

“Emerging Directions” in the DTES: A Recipe for Displacement and Devils in the Detail (July 2013), by Carnegie Community Action Project

What’s the LAP and where did “Emerging Directions” come from?

If you’ve been in the DTES over the past few days, you might have seen posters for the Local Area Plan (LAP), “[Emerging Directions](#)” and the city’s [open houses](#).

The LAP for the DTES is a development plan whose purpose is “to ensure that the future of the DTES improves the lives of those who currently live in the area, particularly the low-income people and those who are most vulnerable” (LAPP Terms of Reference). For over a year, low-income residents have been working with City Planners to draw up the Local Area Plan (LAP) for the neighbourhood. However, these meetings did not show any evidence of the City’s plan to stop gentrification, which is displacing low-income residents. Consequently, an alternative plan for the DTES, called the “Social Justice Zone” was created. In just two weeks, over 3,000 residents signed a petition calling for a “[Social Justice Zone](#)” in the DTES.

Last week, the City released its “Emerging Directions” report, which sets the path of the development plan. There was one section missing – the Housing Section. CCAP took the “Emerging Directions” (without the housing section) to our Town Hall meeting on July 16th. We talked it over, but it’s pretty hard to know what to think about a development plan for the DTES that doesn’t have a housing chapter. As CCAP volunteer Harold Lavender said, “the devil is in the detail, but the detail isn’t here.”

The committee saw the full version of “[Emerging Directions](#)”, with the Housing Section, for the first time on Wednesday, July 17th. The first city-hosted open house is on Thursday, July 18th.

Does that sound like enough notice to you? It sure didn’t to CCAP and the low-income caucus of the LAPP. With only two days to analyze the document, here are some initial thoughts. You can read the Housing Section for yourself [here](#). And – most importantly – you can give your thoughts by going to the [open houses this week](#) or [writing to the city](#).

Social Housing. In theory.

If you live in the DTES, you might have heard rumours of the “60%/40%” over the past month. Back in early June, we received a draft “Emerging Directions” and were happily surprised to see that the city was proposing zoning in the Oppenheimer District – the heart of the DTES – for 60% social housing and 40% rental housing. While these numbers wouldn’t mean enough units to house the homeless and replace the SROs, it would at least block condos in the DTES.

Except there was one catch: “Social housing” wasn’t defined. This means that there was no guarantee that any of the housing the city is committing to would be at the welfare/pension rates allowance of \$375/month.

Despite the low-income caucus’ gallant efforts, the new “Emerging Directions” still doesn’t define social housing. This means that people living on pensions and welfare might not be able to afford any of the housing that the plan proposes.

This isn’t an innocent mistake that the city planners have made. It’s a strategic decision, a compromise, and ultimately a complete disregard for the city’s most marginalized and vulnerable residents. The missing definition casts a shadow over all of the “Emerging Directions” housing objectives.

Housing crisis? What housing crisis?

In “Emerging Directions”, the city commits to building **800 new social housing units over 10 years** in the DTES. At last count, there were 850 homeless people in the DTES, and many more who are couch surfing, in unstable living situations, or just not accounted for.

Allowing a 10-year time frame to house some of our community’s most marginalized people while the city invests in things other areas, like art galleries, parks, bike lanes and a business characteristics survey, is baffling. That isn't to say that art, parks and bikes aren't important. We like art, parks and bikes. They should be priorities - after everyone's basic human right to housing is met.

Going back to what Harold Lavender said, the devil is in the detail. The city commits to ending “street homelessness” in the LAP. But what about people living in shelters or inadequate, temporary and unsafe housing? Street homelessness is just the tip of a larger iceberg. The tip won’t go away until the iceberg does. Which brings us to our next point: existing housing in the DTES.

Rats! It’s business as usual in the SROs

The legendary biodiversity in the SROs (as in the bugs and rats), the shocking safety standards (or lack thereof) and the tiny room sizes are no secret. The city’s 2005 Housing Plan for the DTES recognized that 5,000 SRO units needed to be replaced with self-contained units. The LAPP is supposed to implement the Housing Plan.

“Emerging Directions” takes a step backwards. It pledges to **improve 1,500 SROs over the span of 10 years** instead of implementing the city’s 1:1 replacement policy. Renovating 1,500 SRO rooms might sound like an improvement on the present situation, but – again – the devil is in the detail. Will new, bigger rooms in existing buildings mean less overall housing? How will the growing “renoviction” trend be stopped? The city makes a nod to the need for rent control for SROs, but it doesn’t clarify whether rent hikes will be allowed in these new renovated units.

Renovating SROs might not just be bad news for residents – it could also be a bad business decision. The provincial government has been criticized for spending far too much money renovating hotels like the Washington when, for only a small amount more, it could have built new self-contained housing.

What about the rest of the plan?

There's more to worry about in "Emerging Directions." The social housing zoning rates outside of the Oppenheimer district are dangerously low. With the exception of Kiwassa and Hastings East, there are no numbers for how much social housing zoning the city will consider. The 1650 units of market rental housing won't help low income DTES residents. The emphasis on more supportive housing, instead of plain social housing without institutional supports, is part of a pro-institutionalization trend worrying many residents. The proposed rent subsidy measures can be an effective stop-gap measure but can have drawbacks, such as increasing rents in nearby unsubsidized places, costing more than building new social housing in the long term, and maintaining the housing scarcity that drives up rent prices. Caucus members have also raised concerns about a lack of attention to services and supports for children, seniors and women.

That's not to say it's all bad. There are some nice ideas in the LAP. The City has listened, at least in part, to 3,000 DTES residents who signed the Social Justice Zone petition by creating a (more tamey-named) Community-Based Development Area in the Oppenheimer District and on part of Hastings. And, to the credit of community residents who have been making noise for decades, the document recognizes that gentrification exists. It also recognizes that gentrification is displacing neighbourhood residents. Without a strong statement on housing, though, the pretty things that come from the LAP might never be enjoyed by the neighbourhood's low-income people. As it stands now, **"Emerging Directions" is a recipe for displacement.**

But is housing really the responsibility of the city?

The city is quick to say that the other senior levels of government are responsible for housing, and that "Emerging Directions" and LAP are only a summary of the city's commitment.

We agree that the senior governments should be doing more. And we think that the city's role is to push them more.

How can the city do this? Recent history shows that when the city puts down an initial investment in something, it has a good chance of leveraging more money from government. This is precisely what the city is planning to do with the art gallery. And this is how the city got social housing in the blowout surrounding the 2010 Olympic Games.

We're not suggesting that the city should buy land, demand funding from senior government and build more of the same types of government-run housing. Vancouver sits on unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories. Gentrification is part of a cycle of ongoing colonial displacement in the DTES. Vancouver has declared 2013 as a "Year of Reconciliation." Many residents have ideas on how a plan for the DTES can spearhead this "Year of Reconciliation." It's time for the city to listen. And if you're a DTES resident with your ideas about the future of the neighbourhood, make sure you take this moment to have your say. The next few months – when the "Emerging Directions" become the Local Area Plan – are a critical time.