

The Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program, Downtown Eastside "Extraordinary" Policing, and Business Improvement Associations (BIA's): Why the People of the DTES Are Being Harassed and Brutalized

It's the year 2000, BC's second largest industry is tourism and 1/3rd of the top 100 public companies fall into the realm of high technology, communications, real estate, entertainment, finance and investment (BC Business, March 2000). While tourism requires expanded entertainment, leisure and shopping opportunities, attracting new company headquarters necessitates an expanded Central Business District with high-class offices, condos and fancy restaurants for business luncheons.

Downtown Vancouver is no longer enough. New developments over the past several years have started at the edges of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) and now the City has plans to "revitalize" its centre. This has caused much concern for DTES residents - they are being displaced from their homes, swept from the streets and increasingly, harassed and brutalized by police and private security guards. In a July 1998 memo to the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment, the General Manager of Community Services stated:

Some people worry that new condominiums in International Village, in Gastown and in City Gate, and the planned Trade and Convention Centre on the waterfront to the north will bring further development interest to the area. Although new investment can assist with the Downtown Eastside's revitalization, some see it as conflicting with the neighbourhood's traditional role as a place for the less advantaged.

This memo was one of a series that were bandied about in 1998 when the City Manager, Chief Constable of the VPD, and the General Manager of Community Services asked City Council to endorse their funding application to the *National Crime Prevention Program*, *Safer Cities Initiative*, *Crime Prevention Investment Fund*. They were asking for \$1.25 million per year, for five years, to fund a project called "Building a Future Together - The Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program". The final proposal was put forward with the City of Vancouver and Vancouver's Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment as co-applicants, and in February of 1999 they were granted \$5 million - \$1 million/year for the next five years.

While this program purports to be interested in the needs of DTES residents - through promises of new social housing, "sensitive" conversion of SRO's, immunizations, drug treatment, harm-reduction and employment opportunities for residents in need - it is clear that law-and-order is the program's priority. Forty additional police officers walk the "beat" in the DTES; five new community policing offices have been established; a crime prevention forum was hosted at which "broken windows" theories of crime were espoused; and a Community Court Watch Program monitors judges for lenient sentencing.

In fact, in the same memo as mentioned above, it is very apparent that the General Manager's arguments for the program were built upon the pathologizing and criminalizing of DTES residents. He states:

The Downtown Eastside has consistently accommodated more than its fair share of **people with problems**. Some residents have had **physical or mental disabilities**, been the **victims of dysfunctional families**, or been **addicted to alcohol or drugs**.

The phase-out of the Province's mental health institutions has brought more **disturbed and disturbing people** into the neighbourhood.

Add Mayor Owen's statement: "Anti-social behaviour in public spaces will not be tolerated" (City of Vancouver NewsRelease: Oct. 1998), to the fact that in the same year 1400 people were turned away from Lookout Emergency Shelter for lack of beds (DTES Monitoring Report, 1999), and the fact that over 400

SRO units have been lost and all of a sudden you have whole populations of "disturbed" people filling jail cells before the proposed social housing is even under construction. Another example of how law-and-order is being prioritized is the way the issue of drug use is being handled. While several forums on harm-reduction strategies have been hosted this year by the Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment, drug arrests have increased from 675 in 1996 to 1,951 in 1999. In 1996, 49% of these arrests were made in the Downtown Eastside; in 1998 it was up to 74% (VPD Annual Statistical Report, 1999).

Funds for the Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program, which should have been channeled into actual housing, drug treatments etc., are being used to create a "management and support network for community development" called Community Directions (Side By Side, March 2000). The purpose is to facilitate, mediate and research contentious issues and interests of developers, residents and agencies in the DTES. Call me a conspiracy theorist, but what better way to "manage" those parties who care about the community than through the guise of a democratic process. As they participate in the "process" developments such as; new trade and convention facilities, Tinseltown, yuppie highrises, a new cruise ship terminal and 1000 room hotel, International Village, and a communications hotel in the Woodward Building (once promised as social housing) are being easily approved through City Council (DTES Community Monitoring Report -1999). The risk, they say, is that if you don't sit at the table, your own or people's interests you represent, will not be included in the program.

But we only need to look at the economic scheme of the Revitalization Program to see who they want to serve in the long run. The plan is to build on "tourism, arts and culture, support services for the area's educational institutions and nearby Central Business District, high technology, television and film, and retail services for existing and new residents" (Vancouver Economic Development Commission, July 1999). These are all the things necessary for a tourist and yuppie urban playground - not an environment you would want the impoverished hanging out in. It is no coincidence that the extra \$3.2 million granted to the VPD by the City funds what is called the Downtown Eastside Extraordinary Policing Plan. This plan puts extra cops on the street from May 15th to September 15th - during the tourist season. This, despite the fact that crime rates have fallen consistently since 1996. The gross operating budget of the VPD has climbed from \$112 million in 1995, to \$123 million in 1999 (VPD - 1999 Statistical Report). We are quickly approaching a police state.

And finally, as if all this were not enough to take control of the "undesirables", Business Improvement Associations are now taking a stab at law enforcement and so-called "social services". The Downtown Vancouver BIA (DVBIA) is spending \$835,000 this year to hire 12 full-time and 8 part-time Ambassadors, and six full-time Loss Prevention Officers (LPO's). They will patrol downtown streets from 7am to 10:30pm, seven days a week. The job of the Ambassadors is to "build on noted hospitality and tourism services" and "become the 'eyes and ears' for downtown, ever vigilant about matters of cleanliness, graffiti, and public safety" (Renewal 2000, Downtown Vancouver BIA Report). They have been hired through two security companies; Palladin Security Services - headed by an ex-RCMP officer, and Alliance Security Services - known for it's PR abilities. Through hiring these Ambassadors, the DVBIA is claiming to be able to achieve an "enhanced perception of safety" in the area, "fewer aggressive and passive panhandlers", and "fewer unlicensed street vendors" (Renewal 2000). My question is *how* they are going to achieve this.

The word on the street says they'll do it through force. This is especially scary in the case of the LPO's. Their duties include "identifying, targeting, observing, deterring and/or assisting in the apprehension of criminals. They would also help prepare the necessary documentation to assist in the prosecution of offenders" (Renewal 2000). Given that these people are not police officers, and therefore not constrained by the VPD's Professional Code of Conduct or Use of Force Regulations, this gives rise to a situation where hired thugs can go around physically, verbally, and emotionally beating anyone whom they perceive to be "criminal".

In the July 1999 issue of Downtown News put out by DVBIA, Manmohan Mand (Director of Crime Prevention Services) points to "panhandlers, squeegee window washers, and others who bother those who

walk and drive downtown streets" as "nuisances" who impede on the rights of shoppers, visitors, workers and residents. As a measure of deterrence, Mand took the matter into his own hands and created the "Real Change" program. Through the Vancouver Recovery Club, the BIA hires "outreach workers" - for less than minimum wage - to offer these "nuisances" food vouchers and advice on shelters and programs in exchange for getting the hell out of the Downtown area. Mand urges the public to give "'Real Change' to the social service agencies and charities" rather than to the poor, whose "revenue goes straight to liquor or drugs". Oh I pray for the day that Mand has to turn to these services because of his unemployable status of being addicted to power and wealth.

The DVBLA empire also boasts of it's cosy relations with the Vancouver police. "Operation Cooperation" is a tripartite informal association between private security professionals, the business community and the VPD. Their Crime Alert Paging Program "dispatches information about criminal occurrences and public disorder matters" (Downtown News, March 2000). We saw this network in action for the MayDay 2000: Carnival Against Capitalism march and rally when the Executive Director of the DVBLA announced over the radio that extra security and police would be on hand to control any "public disorder" we may cause. The police are in the DVBLA's pocket; they owe them one because: "The DVBLA was instrumental in the establishment of highly effective police bicycle patrols, financing equipment and uniforms for several years" (Renewal 2000).

This funding was not reflected anywhere in their budget. But the Yaletown and Strathcona BIA's are more straightforward, they claim \$28,000 and \$3,000 towards Community Policing Offices respectively. In terms of security thugs Chinatown spends \$30, 000/year, Gastown - \$85,000, South Granville - \$52,800, and Yaletown - \$30,000. In addition, both the Robson Street BIA and Davie Village BIA spend \$20 - and \$29,000 on Panhandling Outreach. We know that this is not because of their love of the people.

As our own "eyes and ears" of the Coalition Against Police Harassment and Brutality have witnessed, the Strathcona Area Merchants Society (SAMS) have been using private security armed with video cameras to chase prostitutes out of "their" territory. And they have promised to follow them anywhere they go. SAMS has also collected monies from several local institutions to appeal the City's decision to set up a Resource Centre for drug users. Not In Their Backyard!!!

As the General Manager of Community Services stated: "Downtown Eastside residents are feeling increasingly under siege" (July 1998, DTES: Building a Common Future), but not, as he puts it, by the disturbed and disturbing. The VPD, Developers, and Business Improvement Associations are gaining power and have only the interests of upper middle-class to wealthy consumers in mind. Urban tourist and yuppie playgrounds are the new economic role of cities as we move into the 21st century. Maybe there *is* hope that housing, drug treatment, harm reduction, jobs, and more adequate social services and welfare will be forthcoming. It would help clean up the streets after all... But in the meantime the reality is that police and private security have become drunk with their new powers - they are conducting illegal searches of homes and bodies, making false arrests, intimidating, harassing and brutalizing the poor on the streets every day.

Join us in exposing the abuses of the Vancouver Police Department and BIA's Security Forces. Put a stop to the City's outrageous funding of such criminal activities. And most importantly, help create a safe community for all Downtown Eastside residents - we can do this on our own initiative.

For more information on the Coalition and it's activities, please call: 215-7734.