

Fearful residents urge city to close Vancouver homeless shelters

The Globe And Mail

Mon Jun 22 2009

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Section: British Columbia News

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VANCOUVER -- The city has stepped up police patrols around two temporary homeless shelters near the Granville Street Bridge in the wake of a public outcry, but some residents still want the facilities closed.

"It's like we're on Neighbourhood Watch now because we are so fearful of our safety," Lin Sheffield, who lives in a nearby condo, said in an interview. "We keep sending e-mails and phone calls that this is a ticking time-bomb, and no matter what, it seems to fall on deaf ears."

As she spoke Friday, Ms. Sheffield could see police vehicles that had responded to an incident that morning, in which a homeless man was stabbed after a fight broke out near one of the shelters. Police are looking for a suspect.

Vancouver Councillor Kerry Jang said the city has taken steps to address community concerns that boiled over at a public meeting earlier this month.

"We heard very clearly that there were a number of issues that were consistent," Mr. Jang said. "For example, they were quite worried about their personal safety."

In response, the city asked for increased police patrols around the shelters, which are across a back alley from one another at the south end of the Granville Street Bridge. Shelter staff and users have stepped up street sweeps to pick up garbage, including discarded needles.

The bridge-area shelters, with three others, were opened late last year by Mayor Gregor Robertson's homeless emergency action team, which was charged with getting homeless people off the streets during frigid winter months. To quickly get the shelters running, the city waived its usual permit process. No neighbourhood consultation took place before the facilities opened.

Since then, the shelters have been full. In March, the province took over funding of the facilities and agreed to keep them open until the end of June. The city has asked the province to keep them open until April, 2010, as part of an interim housing solutions strategy, which calls for 500 units of temporary supportive housing over the next five years.

That has angered some residents, who feel the shelters have been rammed into the community at their expense. The shelters each have a capacity of about 40 people and are low-barrier, which means they accommodate users' pets and belongings, such as shopping carts, and don't turn away people who are intoxicated. The shelters open earlier in the evening than other city facilities and provide two meals a day.

Drug and alcohol use is not permitted inside the buildings.

The bridge-area shelters have drawn a younger population than other city shelters. About 70 per cent of users are younger than 29, and many return to the shelters night after night.