



Chair: Mike Harcourt

FUNDERS' UPDATE: BUILDING COMMUNITY SOCIETY APRIL 2013

Business and governments have important roles to play, but they have to be involved on the condition of respect and accommodation for low-income people.

- Milton Wong, Founder, Building Community Society.

7 Years of Commitment

Building Community Society (BCS) is a group of people with backgrounds in government, business, communications, community work, planning and architecture with backgrounds and interests in the Downtown Eastside.

Since 2006, BCS has focused on ending chronic homelessness, generating affordable housing and developing safe, sustainable and healthy communities in the Downtown Eastside for the benefit of the area and the city as a whole.

BCS does this by contributing to informed discussion, planning and decision-making in shaping the future of the Downtown Eastside, supporting promising demonstration projects and advocating and assisting a community-driven Local Area Planning Process for the Downtown Eastside – at all times respecting local knowledge and accomplishments and working in collaboration with local organizations.

Activities: 2012

Downtown Eastside Local Area Planning Program

Since its inception BCS has been advocating for a local area plan for the DTES. Without it there is no framework for making decisions about development and how it will shape the future of the area. Without it the communities of the DTES live and work side by side but have no playbook to ensure the priorities of each complement and do not compete or clash with one another.

A historic initiative was launched in 2011 when the City called on BCS and the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council (representing low income activist residents) as co-chairs of a new Local Area Planning Committee. The first task was to develop terms of reference, then to populate the committee and get the process underway. Work began in April 2012. A majority of the participants are living with low incomes (reflecting DTES demography), and there is gender, racial and ethnic diversity. Local business is represented as are various community groups.

The LAPP is engaged in planning with the involvement of several experienced members of BCS in four areas: "Our Homes, Our Places, Our Well-Being, and Our Livelihoods." The City is providing extensive staff support led by a senior planner with whom BCS works closely. The report is due in September for submission to City Council in November.

BCS is also contributing to informed public discussion about planning in the Downtown Eastside through publications and papers. A recent Vancouver Sun Op-Ed piece by BCS Chair Mike Harcourt spoke to the importance of a local area plan ensuring that low income residents have a future in the area (March 2, 2013).

Aboriginal Mother Centre: The Centre officially opened in December 2011 with 16 residential units for Aboriginal mothers and their children and a full range of support services: health, social, cultural, training and employment.

Without the Centre, the mothers are at risk of losing their children and facing a life of hardship on the street. Plans are now underway to build a 40-unit permanent residence on adjoining property so mothers at AMC can be assured of safe, appropriate housing for themselves and their children.

The AMC is an Aboriginal organization whose founder Penny Irons learned about mothers' centres in Europe and felt the model would be particularly suited to young Aboriginal mothers in Vancouver. Builders Without Borders led the planning and construction for the Centre. BCS has assisted with fund-raising, with the coordination of the development partners and with providing management assistance. Funders include the Street to Home Foundation, The City of Vancouver, B.C. Housing and private philanthropists. BCS facilitated the Street to Home Foundation's first substantial grant as a new foundation to the AMC project. L'UMA Native Housing Society has provided the legal umbrella for the financing of the project as well as management and technical assistance.

First United Church, "Our Place":

BCS worked intensively with First United Church at Gore and Hastings for the redevelopment of the property as a residential, multi-service, spiritual centre that provides a community for the most marginalized.

By the fall of 2011 the project was well advanced with architectural plans and with planning for a capital campaign. However it was put on hold when a change of church leadership occurred. During 2012, BCS worked with First United in its review of all aspects of the project to ensure that what emerges will serve the mission of the church and the needs and assets of the community with financial sustainability.

Background Research on Substance Abuse and Mental Illnesses

One of the foremost challenges to the development of safe, sustainable and healthy communities in the Downtown Eastside is the concentration of people with substance abuse and mental illness problems. To understand the scope and severity of this challenge, BCS is investigating research and information with respect to their health and well-being and the fact that the necessary levels of care are not available to the extent required.

Pantages Theatre/Housing Project

Community development involves taking principled risks that will lead to solutions and community well-being. These sometimes succeed and sometimes don't. But even the outright failures generate learning that can be applied to new opportunities.

BCS saw an opportunity to honor the history of the historic Pantages Theatre near Hastings and Main with a housing development on the site that included a significant cultural amenity – a showcase for local arts and cultural groups and a residence affordable for people living on low incomes, including those involved in the arts. In doing so we were building on the inspiring vision of the Pantages Theatre Arts Society. BCS twice made the case to the City to acquire the property to ensure that it would remain an asset for the community, but the timing was off and it didn't happen. BCS worked with the owner and a prospective buyer and various potential funders but the successful formula could not be found. Today plans are underway by the owner to build a 6-story building with a mix of non-market and market housing. BCS is no longer involved. Much was learned about the challenges of putting together multi-party development packages that are community-based.

With Thanks

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BCS is incorporated under the BC Society Act. Funding for projects undertaken may come to BCS directly or through its sponsor society, Sustainable Cities International (SCI) on whose behalf BCS carries out this work.

The mission of Sustainable Cities International is to catalyze action on urban sustainability around the world.

For Information

- Building Community Society: <http://buildingcommunitysociety.org>
- Sustainable Cities International: <http://sustainablecities.net>