

BC Urban Mayors' Caucus 2020 Blueprint for British Columbia's Urban Future

COVID's Impact on B.C.'s Urban Communities

British Columbia's urban communities are facing unique challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the BC Urban Mayors' Caucus wants to ensure the next provincial government is ready to work in partnership with local governments to address the most pressing issues facing cities across B.C. as we recover from COVID-19.

Our urban communities are the province's economic engines – home to key industries and their workers, medium- and high-density housing development opportunities, world-class healthcare facilities and post-secondary education institutions. The communities we represent are diverse – from the south-western coast to the North, from the Fraser Valley to the Interior – but the vital economic role that each community plays, and the challenges we each face, are shared.

Our cities are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, which have exacerbated existing challenges related to mental health and substance use, homelessness, and a lack of affordable housing. With vital support from the provincial and federal governments, cities have maintained critical services, such as public transit, but ongoing financial challenges put the long-term sustainability of these services at risk. In addition, we are in danger of falling behind on planning for infrastructure expansion, economic development and climate change as our respective populations continue to grow and British Columbia moves to rebuild post-pandemic.

Our Shared Proposal

In this election, we are asking all parties to commit to working with leaders from B.C.'s urban communities to address the issues we face today, while we plan for the restored prosperity and growth expected when we eventually emerge from the pandemic. Moreover, putting our cities on the path to a strong recovery will support neighbouring smaller and rural communities and B.C. as a whole.

This partnership will require ongoing investments in key areas such as housing, health and infrastructure. A strong recovery will also depend on the creation of a new fiscal relationship between the provincial and municipal governments in this province – one that provides cities with sustainable, predictable and reliable funding tools, so we can support inclusive, equitable urban economies well into the future.

2020 Blueprint for B.C.'s Urban Future

1. Mental Health, Substance Use and Treatment

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 use crises. Too many of our residents are suffering from mental health and substance use issues and, increasingly, brain injury.

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. Our businesses – which are already struggling from the economic impacts of COVID-19 – are facing increased break-ins and other challenges, as a result of higher rates of social disorder and unpredictable, sometimes violent behaviour from people in crisis.

We call on all parties to commit to:

1. 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.
2. Make the recent public health order regarding expanding the number of health professionals authorized to prescribe safer pharmaceutical alternatives to the toxic drug supply permanent and urge all relevant regulatory colleges to scale up access to safer pharmaceutical alternatives for people at risk across B.C.
3. While reviewing changes to the *Police Act*, consider alternative approaches for responding to mental health and substance use calls in the community on a 24/7 basis.

2. Affordable Housing

BC Housing and the Province have made significant investments to address the lack of affordable housing in our communities. Yet many residents still face stress and uncertainty related to housing affordability. Young families can't afford to buy homes in some communities. Seniors living in market-rental units have pensions that can't keep pace with rent increases. Low-wage workers are forced to commute long distances to access their jobs in our cities, severely impacting their quality of life. Too many of our vulnerable neighbours are looking for a path out of homelessness and people that identify as Indigenous are continually disproportionately represented in homeless counts.

There is not enough housing in our communities that is affordable for the people who live and work in them. This situation is also causing economic fallout for businesses in terms of recruitment and retention of workers, thereby reducing the overall productivity of B.C.'s economy.

We call on all parties to commit to:

1. Accelerate investments to affordable, supportive and social housing on a priority basis, and simplify the funding application process.
2. Continue to ensure there is a regulatory and taxation climate that prioritizes housing for people who live and work in our cities, rather than housing as an investment.
3. Ensure there is a rental housing system that balances the security of tenure for renters with the needs of landlords.

3. Public Transit

Affordable, reliable and accessible public transit is critical to the economic, social and environmental future of our communities. Pre-COVID-19 ridership across the province was growing faster than anywhere in North America, as residents increasingly turned to transit as a viable alternative to single-occupancy vehicles.

Although the pandemic has cut transit ridership by over 50 percent and devastated the financial sustainability of TransLink, BC Transit and BC Ferries, this setback is temporary. For our cities to remain competitive with counterparts in the rest of Canada and the world in a post-pandemic economy, we must keep building transit-friendly communities that continuously invest in high-quality transit that reduces road congestion and GHG emissions, keeps our goods moving efficiently on limited road space, and offers an affordable transportation mode to all residents, especially those without other options.

We call on all parties to commit to:

1. Complete the financial recovery of the projected long-term losses facing TransLink, BC Transit and BC Ferries once the recently announced Safe Restart operating funding expires in late-2021, so that service levels are maintained, allowing ridership to quickly bounce back through the pandemic and the economic recovery period.
2. Redesign the transit funding model that has relied too heavily on regressive transit fares and local property taxes to one that is more resilient and equitable.
3. Prepare for a quick return to the transit expansion our cities will need to maintain competitiveness by ensuring that current planning processes are not paused due to the pandemic. Investments in planning studies and developing business cases now will ensure future service expansion and capital investments are ready to go in the rebuilding stage.
4. Make the investments required over the coming decade to support BC Transit and TransLink's ambitious low-carbon fleet plans.

4. A New Fiscal Relationship

COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that the fiscal framework set up in 1867 – which sees local governments in Canada reliant primarily on property taxes – is wholly inadequate to meet the challenges and opportunities cities are facing in the 21st century. As city leaders, we have been on the front lines responding to COVID-19 without resources to provide the services needed to keep our most vulnerable residents healthy and safe, and at the same time, offer additional supports to the businesses and neighbourhoods most impacted by pandemic-driven challenges.

Respecting Canada's constitutional framework where cities are “creatures of the provinces” doesn't mean we can't innovate within it. We must innovate, or we put at risk the opportunity of creating inclusive, equitable urban economies, good jobs and sustainable communities.

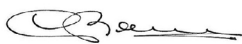
We call on all parties to commit to:

1. Convene an implementation committee comprised of local and provincial government officials to revisit and implement relevant recommendations in the Union of B.C. Municipalities report, *Strong Fiscal Futures: A Blueprint for Strengthening BC Local Government's Finance System*.
2. Pursue municipal finance reform to provide municipalities with a broader range of sustainable, predictable and reliable funding tools in order to address increasing financial pressures related to a growing asset base, aging infrastructure, climate change, housing challenges and the opioid crisis as per the recommendation from the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

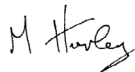
About the BC Urban Mayors' Caucus

The BC Urban Mayors' Caucus is an informal, non-partisan group of mayors from urban communities across British Columbia.

We have come together in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and learned that we have shared challenges and opportunities. We will continue to meet as a group to learn from one another to act as a unified voice on critical issues facing our communities as this pandemic evolves and rebuilding takes hold.



Mayor Henry Braun
City of Abbotsford



Mayor Mike Hurley
City of Burnaby



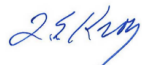
Mayor Richard Stewart
City of Coquitlam



Mayor Ken Christian
City of Kamloops



Mayor Colin Basran
City of Kelowna



Mayor Leonard Krog
City of Nanaimo



Mayor Jonathan X. Coté
City of New Westminster



Mayor Lyn Hall
City of Prince George



Mayor Malcolm Brodie
City of Richmond



Mayor Fred Haynes
District of Saanich



Mayor Doug McCallum
City of Surrey



Mayor Kennedy Stewart
City of Vancouver



Mayor Lisa Helps
City of Victoria