

Downtown Eastside Fact Sheet

Prepared by the Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP), January, 2010



The Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP)

CCAP is a non governmental organization that works out of the Carnegie Community Centre in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. It is accountable to about 5,000 members of the community centre, most of whom are low income DTES residents. CCAP has one paid staff member and many volunteers who work for more and better housing and higher incomes in the DTES. CCAP believes the low-income DTES community has a right to exist and to seek improvements for itself.

Overview: The Downtown Eastside (DTES) is one of Canada's poorest urban neighbourhoods. About 70% of the residents have low incomes with the average less than \$1,000 a month. About 700 are homeless. Most live alone and are renters. There is a high percentage of seniors, Aboriginal people, people of Chinese ancestry, people with mental and physical disabilities, and people who use illegal drugs. The DTES is a non judgmental community where many people are accepting, empathetic, caring, and volunteer in many capacities.

There is also a tremendous community spirit and a history of the community fighting for its basic human rights. In the 1930s unemployed men rallied in the DTES before going to Ottawa to seek work and wages. In the 1960s residents stopped a freeway from bisecting the community. In the '70's they fought for a community centre, better housing and neighbourhood improvements. In the '80s they occupied waterfront land until the city developed CRAB park and worked for more social housing. In the '90s they fought for North America's first safe injection site and to demand that police find missing and murdered women from the neighbourhood. In the '90s they occupied Woodward's to demand social housing. Now the fight continues for more decent housing, higher incomes and to slow gentrification which is pushing low income residents out and destroying many community assets.

For more information on the DTES community, please visit ccapvancouver.wordpress.com

The impact of the Olympics on low-income people in the DTES

The Olympics have had four major impacts so far:

1. The Olympics have been used as an excuse for governments to make the physical appearance of the DTES better (sprucing up store fronts, creating the Carrall St. Greenway for tourists, opening Woodward's, etc.). This makes it easier for developers to sell condos to upscale residents; it increases property values in the area, and has numerous ripple effects that displace low income residents and/or make them feel uncomfortable in their own community.
2. Police have been giving low income DTES residents fines for very minor offenses like selling things on the street, riding a bicycle on the sidewalk, etc. There is no way that people can afford these fines. They are afraid they will be arrested for unpaid fines and moved off the streets during the Olympics.
3. The provincial government has enacted what local residents call The Olympic Kidnap Act which allows police to force homeless people into shelters even if they don't want to go.
4. While the city and province have opened up more shelter beds for homeless people during the Olympics, funding for many of these shelters ends in April.

Olympic housing promises

As part of Vancouver's Olympic bid, the three levels of government and VANOC made several promises about housing. In March 2007, they created the "Inner-City Inclusive Housing Table" to make recommendations about how to meet these promises.

Several of these unanimous recommendations included:

- Build 3,200 units of social (non-market) housing by 2010
- Eliminate barriers to getting welfare (income assistance) that make people homeless
- Increase welfare rates by 50%
- Make 250 units of housing at the Athletes Village available to mostly low income people.
- Buy 800 units of existing housing.

Only the last promise has been kept.

The boundaries of the DTES



These are the boundaries that the city and CCAP use:



(Source: City of Vancouver Housing Plan for the DTES, Oct. 2005)

The population of the DTES: About 16,000 in 2006.

(Source: paper prepared for CCAP by Hannah Spaulding, October, 2008)

Percentage of DTES residents with low incomes

2006 census tract areas roughly break down into the DEOD (75.5% low income), Gastown and Victory Square (70.6% low income), Thornton Park (64.4% low income) and Strathcona 46.9% low income).

(Source: paper prepared for CCAP by Hannah Spaulding, October, 2008)

Many of these people depend on welfare (\$610 per month for a single person) disability (\$906 per month) or basic old age pension (about \$1100 per month). People on welfare and disability are supposed to pay \$375 for rent but many have to use their food money to pay higher rents. The average rent for a 1 bedroom apartment in Vancouver is \$919 a month

(Source: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp)

Kinds of housing DTES residents live in

In the DTES there are about:

- 5,000 SRO (residential hotel) units, about 1,500 owned by the province and operated as supportive housing;
- 5,000 social housing units;
- 900 special needs housing beds;
- 2,100 owner occupied and market rental apartments and houses.

(Source: City of Vancouver Housing Plan for the DTES, Oct. 2005)

In addition, about 700 residents are homeless.

Of the 3,500 privately-owned SRO units, many are tiny rooms, with a bathroom down the hall for everyone on the floor. They have no kitchen and numerous cockroaches, bedbugs and vermin. People who live in social housing have a stable base in the community and find it easier to get and stay healthy, find work, volunteer and socialize. CCAP is working to get more social housing in the DTES.

Provincially-owned hotels

Since 2007 the province bought or leased 24 old hotels with about 1,500 rooms. Most have been upgraded and all are managed by non profit groups. Most of these hotels were full of residents when they were purchased so they are not additional housing. While these hotels are better now than they were, they are still too small to provide adequate accommodation and people still have to share a bathroom with others on their floor and have no personal kitchen. The hotels don't meet modern earthquake standards.



New low-income housing units to be built

While five more social housing buildings have been planned for the DTES, they will make only a small dent in replacing the 5,000 residential hotel rooms and providing housing for the 700 homeless DTES residents and it will probably be at least 3 years before they will start accepting residents. CCAP is calling for our governments to replace all the hotels in 10 years. Government studies show that it is cheaper to house homeless people than to maintain them on the street. The province has a \$250-million Housing Endowment Fund that it could spend on housing now. Hundreds of groups across Canada are calling for a National Housing Program that would fund 20,000 units of new housing for low income people per year.

Number of new low-income housing units needed

The city's policy is to replace every residential hotel room that is lost with a new self contained unit for low income people. If new affordable housing continues to be built in the DTES at the current rate, it will take 53 years for this policy to be implemented.

Market housing units and the impact of condos

According to a June 2008 memo from the head of the City's housing centre to city council, 1,842 condos and 151 other market housing units are either built or planned for the DTES between 2003 and 2011. Of these, 833 are completed, 959 are under construction, 248 are approved, and 215 are under review. Some of these projects may have been stalled because of the economic situation. Condo construction is a large part of the gentrification process where people who are richer than current residents take over a neighbourhood, replacing the low-income housing, services and businesses that serve low-income people with housing, services and businesses for higher income people. As more condos develop, property values rise, hotel owners convert to more lucrative tourism uses, and new businesses serve the richer residents, increasing rents for social agencies and others with storefronts now. Some new residents, we have seen, lobby fiercely to keep more desperately needed social housing and services out of the area.

Displacement of low-income residents by gentrification

Rents are increasing. Hotel rents are escalating beyond what people on welfare, disability and seniors can afford. According to CCAP's hotel survey, the number of hotel rooms renting for over \$425, \$50 above what people on welfare and disability have for rent, increased by 44% between 2008 and 2009. In other words, about half of the privately owned SROs are renting for more than low income people can afford. Probably as a result of these rent increases, CCAP also found that the number of hotels where two people are staying in one tiny room quadrupled between 2008 and 2009.

Hotels near Woodward's have the highest rents. According to CCAP's 2009 hotel survey, 10 hotels with about 450 rooms, East of Main, rent rooms at over \$425 a month. But 15 hotels with about 1,130 rooms, West of Main, rent rooms at over \$425. This statistic shows that, in general, the hotels closer to Woodward's have the highest rents.

More empty rooms. According to a survey by Jodyne Keller of the VPD in December 2009, some hotels have large numbers of vacant rooms. In CCAP's experience this usually means they are getting ready to sell or to upgrade and rent at increased rents (maybe to students of the new SFU Arts School). These hotels include the Colonial (90 vacant units), and Argyle (40 vacant units). The Golden Crown (28 units) is empty and renovating as is the Burns Block (28 units). Other hotels may be doing this as well. With increased rents these hotels will not be available to current low-income DTES residents. These hotels are all located near Woodward's.

City counting method doesn't give a clear picture. City staff continually inform council that its 1 for 1 replacement policy (for every SRO that is lost, a new social housing unit should be built) is being met. However, the city does not take into account rent increases that make the SROs, the last housing before homelessness, unaffordable to very low-income people. Nor is it examining the impact on low-income DTES residents of owners holding rooms vacant. And the city includes provincially owned hotels as new social housing when they are newly social but not new accommodation.

Gentrification won't help current residents

Over the past 30 years, cuts to government social programs and minimum wage have effectively taken millions of dollars in purchasing power out of the DTES. If welfare had the same purchasing power today that it had in 1980, it would be about \$250 a month more than the \$610 that single people get now. If minimum wage were the same percentage of the poverty line as it was in 1975, it would be about \$11.76 an hour now, not \$8 (and \$6 for new workers). In the '70's and '80's unemployment insurance was a significant source of income, but that program has been badly cut so that EI is virtually irrelevant. CCAP wants social policies to restore purchasing power to residents so they can spend money in local businesses and help them flourish. We want businesses and services that serve existing low-income residents. Gentrifying the neighbourhood won't help existing residents, but will push them out to where they will lose their community of friends, support, and services.

For more information on the DTES community, please visit ccapvancouver.wordpress.com



flux fotos

One of many marches and rallies that have been held by Downtown Eastside residents demanding affordable housing.