

# **Victoria Coalition Against Poverty**



## **THE PEOPLES' PLAN FOR PANDORA**

### **Research Results: Statistics and notes from surveys, interviews and focus groups**

#### **Speaking with the street community members who reside and/or spend time on the Pandora 900-block**

**A project from the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) and the Victoria Coalition Against Poverty (VCAP) in collaboration with the Committee to End Homelessness, Harm Reduction Victoria (HRV) and the Society of Living Intravenous Drug Users (SOLID)**

#### **Section 1: Introduction**

The 900-block of Pandora Avenue serves as a gathering place for many street-involved residents of Victoria. It is also one of the most controversial areas within the City. Located directly across from “Our Place”, the 900-block has been the subject of fierce debate on how to address chronic poverty, homelessness, health and drug use in Victoria.

Some housed residents and business owners in the neighbourhood have demanded that the City and the police clear the area of street-involved people who spend their days and nights on the block and its grassy boulevard. Over the past few years, the City of Victoria has responded in several ways.

First, the City issued a \$250, 000 call for proposals to “beautify” Pandora Green, with the explicit objective of discouraging loitering. The “beautification” would entail paving a walkway down the middle of the boulevard, installing hard metal benches with dividers to prohibit sleeping, replacing the sod with shrubs, and installing sprinklers to water the shrubbery and homeless alike. No developer was able to submit a plan to the City within the required budget. The plans appear to be on hold at the moment.

Second, the City amended a streets and traffic bylaw to render “sitting, kneeling or laying” on boulevards and medians illegal from 7:00 pm until 7:00 am. This move targeted Pandora Green specifically. It was criticized for displacing the City’s most marginalized population while using “safety concerns” to couch a deeper objective of clearing the boulevard of campers.

The two initiatives share two common features. First, neither initiative has been developed based on the needs of the population that would be most affected: the street

community that uses Pandora Green. A prerequisite of developing strategies based on the needs of a certain community is their engagement and involvement. Our research results indicate that the street community was not consulted at all in conceiving and drawing the “beautification” plan, or in the lead-up to the bylaw amendment proposal. A real, comprehensive “consultation” provides people with options – including remaining where they are – and devises programs based on their needs.

A second feature that both plans share is an explicit objective of rendering poverty, homelessness and drug use invisible. The “beautification” plan is a thinly-veiled attempt to move people who spend their days on Pandora Green somewhere else. Several documents released by the City in preparation for its vote on the bylaw amendment are explicit in their concerns regarding the City’s image and the visibility of poverty on the Pandora 900-block. Simply stated, both City initiatives are clearly an attempt to implement social cleansing, or clear away the people facing poverty, homelessness and/or drug issues to make Victoria appear more attractive.

The “beautification” plan and the bylaw amendment are two steps in an ongoing strategy with regards to the 900-block. While the history of the block is briefly described below, it is essential to remember that the City, along with the police board and service providers, continue devising plans to address the “social disorder” on the “Green.”

#### **A brief history of social cleansing on Pandora**

The history of Pandora Green sheds some more light on the current situation. In November 2007, the Open Door and the Upper Room charitable organizations joined forces to build Our Place, a drop-in meal centre and transitional housing facility located at 919 Pandora Avenue. As Victoria's street-involved community began to migrate to this part of the city, most of the businesses on the 900 block signed a “Good Neighbour Agreement” with Our Place, the North Park Neighbourhood Association and the City of Victoria.

The agreement was designed to minimize the impact of poverty on local businesses and properties. It states that businesses and property owners will keep their properties well maintained and install gates and lighting to “discourage loitering.” By putting the onus on Our Place to control the activities of the people who access its services, even outside its premises, the Good Neighbour Agreement also shifts surveillance and policing costs onto Our Place.

While the story of Pandora Green was unraveling, Victoria’s only fixed-site needle exchange was closed down. The fixed-site needle exchange, which had been located on Cormorant Street and was operated by AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI), was evicted in May 2008. The needle exchange was the only evening drop-in services that welcomed drug users, but it had been chronically underfunded. The facility, as a result, was too small and understaffed. These factors created a situation where many street-involved people gathered regularly outside the needle exchange and spent the night in the neighbourhood, leading to complaints from neighbours. The neighbours threatened to file a lawsuit, prompting AVI to close the exchange. Although the need for comprehensive harm reduction services, including fixed-site needle exchanges, has been demonstrated in countless research reports, no new site has been established.

The needle recovery, needle distribution and outreach services that the needle exchange had offered were reduced to a “mobile” model in June 2008. At the same time, the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) established an ad-hoc “no-service zone” that restricted AVI mobile needle exchange workers from distributing safer drug use supplies in the blocks between a two-block radius surrounding St. Andrew’s School. Pandora Green falls within the “no-service zone.”

### **The Peoples’ Plan for Pandora: Project Goal**

The idea for the *Peoples’ Plan for Pandora* emerged from our concern that many of the city’s most marginalized and vulnerable residents, who spend much of their time in an under-serviced area, were completely excluded from decisions that could deeply impact their lives. In collaboration with the Victoria Police Department and various service providers, the City of Victoria continues to undertake various strategies to manage poverty in the neighbourhood.

The *Peoples’ Plan for Pandora* seeks an alternative approach to the issue of poverty. Its goal is to compile and publicize the visions, insight and ideas of the street-involved community on Pandora Green. We see this goal as an essential pre-condition to rehabilitating the democratic process with respect to marginalized populations in Victoria.

Our objectives are to create a space that provides both a fulfilling and empowering experience for the street-involved community. Our work is based on a vision of engaging with marginalized people as they should be treated: As citizens with the rights and power to shape their community. We also aim to provide an opportunity for popular education for the housed residents of Victoria. Through our work, we are seeking to inform the municipal and provincial decision-making processes that hold implications for the people who use the space on Pandora Green.

The *Peoples’ Plan for Pandora* is a contribution to an ongoing dialogue that many Victoria-area collectives, such as the Action Committee of People With Disabilities, the Committee to End Homelessness, Harm Reduction Victoria and the Society of Living Intravenous Drug Users (SOLID), have been carrying out for years. The *Peoples’ Plan* is not an attempt to produce a singular vision for Pandora Green. Instead, it seeks to communicate some reflections from a standpoint that is marginalized in government and the media.

### **Research Process**

Our research process is participatory and community-based. We began our process by holding two community food servings on Pandora Green where we conducted one-on-one and group semi-structured interviews, using a survey as a conversation guide. We allowed for a great deal of flexibility in our approach to gathering data. We held one community mapping session on Pandora Green. Finally, a focus group was held with 25 individuals. In total, we spoke with 99 individuals.

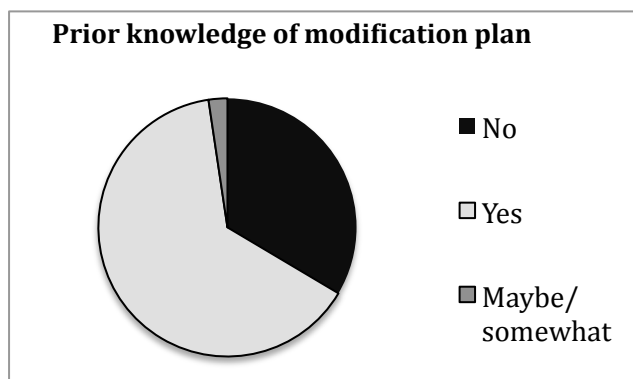
Instead of demanding that respondents conform to requirements set out in our survey, we were flexible in ensuring that our discussions conformed to their interests and needs. We have included numbers and percentages in this report, but not every interview or

discussion addressed all the questions listed in our conversation guide. We were happy to record thoughts or ideas as they arose in our discussions.

The interview results will be presented to the street community at another food serving on Pandora Green. At the event, people will be invited to reflect, share ideas and make proposals for a *Peoples' Plan*.

## Section 2: Results

**Question 1: Had you heard that the city has a project to spend between 250 and 500 thousand dollars to redesign the 900-block of Pandora Avenue?**



Sixty people (61%) had heard of the Pandora beautification plan. In the focus group, the majority of participants reported that they had either heard of the plan on TV or at an event hosted by anti-poverty groups at City Hall. On the “Green”, a lower percentage (53%) of participants were aware of the beautification proposal.

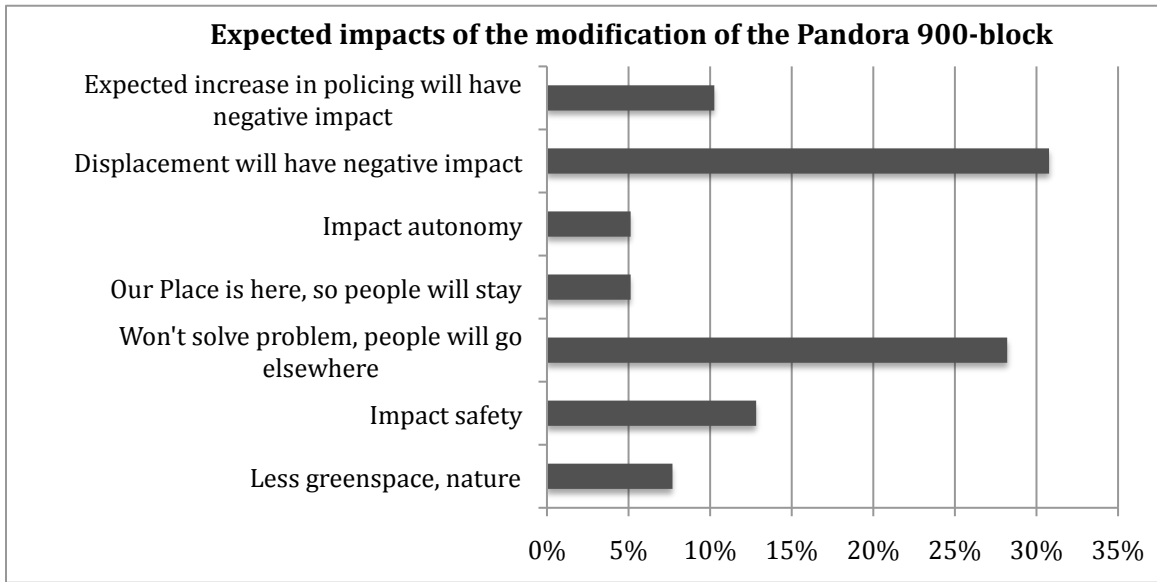
**Question 2: Were you consulted by the city about its plan?**

Of all participant interviewed – on the “Green” and in the focus group – only one respondent answered that they were consulted by the city about its plan to “beautify” the 900-block. Although our first round of surveys was conducted before the streets and traffic bylaw amendment was introduced, none of our respondents mentioned any discussions concerning their futures with the City of Victoria at the time.

**Question 3: Do you think the modification of the 900-block of Pandora will have an impact on how you use this area? If so, why?**

Over two-thirds of the individuals interviewed on Pandora Green (67%) felt that the City’s beautification project would affect their use of the area for the worse.

We asked the respondents who felt that there would be a negative impact to further explain what the potential impacts would be. The comments they provided were grouped into the seven categories listed in the chart entitled “*Expected impacts of the modification of the Pandora 900-block.*”

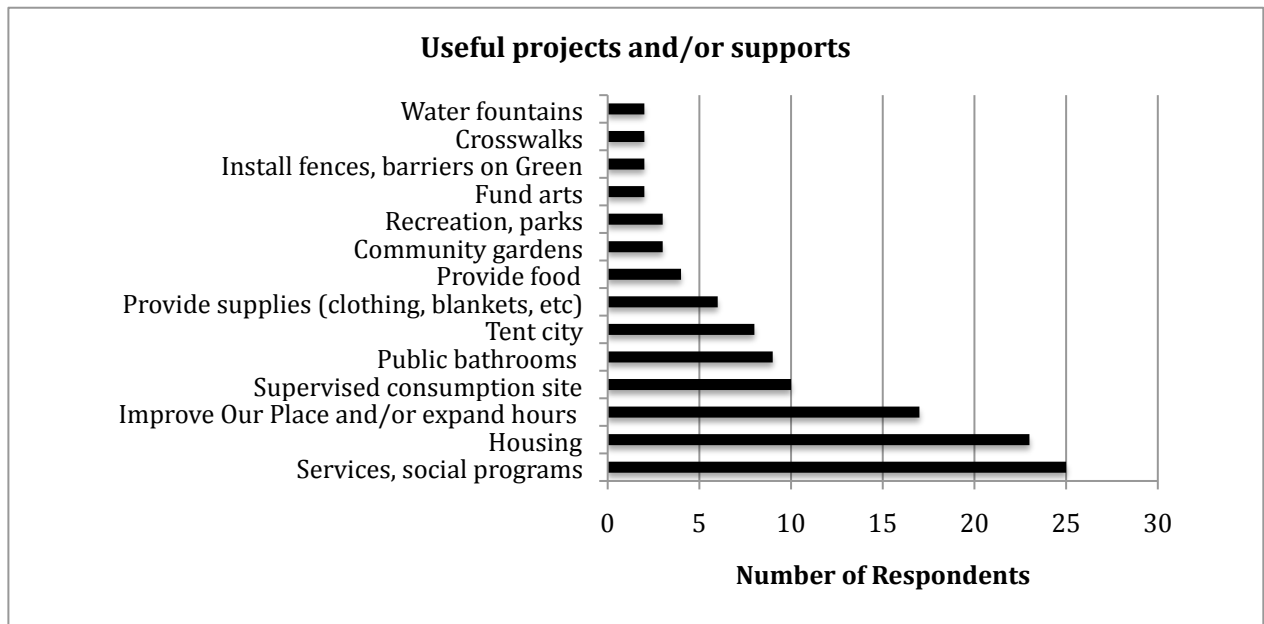


The most frequent response (31%) was that the modification would result in displacement. One respondent, for example, stated that “the construction process will displace people. The city wants to ‘beautify’ the space but they don’t see the beauty that is here.” Comments regarding displacement often included mention of how the modification of the 900-block would affect a *community* of people and not simply a series of individuals. One person interviewed on Pandora Green said that that the City’s beautification project would “break up their community” and “exacerbate mental health problems.” Another held that “this is a shared home.”

Many respondents (28%) held that modifications would not solve the problem, and that people would simply move elsewhere. A focus group participant held that “this started as Cormorant Street and has just moved to Pandora.” On Pandora Green, one person stated that “if they take away space we’ll just move...we’ll be on Fort and Douglas in front of the stores.”

Some respondents (10%) cited concerns that the beautification project would increase the presence of police and their power to criminalize people’s activity by enforcing the preservation of a streetscape at odds with how it’s actually used. One respondent argued that, “this will impact people because we have nowhere to go. Security and cops block everywhere; we can’t sit, stand, be, or come in anywhere.” In a related vein, another respondent stated that “we are treated like sub-humans because we are homeless.”

**Question 4: As someone who uses this area, what projects or supports would be useful for the City to provide here?**



We asked the street community which projects or supports would be useful on the 900-block in an open-ended question, and recorded as many responses as the interviewees provided. Respondents to our survey suggested ways to use municipal funds that did not include installing shrubbery, lighting or sprinklers. Instead, respondents called for more services and social programs, including counseling and harm reduction. Second to the recommendation for more services and social programs, which appeared 25 times in our results, 23 respondents voiced a need for housing. One respondent said, “we need more safe places to go, a section of the town where we can go and not be harassed. There are no good housing options. We won’t go to shelters – there are bugs and too many people.”

Another area of priority was an improved Our Place with expanded hours (17 responses). Referring to the facility’s limited hours, one interviewee noted that “they should have somewhere open 24/7; on Saturday and Sunday we are still homeless.” In another interview, one person mentioned that, “we need 2-3 more Our Places.”

A supervised consumption site appeared in 10% of the surveys we coded. In the words of one respondent, “people talk about how diseased we are, but we have no options. A safe injection site will keep people inside.” Another respondent maintained that “a safe space for injection would mean a safer neighbourhood for everyone.”

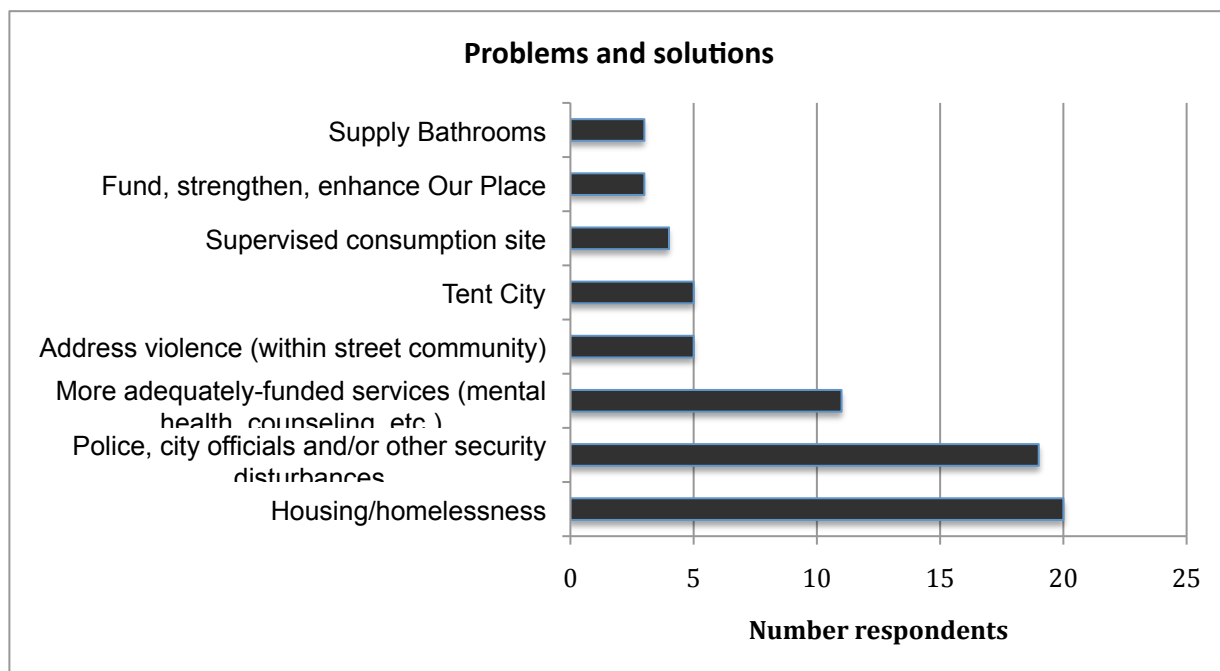
Other suggestions included installing public bathrooms (9 responses) and creating a “tent city” (8 responses). A resident on Pandora Green commented that, “police are nicer when we have tents. We have privacy, folks can keep to themselves. Tents are better and more appealing, people are responsible for their belongings, there’s less people on sidewalks, and they’re more compact. Tents are like a little house.”

**Question 5: What problems do people experience here? What should government be doing to resolve them?**

The purpose of our final question was to have a more general discussion about the problems people encounter on the 900-block and the actions that other levels of government should be taking to address them.

Homelessness and housing appeared at the top of the list, with 20 respondents mentioning that the issue was a problem and an area that required government attention. One respondent said that, “we need real housing, not shelters. We need affordable housing that’s easier to get in and accessible.” Another asked, “why are we forced into a shelter? I don’t want to be housed – I want a home. We’re surveilled by neighbourhoods, there are no public bathrooms, I’m tired of shelters and curfews. We are something to be moved.” One respondent who identified as being homeless held that, “Welfare does not give you enough - \$375 is not enough for a home. They give \$200 for food but it all goes to rent or we are homelessness.”

Security concerns stemming from interactions with police, bylaw officials and private security guards was also a strong theme: 19 respondents mentioned the issue in interviews and focus groups. One reported that “there’s so much harassment from police and City officials. They’re kicking people off the green, when the weather is bad especially. The City is hard – there’s nowhere to go.” Many people commented that the police and City officials created disturbances early in the morning. Said one respondent, “they take your stuff and throw it away. People have nothing, and their stuff is still taken to dump. We have to replace our blankets, pillows, clothes 2-3 time a week. All these belongings are gone, and we can’t get them back. Is this safety or harassment?” Another respondent voiced a sentiment that appeared in our many of our discussions: “All they do is push us and push us and push us. Stop handing out fines to homeless people – what is the point of giving somebody a fine they know they’re not going to pay?”



Another topic that appeared again was a need for more adequately-funded services (11 responses), including harm reduction services and mental health supports. Addressing violence within the street community (5 responses), the need for a Tent City (5 responses) and the need for a supervised consumption site (4 responses) were among the other issues voiced.

Reflecting on the issues faced by Victoria's street community, one respondent said that "right now people come together here as a community on the lower income level seeking peer and government support." Another respondent mentioned a need for popular education among housed Victoria residents: "The general public needs to work on understanding different ways of living, and understanding different mental health situations."

### **Conclusion**

The results of this research will be presented back to the street community as a next step in creating a "Peoples' Plan for Pandora." The final version of the plan will be released in the coming months.

We must stress that the results from our consultation process only include views about the City's beautification project. One can speculate that the bylaw amendment to ban camping on the boulevard would reinforce the concerns people have already stated, from concerns about displacement, to the destruction of community, and the increased intrusion of police into people's lives.

The streets and traffic bylaw amendment was passed by Victoria City Council in October, 2010, and the median itself is cleared of people in the evenings. During the daytime hours, however, Pandora Green remains a gathering place for the street community.