

Province, city say they are negotiating to keep three homeless shelters open

Mike Howell, Vancouver Courier

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The city continues to negotiate with the provincial government to keep the doors open at three temporary homeless shelters.

A statement issued Monday from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development said three of the seven so-called HEAT shelters could possibly remain open beyond April 30. They are located at 201 Central St., First United Church on Gore Street and the Stanley/New Fountain in Gastown. Roughly 400 people per night stay in the three shelters.

"We are discussing the possibility of extending operations of the remaining three HEAT shelters with the city of Vancouver and no decisions have been made," said the statement sent to the Courier. The statement confirmed that four other shelters will close April 30. They are located in Kitsilano, Mount Pleasant, the West End and underneath the north side of the Granville Bridge.

The statement added that B.C. Housing is working with guests of the four shelters, which amount to about 160 people, to "transition them to other shelters and housing." Despite media reports to the contrary, the city earlier agreed with the provincial government that those shelters would close after the winter.

"We made it very clear when we started them that they were only for the winter," said Vision Vancouver Coun. Kerry Jang. "We promised neighbourhoods that, we're sticking to that." As for the three other shelters, Jang said Monday he is hopeful a deal can be struck with the provincial government to keep them open.

Jang pointed out that city governments don't traditionally pay for operating costs of shelters. Since Mayor Gregor Robertson announced the opening of the first shelters in December 2008, the provincial government and the **Streetohome Foundation** covered operating costs of more than \$7 million. The city has provided all but one of the buildings, either through ownership or lease. The First United Church opened its doors as a favour to the city.

Various nonprofits manage the shelters. Guests are provided meals, laundry and washrooms. Space is also available for carts and pets. Jang noted more than 200 people staying at shelters have been relocated to housing. The fact that people are getting regular meals and have access to washrooms and laundry facilities has also been a boost for the homeless.

"We're making great gains with this population and just on those grounds alone says that the government should be funding the operation of them or working with us to open up some interim housing," Jang said. The Vancouver Police Department and the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association support the shelters.

Police Chief Jim Chu has said several times the shelters provide space for people who otherwise would have to be looked after by police officers. The DVBI has recorded a decrease in crime and street disorder, including aggressive panhandling in the downtown core.

The uncertainty of the shelters' future comes as the city's recent homeless count revealed an increase in homeless people since 2008. The count, conducted March 23, showed there were 1,762 homeless compared to 1,576 in 2008.

But the encouraging news from the city's perspective is that 1,334 of the 1,762 homeless were in shelters. "That's huge," Jang said. The statement from the provincial government said it has invested \$172 million to build six supportive housing sites totalling 1,400 suites in Vancouver.

The government also spent \$86 million to buy 24 single-resident-occupancy hotels and another \$54 million to renovate 1,400 rooms.

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