



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

# Briefing Note

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**To:** Council

**File No.:** 5020-20

**From:** Director of Recreation, Culture, and Community Services

**Date:** October 23, 2024

**Subject:** Winter Shelter Strategy Update

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**PURPOSE:** To update Council on the Winter Shelter Strategy project and to update Council on progress in securing and activating winter shelter locations in the Comox Valley for the 2024 / 2025 winter season.

## **BACKGROUND:**

Recognizing winter sheltering options are a critical service for people experiencing homelessness, the City of Courtenay expressed interest in leading the development of a Winter Shelter Strategy for the Comox Valley. In August 2024 funding was approved by the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) from the Homelessness Support Services function to support the City in development of the strategy. This project will begin by focusing on activating winter sheltering spaces for the 2024/2025 winter season, and then continue to work with partners to build a winter sheltering strategy to bridge services until a permanent shelter is built.

## **DISCUSSION:**

### **Project Status**

#### *Consultant Secured*

Urban Matters CCC has been secured by the City of Courtenay to support development of a Winter Shelter Strategy and activation of a shelter for the 2024/2025 season. The consultant team brings more than 20 years combined experience working with communities across B.C. to respond to challenging issues such as housing and homelessness, toxic drug supply crisis response, community health and wellness, poverty reduction, accessibility and more. Urban Matters will provide administration, facilitation, planning, and project management support to the project.

#### *Establishing a Winter Shelter Working Group*

To efficiently secure winter sheltering options for the 2024/2025 winter season, the Emergency Weather Response Task Force (established in fall of 2023) has been paused and a Winter Shelter Working Group has been launched. The Working Group brings together operators, service providers, local government staff, and funders to act on establishing winter sheltering options for the current season. The purpose of this group is to facilitate and support shelter activation, as well as gather as a community of practice to ensure the successful operation of winter shelter services through sharing of knowledge, skills and resources that directly support operations.

The initial meeting of the Winter Shelter Working Group was on October 11, 2024 where staff provided an overview of the winter shelter strategy project as well as status update on current activities including the Extreme Weather Response Community Plan and regional emergency warming centre activities. Through this meeting potential additional funding sources were identified, as well as sharing of knowledge and expertise, and interest by multiple organizations to support this year's efforts. A list of invited groups can be found in Attachment 1.

### *Funding Applications to BC Housing*

An Extreme Weather Response (EWR) Community Plan has been submitted to BC Housing by the Coalition to End Homelessness. It includes expanded spaces (approximately 12 beds) at two current sheltering locations and a proposal for an additional EWR at a location yet to be confirmed (approximately 20 beds).

Staff have been informed by BC Housing that all available funding for Temporary Winter Shelters (shelters that run regardless of weather from November 1 to April 30 annually) has been fully allocated for the 2024/2025 season. The City has engaged in discussion with BC Housing staff regarding the significant gap in shelter availability in the Comox Valley and the need for consistent sheltering services to be offered. As such, staff have submitted a budget request to BC Housing for a Temporary Winter Shelter program (20 bed) in the hopes that additional funding will be made available.

As per past discussions and reports to Council and the Comox Valley Regional District, the funding models between the two programs (EWR and Temporary Winter Shelter) differ significantly. If funding is only secured for an EWR shelter, and not for a Temporary Winter Shelter, additional funding will be required to support the operation including but not limited to lease and security costs.

### *Securing Location and Operator*

Discussions are continuing with property managers, owners, and local institutions to determine and secure a space from which to operate an EWR or Temporary Winter Shelter. Staff have reviewed a variety of currently vacant spaces to assess for suitability and willingness. There are currently three potential locations in the Comox Valley that staff are pursuing further, in consultation with the Coalition to End Homelessness and interested operators, to determine feasibility for activation. This next phase of work will include a review of the building implications from a use and code perspective, review of zoning regulations, and engagement with interested parties and neighbouring organizations and or businesses. These reviews will determine the path forward towards space activation.

Based on the current locations available it is likely the shelter will only operate overnight and will not provide daytime services. This is due to the funding limitations of the EWR program as well as site amenity limitations (i.e. lack of showers, kitchens, etc), and also to address community concerns related to the impacts of shelter use during daytime activities. The sites currently available will also likely require that the operator implement a Community Advisory Committee for the term of the shelter to support community integration.

The Coalition to End Homelessness released an expression of interest in the summer for organizations interested in being potential operators and a final request for interested parties was discussed during the Working Group meeting. Additional engagement with interested operators and supporting agencies will occur through the Working Group, and once BC Housing funding has been approved more detailed discussions will occur.

### **Native Sons Hall**

Staff have received a request to consider making the lower Native Sons Hall (NSH) available for an Extreme Weather Response shelter. The NSH is currently identified, as per Council direction at the December 6, 2023 Council meeting<sup>1</sup>, as an emergency response location for regional warming centre activation, through the

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<sup>1</sup> [Warming Centre and Extreme Weather Response Shelter Update \(escribemeetings.com\)](https://www.escribemeetings.com)

Comox Valley Emergency Program. At the December 6, 2023 meeting, Council also approved the use of the Tsolum building as an EWR shelter, however this building was never activated in the 2023/2024 season and is unfortunately not currently available due to the Comox Road Sewer Project. Staff have shared that the NSH is not available as an EWR and do not recommend its use for activation as an EWR shelter.

Staff fully support recreation facility use for emergency responses to meet the diverse needs of our community on a short term and sporadic basis. NSH is an actively used recreation, culture, and community facility, and with a variety of spaces, NSH hosts diverse programming and events through Courtenay Recreation, community groups, and private rentals. It is manageable to make the NSH available for emergency response with limited impacts to services and patrons, however ongoing activation as an overnight shelter is not compatible with current use and would require substantial adjustments to staffing, services, and programs.

The Warming Centre activations in 2023/2024 were successful due to an effective operator, good communication and coordination, and collaborative planning. It is important to note that despite the warming centre's effectiveness it also comes with challenges that must be acknowledged and considered in decisions to maintain or expand its use for overnight sheltering. During the short Warming Centre activations (two activations over approximately 9 days total) in winter 2023/2024, Courtenay Recreation received two rental cancellations, and a number of recreation program participant cancellations and concerns from residents and patrons. Warming Centres operated 10:00pm to 7:00am in the lower NSH; however other programs and rentals continued to operate late into the evening and starting in the early morning (6:00am) throughout the entire building. While last year's activations did not result in the City cancelling any rental permits, this is a potential implication depending on the schedule of rental activities and when weather conditions warrant Warming Centre activations.

During its operation, staff responded to multiple plumbing issues, supported the clean-up of biohazards both inside and outside the building, and addressed the impacts of congregation on safety and access at building entrances both at NSH and the Florence Filberg Centre. It is for these reasons, as well as overall risk management, that overnight use of this nature at this location requires a City staff person on site to support the warming centre operations and respond to issues that arise to ensure they are addressed in a timely fashion that reduces impacts on other uses and patrons. Courtenay Recreation does not have the staff capacity to provide staffing on an ongoing, overnight basis to enable EWR activation at this location.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**

The Comox Valley Regional District approved allocation of \$91,000 through the Homelessness Supports Services Function 451 towards the development of a Winter Shelter Strategy and activation for the 2024/2025 winter season. Due to the urgency of securing a location for this season, consultant hours are currently focused on supporting EWR activation, with work on the longer-term strategy on hold at this time.

Depending on the type of shelter activated (EWR or Temporary Winter Shelter), additional funding may be required from local government to support the shelter, such as for lease and security costs. Should Council direct staff to consider the use of the Native Sons Hall as an EWR, staff will return with the financial implications including revenue impacts and additional costs including overnight facility staff which are not funded through the EWR program.

**ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:**

Recreation, Culture, and Community Services is leading this work internally within the City. Once a space is identified, support from Development Services and Courtenay Fire will also be required. The development of a Winter Shelter Strategy is not currently within the City’s or RCCS’s strategic priorities or workplan, so other departmental initiatives are being delayed to support this work.

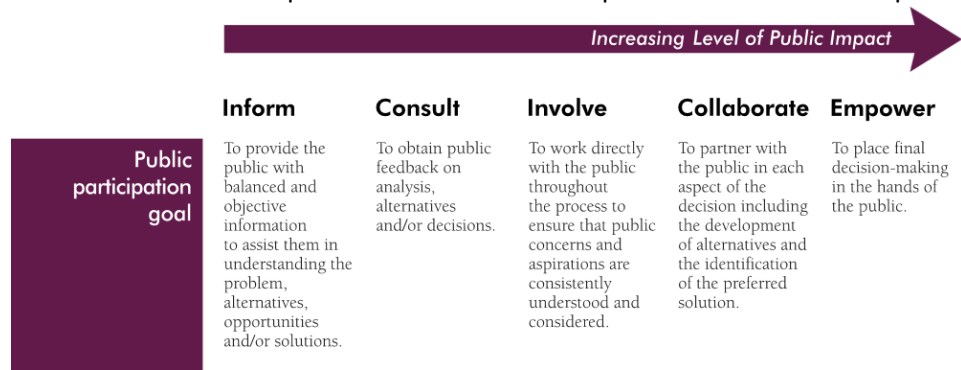
**STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:**

N/A

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:**

Staff are engaging with operators, service providers, local government staff, and funders through the Working Group to act on establishing winter sheltering options for the current season. Staff are also engaging with landlords regarding potential space use.

Staff would inform the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



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**RECOMMENDATION:** THAT Council receive the “Winter Shelter Strategy Update” briefing note.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Winter Shelter Working Group Invitation List

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Concurrence: Geoff Garbutt, M.Pl., MCIP, RPP, City Manager (CAO)