown Eastside local area planning process (LAPP) that is designed to grapple with this issue. Building Communities Society co-chairs the committee along with the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council representing low-income people. Its report will be heard by city council this November. The problem is that while this planning is underway, the pace of real estate and property development continues unabated. November could be too late for too many people.

A key objective of the LAPP is to ensure that it's not too late; that those who live in the area can continue to do so, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

The plan must address two urgent priorities: One, more non-market housing, in particular, housing that is based on the current welfare shelter rate (\$375 per month for singles). The second priority is to strengthen the local economy in the DTES so there are still coffee shops and restaurants, shops and stores that are affordable to people living on low incomes - the everyday neighbourhood services that the rest of us in Vancouver take for granted.

New business investment is important to the area. It needs to take place within an economic plan that benefits local residents.

Imagine coming out of your front door and your neighbour is no longer there. Imagine going out for a meal and your local eatery is not there. These are not just issues for people living on very low incomes. Many other residents who call the area home will face challenges as land values and rents skyrocket. So will local businesses under pressure from the same cycle of increasing land values, taxes and rents.

Time and again the people of the DTES, regardless of their economic circumstances, have demonstrated their capacity to bring positive change to their area. The local planning work is building on this record. In the face of enormous challenges, widely diverse interests within the community are working together alongside those from outside who have a stake in the area. And while Pete McMartin and his colleagues in the media are transfixed by the Pidgin protest, they are missing a remarkable, full-on co-operative effort to save the neighbourhood.

The DTES is the birthplace of our city. And it is still the beating heart of Vancouver. Its health affects the health of the city. In the DTES, Vancouver has a special opportunity; to demonstrate that an inner city can be renewed to the benefit of its residents and not at their expense.

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