

June 9, 2020

Honourable John Horgan
Premier of British Columbia
PO Box 9041 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E1

Dear Premier Horgan:

As all levels of government across Canada begin implementation of COVID-19 recovery plans, I am writing to you today to seek long-term support and solutions from the provincial governments, as we move through this process together.

Specifically, I am asking that the provincial government use the coming period of social reordering and economic rebuilding as an opportunity to address the systemic housing insecurity issues related to mental health, poverty and addiction – with the shared goal of safe and accessible housing for all.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a bright light on the issue of housing insecurity and homelessness and the often-associated issues of mental health, poverty and addiction, it has also enabled governments to demonstrate that they are able to act quickly to appropriately house people when such action is deemed a priority. In British Columbia, accommodation for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness has quickly been secured in a variety of innovative ways – from the government-purchase of hotels to the setup of temporary lodging and the introduction of regulations that prohibit evictions. These actions have not only protected individuals from contracting COVID-19 (the initial impetus for the actions); in many cases, they have also set affected individuals on a critical path to sustaining a better quality of life for the long term and enabled access to resources that support recovery and wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated that we do many things differently. Importantly, however, it has also presented us with opportunities to sustain and further develop meaningful changes. There is no better example of this opportunity than that of addressing systemic housing insecurity issues that plague our most vulnerable citizens and hinder opportunities for recovery, health and dignity.

Rather than taking a step back during and after the COVID-19 recovery process, on behalf of Burnaby City Council, I am requesting that the provincial government commit to continue to advance the housing-security progress made since declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initiatives such as British Columbia's Vulnerable Populations Working Group – created to ensure the needs of vulnerable citizens are addressed in relation to COVID-19 and bringing together representatives from the ministries of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, Mental Health and Addictions, Children and Family Development, Health, as well as Emergency Management BC, the City of Vancouver, the Office of the Provincial Health Officer, local health authorities, BC Housing and Community Living BC – have led to innovative housing solutions being created and implemented quickly.

As stated by Shane Simpson, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, “While all of us are feeling the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, there is no doubt that our most vulnerable populations including the homeless and the working poor are disproportionately affected. We are working together with our partners at every level of government and in the social services sector to find safe and efficient ways to provide supports to the people who need them the most as quickly as possible.”

As you know, these COVID-19-focused provincial government actions and initiatives to date have been effective. It is Council's hope that what we have learned and created out of necessity to address pandemic needs can be built upon during and after COVID-19 recovery, including a return to large-scale supportive housing arrangements for people living with a mental illness, such as a revived facility at Riverview.

The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's National Housing Strategy's vision is that “Canadians have access to affordable housing that meets their needs. Affordable housing is a cornerstone of sustainable, inclusive communities and a Canadian economy where we can prosper and thrive.” In addition, it notes the need to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable.

Because achieving safe and accessible housing for all is clearly a shared imperative that will require the focus and resources of all levels of government, I am also writing to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau requesting federal government support.

Burnaby City Council is pleased to see that the tragedy of COVID-19 has set in motion some excellent ways to begin to address the systemic housing insecurity issues related to mental health, poverty and addiction. Thank you for the valuable work of the provincial government to date. We ask that this work continue during the period of social reordering and economic rebuilding currently underway and we look forward to working with you to this important end.

Sincerely,

Mike Hurley
MAYOR