

Homeless pledge a real challenge



GARY MASON
GMASON@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM
NOVEMBER 18, 2008

If Vancouver mayor-elect Gregor Robertson is serious about eradicating homelessness in the city, he's going to need thousands of units of supportive housing to get the job done.

That's when solving the problem gets more difficult.

Everyone agrees something needs to be done to help the poor, often drug-addicted and mentally ill people living on the street.

That is, as long as finding them a place to live doesn't bring them to their neighbourhood where their presence might increase crime and bring down property values.



But a major new study by the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University is worth considering in light of the debate that is sure to be ignited in Vancouver over this issue in the coming months.

Supportive housing, for the uninitiated, is affordable accommodation that also provides onsite services to people who need help to live on their own.

Residents might include formerly homeless people living with serious medical conditions such as HIV-AIDS or some type of mental illness. Others might have drug-addiction problems.

The only hope these people have of making it on their own is having access to onsite services that can help them cope. Supportive housing might offer residents the services of a public-health nurse as well as mental-health and drug-abuse counselling. In other words, the kind of help that addresses the underlying causes of someone's homelessness at a cost that is far cheaper in the end than having a person live in a shelter with a hospital being the only place for treatment.

New York city, which has the most successful and far-reaching program to end homelessness anywhere, began building supportive housing projects in the mid-1980s. Today, there are more than 14,000 units spread out over five boroughs, with thousands more on the books.

The housing proposals were met with vociferous opposition from the outset. According to the U.S. study, people in neighbourhoods where the developments were going up were worried that the housing would "increase crime ... bring people to the neighborhood whose personal appearance or behavior will make visitors uncomfortable and otherwise decrease the quality of life in the neighborhood."

The biggest concern of all was the impact the housing would have on property values.

The Furman Center's study evaluated the impacts of 123 non-profit-run developments that housed 7,500 residents and opened across New York between 1985 and 2003. (For those seeking greater detail on methodology, I suggest you visit the center's website for more information).

In summary, the U.S. findings revealed that the value of properties within 150 metres of supportive housing did not drop when a new development opened and showed "steady growth relative to other properties in the neighborhood in the years after the supportive housing opens."

(Interestingly, the study found that two to five years before a supportive housing development opened - while it was still in the proposal or construction phase - properties within 150 metres sold for about 4 per cent less than properties in a comparative area where there was no supportive housing planned).

The study showed that properties farther away from the supportive housing (between 150 and 300 metres away) showed a decline in value when the development first opened, but realized a steady increase relative to other properties in the neighbourhood.

Ingrid Gould Ellen, co-director of the Furman Center, said in statement: "Our findings do counter fears that supportive housing will lead to sustained neighbourhood decline and suggest that the city, state and providers of supportive housing have been doing a good job integrating supportive housing developments into the surrounding community."

Of course, this study alone is not going to calm the fears that people throughout Vancouver are going to have - and express - when they learn there is a supportive housing development being planned for their neighbourhood. But it should be something people at least consider.

Supportive housing is the only true answer to homelessness. It has to happen - not just in Vancouver but across the country. And it has to happen, in bulk. A couple hundred units here and there aren't going to do much good at all.

It's precisely the kind of social infrastructure we should be investing in during tough times.