



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

# Staff Report

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**To:** Council

**File No.:** 5020-20

**From:** City Manager (CAO)

**Date:** March 11, 2026

**Subject:** Temporary Winter Shelter Hours of Operation Extension

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**PURPOSE:** To update Council on the upgrades to the Temporary Winter Shelter located at 971 Cumberland Road and to recommend moving the shelter from 16 hour a day to 24 hour a day operation.

## **BACKGROUND:**

The 2023 Point-in-Time (PiT) Count in the Comox Valley unveiled a worrying escalation in homelessness, with a recorded 272 individuals experiencing homelessness—more than doubling the 132 individuals identified in 2020. The 2025 PiT showed a slight decrease in the total number of people identified as experiencing homelessness, largely thanks to a number of temporary housing services transitioning to permanent supportive and transitional housing programs, and the opening of a new seniors housing site, but a significant jump in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness – from 89 to 137, or from 35% of participants to 63%. There remains a critical shortage of indoor sheltering spaces for people experiencing homelessness, and the need is increasing.

The building on the City owned property at 971 Cumberland Road has been used to provide winter shelter services for the community since February 2025. The subject property was determined as a suitable location for winter shelter services because: the property was owned by the City and available for immediate activation; its use came at a lower cost than having to rent a privately-owned property; and the site's proximity to the core of town, near other essential services. To make the site useable for shelter purposes, capital improvements to meet building and fire code compliance have been undertaken with costs shared by the City, the Town of Comox and the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD).

In December 2024, Council resolved to defer strict enforcement of the Zoning Bylaw at 971 Cumberland Road to allow the operation of winter shelter services up to April 30, 2025, which enabled the subject property to be used as an Extreme Winter Response (EWR) shelter. The shelter, operated by Lookout Society and funded by BC Housing, ran from February 6 to April 15, open only at night between the hours of 8:30 pm and 7:00 am, and when weather thresholds were triggered.

Over the course of 46 winter nights, the EWR shelter registered 668 'stays' at the shelter. The shelter's reach extended beyond its walls, thanks to strong relationships with neighbors, and community partners. Outreach stayed in close contact with services like ACT, ICMT, Connect, MSDPR, SOLID, The Junction, IHOST, and first responders. Paramedics began bringing individuals in from the cold, sometimes stopping to offer wound care supplies or check in on guests in a caring, informal way. These moments of grassroots care helped reduce hospital visits and built trust with those most hesitant to seek help.

At the July 16, 2025, Council meeting, Courtenay City Council passed a resolution granting Lookout Housing and Health Society (Lookout Society) the authority to submit a Temporary Use Permit (TUP) application for winter shelter services at the City owned property at 971 Cumberland Road. On August 15, 2025, Lookout Society submitted a Temporary Use Permit in accordance with the Council resolution.

At the regular meeting of Council on October 1, 2025, the Temporary User Permit was granted, and staff were directed to enter into a Licence to Occupy agreement with Lookout Housing and Health Services so that they may provide Temporary Winter Shelter Services. One of the conditions in this agreement, as directed by Council, is that the site only be operational 16 hours a day due to constraints on servicing in the building that were deemed to negatively impact the comfort and safety of guests. These included the need to upgrade water service and electrical service to the building. Additionally, potential impacts on the neighbourhood were to be monitored and assessed. It was noted that if the needed building upgrades and operations were going well that the hours of the service may be extended to 24 hours per day for the remainder of the winter season (currently scheduled to end April 15th).

Impacts of the shelter were to be monitored through two means: community outreach and the creation of a Community Integration Table where service providers, neighbours and residents in the area, including representatives from Island Health, RCMP, and the City, could collaboratively and proactively address any issues that may arise.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

With approximately six weeks of operation remaining, staff are recommending a change in the hours of operation of the Temporary Winter Shelter (TWS) to increase from 16 hours per day to 24 hours per day based on the rationale provided below. Note that the proposal reflects a change in the License to Occupy, not a change in the Temporary Use Permit itself.

#### *Building improvements*

Required building upgrades have now been made including both water and electrical upgrades and services. There are now three washrooms and a coffee counter/ hand washing station operational on site. There are still no showers, however guests have been accessing existing free shower programs in the community. A review will need to be conducted by Building Services to determine whether the entire building can be made available for use by Lookout Housing and Health Society, or if the License to Occupy will remain for the two indoor sections currently being used, as well as the external courtyard. Lookout Housing and Health Society has indicated that the existing space is sufficient to accommodate 24 hour services as not all guests remain in the building at all times, and the natural comings and goings of guests will be manageable with the existing common spaces (indoors and outdoors, plus staff storage and outreach offices).

#### *Positive potential impacts of a change in operating hours for the community*

Moving to a 24 hour a day model of service delivery is intended to strengthen community impact mitigation. Allowing the site to remain open to guests means that shelter guests do not have to find alternative locations during the day. This is expected to reduce the impact of having nowhere to go and reduce sheltering in business alcoves, on the Island Corridor Foundation property, or having to transport belongings to and from the shelter. While these issues are not exclusive to shelter guests, removing the need to find shelter and spaces to be during the day for 18 people is likely to see positive impacts.

Additionally, as people receive additional support the likelihood of being connected with ongoing supports and services increases. The shelter outreach services successfully referred 16.7 % of guests to treatment services. Housing support and referrals have been provided to 87% of guests. These services result in an overall betterment of our community and an overall reduction in the number of people who are living unsheltered. This in turn reduces the impacts of homelessness on city parks, private spaces, and housed community members.

Moving to 24-hour shelter services would decrease daytime reliance on parks, public facilities, washrooms, and transit amenities while also reducing calls related to unsheltered daytime presence, including lessening strain on bylaw enforcement, police, and emergency services and improving conditions in surrounding neighbourhoods during the daytime.

*Positive potential impacts for shelter guests*

Moving towards a 24-hour model has a multitude of benefits including positive health and safety impacts through a reduction in daytime exposure to cold, severe weather, and environmental risk and providing a safe space for medically vulnerable individuals to remain indoors. It would lower the risk of injury, illness, and crisis escalation during daytime hours and would encourage recovery and stabilization rather than daily survival activity.

The expansion of hours would support dignity, stability, and trauma-informed care by eliminating the daily requirement for guests to leave the site as it reduces stress, fatigue, and destabilization caused by repeated displacement. The model would allow for guests to retain belongings securely throughout the day and create predictable routines that support calmer behaviour and compliance. It would also improve access to services and housing pathways by enabling daytime engagement with outreach, health, and housing supports and align shelter availability with standard business hours for services. This model would improve follow-through on housing, income, identification, and medical appointments and would support better coordination with community services.

Operating 24-hours per day would support operational efficiencies, opportunities to mitigate risk, and support neighbourhood alignment by simplifying shelter operations by maintaining consistent occupancy for guests. It would reduce guest frustration and conflict associated with daily exits and improve staff ability to monitor well-being and respond proactively. Additionally, it would support the implementation of site-specific operating policies aligned with neighbourhood needs, including:

- Guest conduct and behaviour expectations
- Managed outdoor space and loitering mitigation
- Community safety, cleanliness, and noise considerations
- Clear escalation and response protocols

*Supporting the broader community services network*

In addition to the above-mentioned benefits, moving to a 24-hour model could reduce the strain on already overburdened services in the community. The Connect Center on Cliffe Avenue is the only day-time service hub available for people experiencing homelessness in the Comox Valley. Services provided at the drop in include:

- Health services
- Overdose prevention and harm reduction services
- Access to hygiene resources like washrooms, showers, and laundry
- Storage facilities
- Meals
- Connection with outreach and other community services

BC Housing's funding of the Connect Centre is limited to shelter services for 33 people, and the offering of these additional day-time services has only been made possible through a variety of grants. Grant funding is insecure and the Comox Valley Transition Society (operators of the Connect Centre) has recently expressed

the need to limit their daytime services due to financial constraints. These services are critical, and have had a positive impact on the City, including improved conditions for people experiencing homelessness and better experiences for businesses and clientele of Downtown Courtenay.

The Connect Center records over 150 interactions with clients daily. As they serve the same clientele as the Temporary Winter Shelter, if the site at 971 Cumberland were to be used as a 24-hour service than there would be 18 less people relying on Connect for a place to be during the day, meals, washrooms, and other services. The outreach team at 971 Cumberland is able to offer personalized care and support that Connect is currently attempting to provide without adequate funding.

The Mayors and Chair of each local government in the Comox Valley sent a letter to the provincial government on February 27th, 2026, advocating for appropriate funding for daytime services at the Connect Center. Until this funding is secured there is a large gap in services for the community. Moving the 971 Cumberland shelter to 24-hour services would alleviate some of the potential negative impacts of this service gap.

For clarity, the move to 24-hour operations at Cumberland Road does not mean the relocation of Connect Services onto this site. Day-time services would be limited to guests of the shelter only. This means that there is an 18-person limit for services and services would not be available to the broader public or other individuals experiencing homelessness who are not staying at the shelter. It is expected that traffic to and from the site on Cumberland Road will decrease with this change as guests are not required to leave and return at set times each day.

#### Piloting the 24-hour operating model

Adjusting the License to Occupy for the remainder of the winter sheltering season is an opportunity to pilot 24-hour operations at this location. BC Housing has indicated that funding for the increase in service is available for the remainder of this season. Moving to this model now allows the City and Lookout to benefit from this funding now and assess the impact. This assessment, done through the Community Integration Table, Bylaw reports, shelter service reports, and season wrap up reports, can help inform an appropriate level of service for following seasons. BC Housing also prioritizes and plans future funding based on the level of service provided at each site. Shifting to operating hours now increases the likelihood that 24/7 funding will be available in the future.

#### **POLICY ANALYSIS:**

*OCP, 2022*

##### Affordable Housing

- AH 13: Identify undeveloped and underdeveloped municipal sites for future affordable housing projects with emphasis on providing a mix of tenures including supportive housing.
- AH 18: Advocate for senior government funding for affordable housing projects and initiatives. Social Infrastructure

##### Social Infrastructure

Social Infrastructure Policy 26: Work regionally to identify sufficient and suitable locations for emergency shelters, including during weather related events and evacuations.

- 'SI 6: Identify an appropriate role for the City in the delivery of social infrastructure in relation to other organizations, agencies, and jurisdictions that provide services for equity-priority groups.

- SI 8: Continue to support regional partners on program administration and delivery for homelessness, poverty prevention, mental health, addiction, and overdose prevention programs.
- SI 16: Provide sufficient, high-quality public spaces that promote social connectedness. Include amenities to support all ages and abilities such as public washrooms, seating areas, and drinking fountains.
- SI 17: Develop a strategy to address community need for public washrooms, including hand washing stations and access to secure potable water.
- SI 21: Support volunteers, organizations, and other social assets to continue undertaking their work within the community.

**Zoning:** Zoning for this site is Industrial 2. This site has a Temporary Use Permit to allow the provision of shelter services until fall of 2028.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**

There are no financial implications for the City associated with the proposed change. Approval of this item would not require any additional municipal funding; rather, it would enable Lookout Health and Housing Society to access increased funding from BC Housing. This funding has already been earmarked by BC Housing specifically for this purpose and is contingent on Council approving the move to a 24-hour operation, thereby allowing the organization to enhance service delivery without creating a financial impact on the City.

Being able to access this additional funding now gives Lookout a higher chance of receiving 24/7 funding in future years which can support the organization in the long term.

**ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:**

Processing the change in Licence to Occupy is a component of the core duty of Financial Services; work will be minimal and carried out through Financial Services staff.

Oversight and engagement with the shelter provider and BC Housing regarding the Temporary Winter Shelter have been led by Recreation, Culture and Community Services through staff and contracted services, and are currently under the purview of the City Manager.

**STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:**

This initiative addresses the following strategic priorities:

- Social Infrastructure - Identify roles for the City in the delivery of social infrastructure outlined in the OCP; Implementation plan for delivery of social infrastructure
- Social Infrastructure - Continue working with community agencies to deliver day services. Explore role in the provision of social support services, including future of Connect Centre.

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:**

2025 Winter Season Community Open House

Post operation of the EWR program at 971 Cumberland in winter of 2025, the City and Operator (Lookout) held an open house to allow neighbours and residents to provide feedback on the season. Feedback indicated that the primary challenge for the community was the unpredictability of the service under the EWR model. Hours of operation were also a concern, with overlap in closing hours of the shelter with school, business, and public works yard opening hours resulting in 'traffic jams' of people leaving the shelter, often

with large carts, and vehicles (cars, bicycles, City maintenance trucks, etc.) all trying to navigate the road at the same time. There was general support for a TWS to mitigate these challenges.

#### Temporary Use Permit Engagement Process

The Temporary use Permit engagement included a Community Information Meeting (discretionary engagement regulated by Courtenay's Development Procedures Bylaw No. 3106), the statutory public notice requirement that is mandated by the Local Government Act and Community Charter, a meeting for neighbouring businesses, and a Notice of Application sign installed on site. Invitations to engage, provide comment via an online survey, and additional information about the TUP was mailed to 1,046 addresses in the area (far exceeding the 100-meter radius required), and information was available on the City website.

The key themes of comments heard from the community and in their written comments were, in no particular order:

- concern that if permitted, a shelter may become permanent or extend in duration longer than the term of the TUP,
- concern around an increase in crime and a decrease in safety for the surrounding neighbourhood,
- concern about the compatibility of the shelter with neighbouring uses, such as daycares and schools.
- support for the TUP and a prioritized concern for the well-being of the unhoused community,
- concern that services which support people experiencing homelessness and/or mental health and substance use are too concentrated to the neighbourhood/area where the TUP is being proposed,
- support for the TUP but concern around its ability to operate safely and not result in a decrease in safety for the surrounding neighbourhood,
- concern around a decrease in property values/inability to sell a home in the near vicinity,
- concern that some of the nearby uses were incompatible and could put those users in danger (primarily the nearby daycare and schools), and

#### Community Integration Table Reports

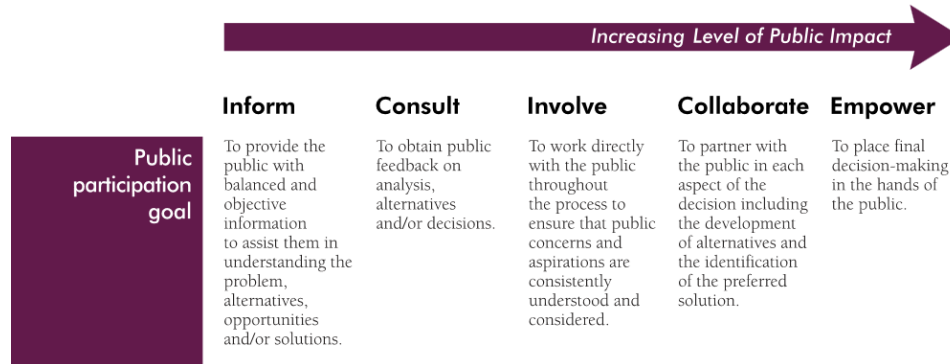
Since approving the Temporary User Permit and entering into a Licence to Occupy agreement with Lookout Health and Housing Society, the City of Courtenay has also secured an independent facilitator to host a Community Integration Table (CIT). The purpose of a Community Integration Table is to build relationships between members that support proactive problem solving including:

- Assist with developing good neighbour policies that speak to common neighbourly disputes such as noise, etc.
- Create opportunities for neighbourhood connections such as open houses, shared meals, community clean-ups and other events.
- Discuss and support shelter services outcomes, including impacts on guests, neighbours, and the broader community of Courtenay.
- Contribute to mid-season and season-end reports that summarize the outcomes of the above activities and are made available to the public.

The CIT has been meeting monthly since December. At meetings, residents and business owners of the area have stated that the impacts of 971 Cumberland have been minimal but continue to raise the general impacts

of encampments / sheltering, debris, distress, and intoxicated persons on the neighborhood. There have been a small number of reports about specific incidents, such as a guest needing medical and RCMP intervention, suspected shelter guests camping nearby which have been responded to by Lookout staff as appropriate, and observations of substance use in public. The shift to 24-hour operations will likely reduce many of the minor concerns raised as shelter guests will have a place to stay and access support throughout the day.

Staff have both consulted and involved the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



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**OPTIONS:**

1. THAT Council direct staff to modify the current Licence to Occupy with Lookout Housing and Health Services to allow 24-hour operations at 971 Cumberland Rd for the purposes of providing Temporary Winter Shelter services.
2. THAT Council direct staff to maintain the current 16-hours per day maximum for the Temporary Winter Shelter located at 971 Cumberland Rd.
3. THAT Council provide alternative direction to staff.

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