Fraser Valley Regional District

# CORPORATE REPORT

To: CAO for the Electoral Area Services Committee
Date: 2019-06-11

From: Alison Stewart, Manager of Strategic Planning
File No: 6840-20-010

**Subject: Proposed UBCM Resolution - Provincial Response to Homeless Camps on Crown Lands**

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## RECOMMENDATION

**THAT** the Fraser Valley Regional District Board forward a resolution on the need for a provincial strategy to address rural homelessness and encampments on Crown land to the Union of BC Municipalities for consideration at its September 2019 convention;

**AND THAT** the resolution shall be as follows:

> **RURAL HOMELESSNESS: CROWN LAND ENCAMPMENTS**
>
> **WHEREAS** Homelessness is a challenge facing both urban and rural communities;
>
> **AND WHERAS** electoral areas have the least ability to address homelessness, in that they are by their very nature remote from health, social, police and other services and the minimal tax bases cannot support the hard and soft infrastructure required to address homelessness;
>
> **AND WHEREAS** the province's response to homeless encampments on Crown land has been inconsistent or ad-hoc in nature, sometimes relocating encampments without taking into account impacts on rural communities and regional district resources;
>
> **THEREFORE IT BE RESOLVED** that the province of British Columbia through its newly established Office of Homelessness Coordination within the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Social Development develop a rural homelessness strategy to address what is clearly a gap in the province's response to homelessness.

## STRATEGIC AREAS OF FOCUS

Support Environmental Stewardship
Support Healthy & Sustainable Community

## BACKGROUND

In late August 2018, the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) became aware, after the fact, of an initiative of the provincial government to relocate a homeless encampment (Borden Creek) on Crown Land in the Chilliwack River Valley (Electoral Area E) to a private property in the Columbia Valley (Electoral Area H). An article in the August 31, 2018 Chilliwack Progress provided an outline of the

process, which apparently included the RCMP, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MAH) and the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRORD). While the FVRD has generally been aware of homeless encampment problems on Crown land in the Chilliwack River Valley, the Region was not consulted on this move.

A number of concerns arose with the province's approach to this problem:

1. Since the province facilitated the move, what supports, if any, were provided to ensure the property owner's and area resident's interests are protected. BC Housing's involvement in this process is unclear.
2. What supports, if any, were provided to camp occupants in order to transition them from homelessness to being appropriately housed.
3. There are several other encampments in the Chilliwack River Valley and other rural areas in the region. In this particular case, the private land in question was ALR land located in a rural electoral area. If this has become FLNRORD's standard practice, will the ministry continue to relocate homeless encampments to private lands in other parts of the FVRD, including municipalities?

Based on the experience in the FVRD there is a need for a provincial strategy to address homelessness on Crown land in rural electoral areas as it is an issue not unique to the FVRD. The province has recently established an Office of Homelessness Coordination within the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Social Development, but it is very early in its formation and unclear as to its function and whether the Office will address what is clearly a gap in the province's response to homelessness.

A UBCM resolution asking the province to develop a strategy to address homelessness in rural areas and more specifically address homeless encampments on Crown land may bring this issue to the forefront. A draft resolution has been prepared for consideration at the June 11, 2019 Electoral Area Services Committee and Regional and Corporate Services Committee meetings. The deadline for submitting resolutions to UBCM is June 30, 2019.

**DISCUSSION**

Homelessness is a challenge facing communities throughout the lower mainland and other parts of the province. Increasing numbers of people are choosing to locate in rural areas, on private land, Crown land and First Nations lands. The costs of cleaning Crown land sites are considerable, but downloading such encampments onto a regional district is not a solution. Electoral areas have the least ability to address homelessness, in that they are by their very nature remote from health, social, police and other services. The minimal tax bases of rural areas cannot support the hard and soft infrastructure required to address homelessness.

According to the FVRD's 2017 Homeless Count, approximately one third of the FVRD's homeless population live unsheltered. Approximately 16% of that group live in cars/vans or campers and are found in locations both inside and outside the region's municipalities. The issue in this case is that the province, who is ultimately responsible for the provision of healthcare, housing and social services has

downloaded responsibility of this particular encampment onto the regional district with no consultation or consideration of local Zoning bylaws, ALR status or the community's capacity to accommodate such a land use.

The process used by FLNRORD in addressing the homeless encampment at Borden Creek is of concern. Homelessness is not only a housing issue. Mental health and addiction issues and related health impacts are significant drivers of homelessness. Based on this most recent response, there appears to be no provincial strategy to address homelessness on provincial Crown lands. Rather, it appears to have been dealt with in an ad hoc manner. To place the onus of this problem onto a small rural community without adequate resources is not an appropriate solution. In addition to the health and homelessness issues, these encampments put the environment at risk, with general garbage, human waste, used needles and other dangerous waste in the mix.

Based on the experience in the FVRD there is a need for a provincial strategy to address homelessness on Crown land in rural electoral areas as it is an issue not unique to the FVRD. The deadline for submitting resolutions to UBCM is June 30, 2019.

The proposed resolution is as follows:

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**COST**

No cost

**CONCLUSION**

Homelessness is a challenge facing communities throughout British Columbia. Increasing numbers of people are choosing to locate away from urban centres in rural areas - on private land, Crown land and First Nations lands. Electoral areas have the least ability to address homelessness in that they have a very limited tax base and are by their very nature remote from health, social, police and other services.

A UBCM resolution asking the province to develop a strategy to address homelessness in rural areas and more specifically address homeless encampments on Crown land may bring this issue to the forefront.

**COMMENTS BY:**

**Stacey Barker, Director of Regional Services**
Reviewed and supported.

**Mike Veenbaas, Director of Financial Services**
No further financial comments.

**Jennifer Kinneman, Acting Chief Administrative Officer**
Reviewed and supported.