



November 8<sup>th</sup> 2013

Mayor and Council  
City of Vancouver  
3rd Floor, City Hall  
453 W 12th Ave  
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4

Dear Mayor Robertson and members of Council:

I am writing on behalf of the board of directors and members of the West End Seniors' Network (WESN) to provide you with our feedback on the recently released draft *West End Community Plan*. We represent our membership of over 800 seniors and many more that use our services.

WESN has been very involved with this process from the outset, and I would like to start this letter by expressing our appreciation for the efforts Holly Sovdi and his planning team have made to engage West End residents in the development of the plan.

Our overall impressions of the draft plan are positive. In particular we are encouraged to see seniors noted throughout the document as an important demographic in our neighbourhood. The inclusion of policies to support age-friendly facilities (p. 87) is appreciated, and ties in well with the city's **Age-Friendly Action Plan, which city staff presented to Council in June this year.**

While our view of the plan overall is positive, we do have several important areas of concern that we feel must be addressed in order to ensure that current and future needs of seniors in our neighbourhood are taken care of.

***SUMMARY OF REQUESTED AMENDMENTS– DETAILS IN BODY OF SUBMISSION***

**A. Housing**

- 1) Include a clear statement supporting the critical need to expand the supply of affordable housing options for seniors.
- 2) In Section 8.1, state clearly that the plan clearly defines "social housing" as the traditional 'rent geared to income' formula, in which tenants pay no more than 30% of their gross income for rent.

## **B. Public Benefit and Senior-Specific Facilities**

- 1) Amend Section 17.1 – Recreation Facilities - to name the West End Seniors’ Network in both the “Strategy for the Next 30 Years” and “Ten-Year Policies” sections (p. 103) to ensure that attention remains focused on the need for an enhanced senior-specific facility to be developed in the West End.
- 2) Amend Section 17.3 – Social Facilities – to name the West End Seniors’ Network in the need to renew and expand social facilities over the next 10-30 years.
- 3) Amend Section 18 – Implementation (p. 119) – to name the West End Seniors’ Network as one of the planning partners for the redevelopment of the community centre, library, King George Secondary and adjacent open spaces.

## **C. Transportation**

- 1) At the beginning Section 9.0 of the plan, include a clear statement of principle committing the city to applying an ‘age friendly’ lens to any and all improvements.
- 2) Include timelines for improvements that can be undertaken almost immediately once the plan is approved, for example, replicating the seating that has been done along the Comox-Helmcken Greenway along many other West End streets.

## **PART 2: DISCUSSION**

### **A. Housing**

The report notes that, ‘...today, [the West End] is home to a generally modest income, young population...’. While this statement is true, it tends to obscure the fact that seniors have been and remain a significant demographic in the community. 13% of West End residents – some 6,000 people – are aged 65 or older. A further 28% are aged 40-64, many of whom will be hoping to age in place over the 30 year lifespan of this plan.

As the plan notes, the West End has the second highest number of seniors of any neighbourhood in the city, and an unusually large number of seniors who live alone (60% vs the city average of 29%). Many of these seniors are women and many live on fixed and very low incomes. The West End is one of four Vancouver neighbourhoods with the highest proportions of census tracts showing low income seniors. The draft community plan itself notes that 18% of West End households are paying more than 50% of their income on rent are senior-led. And, as is true of West Enders of all ages, West End seniors are much more likely to rent than own their homes: 68% of seniors in the West End rent compared to 34% in the city overall.

WESN conducted a one-day survey of 90 senior renters (aged 55+) in February 2012 that helps illuminate the challenges older renters are facing. The average length of time the respondents had lived in the West End was 23 years, with a median length of 20 years. This is a stable population who, as most West End residents of any age will tell you, contribute to the diversity and unique character of our community. However, 28% of the survey respondents knew seniors who had already been forced to leave the West End because of rising rent costs and more than 1/3 of them said that, if their rent was to go up by even \$50.00 per month, they would no longer be able to afford to stay in their home.

We point out the above to stress that in any discussion of ‘affordable’ housing in the West End, seniors must be kept front and centre. The reality is that, as we age, housing stability becomes increasingly critical to our health and well-being while at the same time our incomes tend to stagnate or decline. Being able to remain in their neighbourhoods and familiar environments helps keep seniors active, safe and connected. The ongoing escalation of rents is forcing people to cut down on food or medication purchases, and/or ultimately move out of their homes and communities at a stage of life at which they are least able to adapt to such an upheaval. This is neither good social nor fiscal policy.

In light of the above, we have some specific concerns about the discussion of housing in both Sections 8.1 (Housing Supply and Affordability) and 17.0 (Public Benefits Strategy) of the draft plan:

### ***Section 8.1 (Housing Supply and Affordability)***

- 1) Seniors are mentioned only once in this section, and this only in the context of ‘Ending Homelessness”, where they are grouped with ‘at risk’ populations such as people suffering from with mental health and/or addictions issues. While homelessness is, of course, a concern, for seniors in the West End, a more imminent concern is that of being forced out of the community in which they may have lived for decades due to the inexorable increase in housing costs. **We would like to see the plan include a clear statement supporting the critical need to expand affordable housing options for seniors.** Even at its most optimistic, the draft plan envisions providing only 50% of the anticipated demand for social housing units in our community. We need to ensure that the needs of seniors – who tend to be the least resilient of the demographics facing economic displacement from our community – are entrenched firmly in the final plan.
  
- 2) While we welcome the provisions for ensuring ‘social housing’ in Section 8.1, we are very concerned that there is no definition of ‘social housing’ provided. We find the use of the term ‘affordable housing’ being very relative. **We urge Council to state clearly in the plan that social housing is defined as the traditional ‘rent geared to income’ formula, in which tenants pay no more than 30% of their gross income for rent.** Without defining these limits explicitly in the plan, the definition of ‘affordable’ is left wide open, e.g., labeling a unit ‘affordable’ if it rents for 10-20% below our very high market rates is meaningless for a senior whose gross annual income is at or below the poverty line.

### ***17.0 (Public Benefits Strategy)***

In the *Need for Social and Supportive Housing and Delivery of Social and Supportive Housing* discussions on p. 109, there is no mention of the various models of “support” services that have to be provided to make different kind of social housing work. Social housing with support for seniors living independently is quite different from that needed in social housing for families, or for the mentally ill/addicted or hard to house. Each subgroup requires different locational criteria and support services and this needs to be stated clearly in the plan: one size does *not* fit all. For example, council is well-aware of the conflicts that have arisen of BC Housing Corporation placing large numbers of non-senior “hard to house” individuals in buildings that were previously largely inhabited by seniors.

We are also concerned that, at best, the plan aims to achieve only 50% of the social housing units it projects will be needed over the 30 years lifespan of the plan. We would like to suggest Tables 3 and 4 in this section be combined to show more clearly the anticipated shortfall in social housing units. And, of course, we are very concerned that, at best, the plan addresses only 50 % of anticipated social housing need in a city targeting zero homelessness.

## **B. Public Benefit and Senior-Specific Facilities**

The plan notes that we can expect to see an increase in the seniors' population in the West End over the years to come, making it critical that we provide comprehensive supports for them, including senior-specific spaces.

We are happy that the draft plan mentions the need for policies to support age-friendly facilities. However, **we are disappointed and concerned to see no mention of senior-specific facilities in Section 17, Public Benefits.** The draft states in the "Strategy for the Next 30 Years" the need to "renew and expand social facilities and design them to meet anticipated population growth, including Gordon Neighbourhood House and Qmunity." While we applaud the specific mention of both Qmunity and Gordon Neighbourhood House as community organizations in great need of enhanced city support over the next 10 to 30 years, **we are very concerned about the lack of mention of WESN or any senior-specific organization/facilities in this section.**

Seniors fought very hard for spaces such as Barclay Manor and Kay's Place and, while they remain very active spaces, they are already far too small to adequately meet both current and anticipated future demand. Barclay Manor, while beautiful, was never designed as a community facility and its physical layout presents constant programming and safety challenges, as does its location, blocks away from transit routes. The Manor is also shared with the West End Community Centre Association, preventing us from expanding programs and services into evening or weekend hours. Kay's Place, while ideally located as a hub for seniors, is only 468 square feet in size. It is too small to allow for expansion of the services that we know are desperately needed by seniors in our neighbourhood.

**The West End needs a senior-specific centre that can accommodate the programs and services currently scattered across locations such as Barclay Manor, Kay's Place, Gordon Neighbourhood House, the West End Community Centre et al, in a location that is readily accessible by public transit.** Clearly, the logical site for such a facility would be as part of the redeveloped King George School/West End Community Centre and adjacent areas.

To address this significant omission in the draft plan, we are asking for the following amendments:

- 4) Amend Section 17.1 – Recreation Facilities - to name the West End Seniors' Network in both the "Strategy for the Next 30 Years" and "Ten-Year Policies" sections (p. 103) as follows, to ensure that attention remains focused on the need for an enhanced senior-specific facility to be developed in the West End:

"Develop a long-term strategy with the Vancouver School Board, Vancouver Public Library, **the West End Seniors' Network** and other partners to renew and expand

Joe Fortes Library, King George Secondary School and the West End Community Centre, and to explore opportunities to co-locate other community facilities.”

- 5) Amend Section 17.3 – Social Facilities – as follows, to reinforce the focus on improvements to senior-specific facilities:

**Strategy for the Next 30 Years**

Renew and expand social facilities and design them to meet anticipated population growth, including Gordon Neighbourhood House, Qmunity **and the West End Seniors’ Network**. Explore opportunities to purposefully co-locate and secure affordable multi-tenant space for community-based non-profit organizations. The estimated cost is \$18 to \$20 million.

**Ten-Year Policies**

Explore opportunities to relocate or upgrade Qmunity to a purpose-built facility within Davie Village. Support minor upgrades to Gordon Neighbourhood House until long-term renewal is concluded. **Work with the West End Seniors’ Network to identify and pursue opportunities to construct a purpose-built seniors’ facility easily accessible by public transit in the West End.**

- 6) Amend Section 18 – Implementation (p. 119) - by naming the West End Seniors’ Network as one of the planning partners for the redevelopment of the community centre, library, King George school and adjacent open spaces, as follows:

“Following approval of the plan, City staff will begin a site planning initiative in partnership with the Vancouver Public Library, Park Board, School Board **and the West End Seniors’ Network** and work with community stakeholders to identify future options for the West End Community Centre and King George Secondary School site that will provide opportunities for renewing, integrating and better utilizing community facilities.”

In summary, while the draft plan acknowledges the existing and growing population of older people in the West End, it falls far short of conveying the degree to which the community must respond to meet current and projected needs. The West End Seniors’ Network has over 800 members and provides services to members and non-members alike. Regularly we hear of seniors who have to move out of the neighbourhood because their rent is unaffordable... who have to choose between paying rent and buying food or medication...who are faced with filling out a barrage of complicated forms to access basic assistance...who need information and support to remain living actively and independently in their community....

More than 30 years ago West End seniors struggled to establish WESN and, over the years, gain access to Barclay Manor and Kay’s Place as centres of social connection and support for the thousands of seniors living in the West End . We trust that, as we move

forward, city council will continue to support WESN's work and join with us in developing a comprehensive senior centre as part of the community plan.

### **C. Transportation**

13% of West End residents – some 6,000 people – are aged 65 or older. A further 28% are aged 40-64, many of whom will be aging in place over the 30 year lifespan of this plan. Design transportation options that fully meet the specific needs of seniors, and you will design a transportation network that meets the needs of *all* West Enders, including families with young children, people with disabilities, people for whom English is not a first language and others. For example, designing improvements that include allowances for walkers, wheelchairs and scooters will also serve children in carriages and people pushing grocery carts.

The plan outlines many positive moves toward improving transportation options in the West End (Transportation Section 9.0 – Pp. 59-71). However, we are concerned that, yet again, the specific and very critical needs of seniors are being lost in the overall discussion. **We believe Section 9.0 of the draft plan will be greatly strengthened if, at the beginning, it includes a clear statement of principle committing the city to applying an 'age friendly' lens to any and all improvements.**

The plan identifies a number of transportation challenges facing West Enders:

- Narrow and/or uneven sidewalks;
- Poor lighting
- Lack of seating on the streets not served by public transit (i.e., the majority of streets in the West End)
- Lack of bus shelters with clear, readily accessible schedule and route information;
- Limited street crossing signals for the visually impaired;
- Poorly designed/separated bike and pedestrian walkways.

These challenges are more than 'uncomfortable' (p. 60). For seniors, they can lead to serious and sometimes fatal outcomes like falls, collisions or other serious harm. They can also make the difference between elderly persons remaining active and engaged in their community versus being virtual prisoners within their homes, too frail and/or afraid to venture out onto the streets. With increased governmental and social attention directed at the importance of reaching isolated seniors, we need to employ all means to encourage seniors to be more active. Clearly, we cannot separate transportation from social connection, since it plays such a key role in hindering or fostering those connections.

Some additional specific transportation-related concerns/comments about the draft plan are as follows:

- There are no timelines included in the Transportation section. Some improvements – e.g., the placement of much-needed seating along hills and other long stretches of streets not served by transit and improvements to lighting called for in 9.1.8 (p. 61) or the enhancement of waiting areas at transit stops identified in 9.3.2 - could be undertaken almost immediately, and it would be reassuring to see a commitment to such rapid action stated clearly in the plan.
- Further to the preceding point, it is critical that the city work with Translink to immediately address the extremely poor quality of information available at transit stops, particularly information related to schedule and route changes. The current ‘norm’ – which in all too many cases leaves transit users with information that is at best incomplete and at worst, non-existent - is both inconvenient and dangerous. This particularly impacts frail seniors and those with limited English.
- Uneven sidewalks. We are fully aware of the challenges, including expense, of maintaining level sidewalks. However, given the severe health risks they pose for seniors and others with physical and visual disabilities, we ask that the city do more to mark such hazards – e.g., through the use of paint or other markers – particularly in cases where there will be a delay in repairing them.
- We are supportive of improvements to cycling options in the neighbourhood, but we would like the focus of transportation improvements to remain with the needs of residents, the majority of whom use walking as their main transportation mode, rather than the needs of commuter cyclists transiting the neighbourhood:
  - The city must work harder to separate bike and pedestrian paths. English Bay and the Sunset Beach area are two of the most glaring – and dangerous – examples of poor design fostering pedestrian/cyclist collisions. While pedestrians have a responsibility to be vigilant, it is clearly irresponsible to facilitate heavy, high-speed bicycle traffic cutting through the midst of amenity areas that naturally attract throngs of pedestrians.
  - While we note that the Comox-Helmcken Greenway is discussed under the “Walking” section of the draft plan, the reality is that the only component of the greenway that is of significant benefit to pedestrians at present is the seating placed at regular intervals along the route. **We would encourage the city to demonstrate its commitment to improving walkability by expanding such seating along many other West End**



**streets.** The West End is a neighbourhood of pedestrians, and this includes seniors.

### **PART 3: CONCLUSION**

The West End Seniors' Network has been an active and enthusiastic participant in the West End Community Plan process. As stated at the outset of our submission, we have appreciated the dedication and openness of Holly Sovdi and his team. We see much in the plan that is valuable and that, we believe, over the next three decades will help make our neighbourhood even more exceptional than it already is.

However, we do urge Council to take into full consideration the comments and recommendations we have made here. They in no way dilute the intent of the plan: rather, they will strengthen the plan's ability to include *all* West Enders as we move forward.

I and the WESN board of directors would be more than happy to speak with you to further discuss the contents of our report. We look forward to seeing our input included in the final version of the West End Community Plan.

Sincerely,



Eric Kowalski  
Executive Director

Cc: Brian Jackson, General Manager, Planning and Development  
Holly Sovdi, West End Community Plan team  
City of Vancouver Seniors Advisory Committee

