



Founder: Milton Wong C.M.

January 2015

Report Back to Our Supporters

Several years ago you generously responded to our request for support for some important pioneering work the Building Community Society was doing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Your assistance was truly a demonstration of belief in what we were (and are) undertaking – to contribute to the renewal of the area – an approach which builds on the natural strengths and the accomplishments of the DTES, one that will benefit all residents but particularly those who are most vulnerable and at risk.

Our focus has been on advocating with the City to develop a local area plan for the DTES through a process led by local residents, organizations, and businesses. As well, BCS has been supporting demonstration projects that can serve as illustrative anchors for community development. Taken together these activities can be considered as investing in the development of social capital; the human and material resources from which people and communities flourish.

Such ventures inherently involve risk; the time and effort and resources of all concerned. Our founder, Milton Wong characterized this work as social risk venture capital – in the belief that trial and error are part of the process.

This has indeed been our experience. Our major effort – to have a DTES local area plan, has happened. BCS was asked by the City to co-chair the planning committee with a representative of a residents' organization, The Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council. After two years of intense work the report was submitted to the City and approved by Council last March. We can't say it was the report we would have preferred but given all of the divergent and often contentious interests within the community and between community sectors and the City it does indeed set some important benchmarks which can serve the DTES well:

1. Revision to the non-market/market housing ratio for private developments in the Downtown Eastside Oppenheimer District whose effect is to take the steam out of speculation and hopefully make land values more realistic for generating affordable housing, particularly non-market and welfare shelter rate housing.
2. A local economic development blue print, backed by a modest capital dollar fund for small businesses that provide affordable products and services to the area.
3. An emphasis on public and non-profit service providers increasing their collaboration in the provision of support to people experiencing severe addictions and mental health challenges

4. The creation of community-based structures and mechanisms that can ensure oversight and follow-through on the local area plan, and how it is implemented.

The DTES LAP is backed up by a proposed \$1 billion, 30 year budget, front end loaded, of which \$800 million is targeted to affordable housing.

Our efforts to support demonstration projects centred on three: The Aboriginal Mother Centre, The Pantages Theatre and Housing Project, and the First United Church “Community Place” project comprising housing, services and non-denominational church activities within a new facility. All three were intended to demonstrate the creativity and the efficiency and the effectiveness when services to particular populations are coordinated and initiated.

Of the three, the Aboriginal Mother Centre (AMC) is the one which has truly landed and is a success story. For a variety of reasons (which taken together made for an overwhelming challenge) neither the First United nor the Pantages projects were undertaken – despite being so very close to being launched on several occasions (though First United can still be considered a work in progress).

AMC was already in existence as a service organization when Milton was asked by Neil Griggs of Builders Without Borders to become involved with BWB in helping the Aboriginal Mother Centre to expand with a dedicated, 16 unit transition house residence for at-risk Aboriginal moms and their babies. BCS members, working with the AMC board and staff and BWB provided assistance with management and administrative development, fund-raising and special financing. The Centre provides coordinated, on-site support services as well as accommodation.

We are deeply gratified to report that, through the AMC leadership 80% of the mothers and children in the first cycle of interim housing have moved on to permanent housing. And 23 Aboriginal children who were in foster care have been returned to their moms. As of November 2014, AMC has had 114 moms and 166 children go through the Transformational Housing Program. This truly is a return on social investment of immeasurable value for those involved and for our community – quite apart from the very expensive dollars that have been saved in people who otherwise would be continuously recycling through emergency and triage services.

BCS and Builders Without Borders are now assisting the Aboriginal Mother Centre in the development of an adjoining property that will provide 30 to 35 units of permanent rental housing for Aboriginal families. In this DTES post local area planning stage we are acting as monitors, advocates and contributors with residents to the implementation of the plan. A first priority is the need for action to support people experiencing severe mental health and addictions challenges. We have also lent support to the Carnegie Community Action Project’s first-ever Vancouver Conference of SRO Tenants – a very successful gathering with the City of Vancouver that focussed on the sharing of residents’ experiences, tenants’ rights, enforcing safety-bylaws and maintenance standards. There is a huge challenge in dealing with the rapidly depleting stock of shelter-rate affordable housing in the DTES and elsewhere.

It needs to be stressed that broad, informed and sustained public support and leadership from people such as you is needed to ensure that the Local Area Plan is achieved and that projects like the Aboriginal Mother Centre become the norm rather than the exception. The Downtown Eastside housing needs are urgent. The L.A.P. goals, while set in a 30 year time frame require substantial action now: an increase in the welfare shelter allowance for housing, an up-front infusion of money from senior government. The market and philanthropy have important contributions to make but to reach the tipping point public dollars are essential. We encourage you to use your own networks and influence to these worthy ends.

In this work we are an independent resource available to all parties in achieving the healthy, inclusive Downtown Eastside that all desire – and for which our city will be that much healthier in the future.

Again, thank you for your support in the past. Your assistance was critical in the developmental stages of this work. As members of the Building Community Society we are committed to investing our volunteer time in this important work.

With every good wish for 2015.

Mike Harcourt C.M. (Chair), Larry Beasley C.M., Frank Kaplan, Ian Chang, Michael Clague C.M., Jacquie Forbes-Roberts, Maggie Geiser, Roger Hughes, Ken MacFarlane, Bill MacEwan, Paul Sullivan, Joe Wai, Gerry Zipursky. *We also want to acknowledge the valuable contribution our colleague Ray Spaxman made to the DTES LAP report before retiring from BCS.*