

# **OPINION: Urban Mayors Call on newly-elected B.C. Government to Expand Availability of Substance Use and Mental Health Treatment for Both Youth and Adults**

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*By Mayors Colin Basran and Lisa Helps on behalf of the BC Urban Mayors' Caucus*

During the election campaign the BC Urban Mayors' Caucus released a Blueprint for BC's Urban Future. It called on all parties to address mental health, substance use and treatment, affordable housing, public transit, and to develop a new, sustainable and predictable funding relationship with local governments. All of these issues are important to the well-being of our communities and the health of our economies. Here we emphasize two points out of the four.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an unprecedented escalation in the challenges facing our communities stemming from the mental health and substance crises and lack of treatment options in our communities.

These crises existed before COVID-19, but have been exacerbated by a toxic drug supply, the increased level of pandemic-related homelessness and encampments, and increasing stigma and anger from some members of our communities.

At the time of this writing, 276 people have died of COVID-19 in BC in 2020. As of September 2020, 1202 people in BC have died of overdoses. All of these deaths are tragic. What is equally tragic is that there seems to be no hope on the horizon for those struggling with mental health and substance use; for this epidemic we know there is no vaccine around the corner.

Just like COVID-19, the mental health, substance use and homelessness crisis touches us all. It puts stress and strain on the health care system, particularly on paramedics and other first responders. It means that people are sleeping in parks taking away greenspace for general public use and creating flashpoints in our neighbourhoods. Our businesses – already struggling from the economic impacts of COVID-19 – are facing increased disruption as a result of higher rates of social disorder and unpredictable, sometimes violent behaviour from people in medical distress.

To address these issues, we call on the newly-elected provincial government to immediately expand the availability of the full range of substance use and mental health treatment and recovery options in our communities for both youth and adults, including appropriate facilities for those with complex needs. We need treatment on demand so people get it when they need it. We need action in months, not years.

In addition to the mental health and substance use crisis, our economic recovery and sustainable prosperity is hamstrung by the outdated fiscal relationship between cities and the provincial government.

COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that the fiscal framework set up in 1867 – which sees local governments reliant primarily on property taxes – is wholly inadequate to meet the challenges and opportunities facing cities in the 21st century. The property tax system neither grows with the economy nor distributes costs fairly. And, local governments are responsible for roughly 60 per cent of the infrastructure in British Columbia yet only receive eight cents of every tax dollar. This is not sustainable.

We are optimistic from our meeting with the Premier Elect, days before the election, that there is a strong willingness to work together to develop a new framework before our term of office is up in October 2022. We'd like this new deal with BC's local governments to provide at least \$1-billion annually in direct, unconditional funding for municipal capital infrastructure. We don't want permission to create new taxes and we're not asking the province to do that either. What we're asking for is a re-distribution of the tax pie.

Applying for grants for infrastructure projects is like a roll of the dice – sometimes we get funding for high-priority community projects and sometimes we don't. This impedes local governments' ability to save, invest and plan for the long term. And, in the time it takes to write, submit, evaluate and award grants, construction cost escalation adds millions of dollars to projects and wastes taxpayers' money.

We look forward to working with the new government to address the mental health and substance use crisis and to develop a new fiscal framework. We know the government wants to take bold action to create inclusive, sustainable prosperity in British Columbia. We're here to help, support and champion these efforts.