



VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

REPORT TO THE VANCOUVER POLICE BOARD

REPORT DATE: October 19, 2020
BOARD MEETING DATE: October 29, 2020
BOARD REPORT # 2010C02
Regular

TO: **Vancouver Police Board Service and Policy Complaint Review Committee**
FROM: Staff Sergeant Jason High, District 1
SUBJECT: Service or Policy Complaint #2020-15 re: Downtown Business District Crime

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the Vancouver Police Board Service and Policy Complaint Review Committee (Committee) concludes its review of the complaint based on the information outlined in this report.

SUMMARY:

This Service or Policy Complaint relates to the perceived neglect of the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) to preserve peace and prevent crime in Downtown Business District (DBD). The complainant identified numerous incidents of concern indicating the VPD is failing its mandate to serve citizens and businesses. The complainant is also concerned about stolen property at the Downtown Eastside (DTES) Street Market, open drug use, and street disorder. The VPD met with the complainant, and the owners or operators of three other DBD businesses, to discuss their concerns. These discussions were very well received.

This report:

- Summarizes the incidents of concern for the complainant and the other businesses the complainant refers to;
- Describes the VPD's recent initiatives to respond to crime and disorder issues in the DBD; and,
- Explains the VPD's policing philosophies regarding the broader social issues that are the root cause of much of the crime described in this complaint.

Some of the crime and disorder issues that are increasingly prevalent in the DBD are the manifestation of broader social issues. While these broader social issues are beyond the VPD's ability to unilaterally solve, the VPD actively works with partner agencies to address these issues. The VPD encourages business owners and operators, along with residents and visitors, to report all crime so these incidents can be investigated and addressed.

Based on the information detailed in this report, it is recommended that the Committee conclude its review of this complaint.

BACKGROUND:

On July 31, 2020, the complainant submitted a complaint to the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner (OPCC), which included a detailed letter about crime and disorder in the DBD. The OPCC categorized the complaint as a Service or Policy Complaint.

The complainant wrote the letter in April of 2020, but submitted it at the end of July. In the letter, the complainant addressed several specific issues related to crime, street disorder, open drug use, and the presence of stolen property at the DTES Street Market. The complainant expressed their perception that the VPD was failing in its mandate to: preserve peace; discourage anti-social, violent, and destructive behavior; and, prevent crime and administer justice.

The complainant also identified three other businesses that experienced similar issues. The complainant had personally spoken to an owner or a representative at each business and indicated that they have all given up reporting incidents to the police because, "The businesses shared a unanimous feeling of apathy and a complete lack of faith in the VPD to perform its most basic responsibility."

DISCUSSION:

This report:

- Summarizes the incidents of concern for the complainant and the other businesses the complainant refers to;
- Describes the VPD's recent initiatives to respond to crime and disorder issues in the DBD; and,
- Explains the VPD's policing philosophies regarding the broader social issues that are the root cause of much of the crime described in this complaint.

Incidents Described in the Complaint

Incidents Experienced by the Complainant

The complainant is not complaining about the VPD's response to any specific incident(s), but rather the VPD's overall performance of preserving peace and preventing crime. The author met with the complainant to further understand the details of these incidents and to address the complainant's concerns.

The complainant has been the victim of three Theft from Auto incidents in the past two years. The complainant reported these incidents to the police and subsequently recovered the property stolen in these crimes at the DTES Street Market. In each case, the complainant stopped a police officer to assist in the recovery of the stolen property. On one of these occasions, a person was arrested. The complainant expressed frustration regarding their stolen property being recovered from the DTES Street Market. The complainant believes much of the property sold in this market is stolen and, accordingly, the VPD should take the necessary enforcement action.

Summary of Theft From Auto Incidents Involving the Complainant:

- March 7, 2019 – vehicle parked on the street in District 4 (19-44521).
- December 11, 2019 – vehicle parked in a secure parking lot in District 1 (19-902741).
- July 22, 2020 – vehicle parked on the street in District 4 (20-129718).

The experiences of the three businesses that the complainant identified were investigated by the author and are each summarized below.

Incidents Experienced by Vancity Sports, 646 Seymour Street

The author attended Vancity Sports and met with the owner of this business, who has operated it for the past 30 years. The owner indicated there was an incident with a man with a knife in November of 2019. The owner had two customers in the store when a person came in with a shopping cart. When the owner asked this individual if they needed help, the suspect pulled out a knife and threatened to use it if the owner or customers intervened. The suspect stole some hats but dropped most of the items upon leaving; this incident was never reported to the police.

The complaint also described a person vandalizing parking meters. The owner stated that this happened regularly before Covid-19 and has started to happen again recently. The owner used to report these incidents to police, but does not bother anymore, because no one comes. When asked for clarification about who the owner called to report these thefts from parking meters, the owner said the City of Vancouver (CoV), not the VPD. Asked why they did not call VPD, the owner said that about a year and a half ago, the owner called E-Comm to report one of these incidents, but was told by the call taker that it was not a high priority, so the owner stopped calling.

Incidents Experienced by Browns Craffhouse, 580 West Pender Street

The author attended Browns Craffhouse and met the assistant manager, and discussed incidents of concern raised in the complainant's letter. One concerning incident was about an employee who was assaulted with bear spray. In November of 2019, a bartender followed a male who exited the restaurant without paying and advised this person that they had to pay. The person turned and sprayed the bartender; fortunately, the bartender only received minor contamination from the bear spray. The assistant manager is not sure if this incident was reported to the police.

Another concerning incident occurred on November 13, 2019. A suspect was sitting alone at the outdoor patio, and the general manager observed the person using drugs. The general manager asked the suspect to leave, which they refused to do. The suspect then picked up a lighter and a small bottle of aerosol hairspray and stated, "I'm gonna light you on fire" while gesturing with these two objects towards the general manager's face. The general manager called 9-1-1 and the suspect was located and arrested.

Incidents Experienced by City Vaper, 585 West Pender Street

The author met with the owner to discuss incidents of concern raised by the complainant. The owner advised that the store window had been smashed twice in the last year. The first incident was not reported to the police. The most recent incident was in late September of 2020. In that incident, the owner called the police, and the VPD apprehended a person. The owner described these incidents to be mischiefs rather than attempted break-ins.

When asked if their business had ever been robbed, the owner said they their store has never been robbed. When asked about thefts from the store, the owner said there have been no thefts. The VPD sought clarification about the complainant's indication that this business owner was unwilling to report the incidents to police. The owner stated that, given the few minor incidents that have occurred since they have been in business, the owner has purposely not reported these incidents to the police because they have had no need to make an insurance claim due to their insurance deductible being higher than value of the damage.

Summary of the Incidents Involving the Three Businesses:

A total of ten incidents of concern were identified as having occurred at the three businesses noted in the complainant's letter:

- Four incidents were not reported to the police – two incidents were matters the business owners were aware of and did not report to the police, while the other two incidents cannot be confirmed to have occurred, as the business owners and managers had no knowledge these potential incidents;
- Three incidents were investigated by the police – one resulted in criminal charges, another had insufficient grounds for criminal charges, and, in the third incident, the victim was declined to pursue criminal charges;
- The remaining three incidents, which were reported as occurring on a weekly or monthly basis, were determined to be isolated or infrequent incidents of a minor nature.

VPD Initiatives on Crime and Disorder in Downtown Vancouver

Community Engagement

A primary component of the VPD's response to these issues is community engagement, which includes:

- Informing and educating Business Improvement Associations on how to prevent crime;
- Providing public information through media releases, press briefings, and news interviews – to improve community awareness and promote public safety;
- Issuing social media public service announcements to engage a broad and diverse audience; and,
- Meeting and engaging with residents through four different Zoom meetings with Yaletown residents.

VPD Operational Actions

The following operational actions have been taken by District 1:

- Implementation of a multi-staged approach to address the increase in violence and street disorder;
- Assignment of additional personnel to the District (along with assignments to District 2) to assist with the rising community concerns within their neighbourhoods;
- Dedicated foot patrols assigned to the problem areas particularly on Granville Street;
- More bike members have been trained to provide a visible police presence and a rapid response to incidents in the area;
- Squads have targeted problem locations and chronic offenders by conducting projects that have ultimately led to search warrants, weapon and drug seizures, and arrests;
- There are regularly held meeting with crime analysts to track trends and hotspots, which is then passed on to front-line members; and,
- Good Night Out has recently been reactivated to assist with identifying and providing assistance to vulnerable women.

Proactive Policing Initiatives

- District 1 established a comprehensive Street Disorder Operational Plan;
- The Neighborhood Policing Officers (NPOs) have led the Street Disorder Plan by helping to train the foot patrol members and liaising with community and business partners;
- The NPOs have taken the lead in continuing to build relationships with partnering agencies such as BC Housing and the relevant property managers, Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH), and the Mental Health and Homeless outreach workers;
- A Trespass Prevention Program initiative was recently launched which gives police written consent from the property owner to move along unwanted parties from private property. Custom designed decals are used to visibly identify these premises; and,
- Police have worked with VCH and with CoV cleaning crews to assist with the growing issue of open drug use and discarded needles in the Downtown core and in local parks.

VPD Policing Philosophy on Broader Social Issues

The complainant stated that the increasing crime and social issues occurring in the DBD are indicative of the VPD implementing a political agenda that is unresponsive to business owners' and operators' concerns. There is no political influence from elected officials or staff from the CoV. The broader social issues that contribute to some of the crime and disorder are complex and the following discusses the VPD's policing philosophy on these issues:

People Who Use Drugs

The VPD has consistently acknowledged that addiction is primarily a health issue, not a criminal justice issue. Further, the VPD has been steadfastly dedicated to a Four Pillars approach, which focusses on Prevention, Harm Reduction, Treatment and Enforcement. The VPD has been a leader in advocating for the advancement of all the pillars: in May of 2017, the VPD released a report entitled [*The Opioid Crisis: The Need for Treatment on Demand*](#) that publically called for expanded opioid assisted therapy programs and investment in addiction treatment to reduce the harm caused by the opioid crisis.

Further, the VPD has been a leader amongst North American police agencies through its recognition that the opioid crisis is predominantly due to a toxic supply of street drugs. As such, the VPD is proud to be a leading Canadian police agency in its support, and avocation for, a safe supply. In doing so, the VPD recognizes that a medically-led, evidence-based approach is required to care for the most heavily addicted persons living in our community. Our November 2019 report [*A Journey to Hope*](#) provides an overview of the numerous efforts being made by the VPD in response to the opioid crisis.

Unsheltered People

VPD officers have balanced the needs of unsheltered individuals while still being duty bound to respond to calls for service that are received from residents and businesses. Frequently, and increasingly, VPD officers are called regarding individuals who have sheltered on sidewalks or in entryways and, as a result, impede the lawful use of property by residents or businesses. Since the beginning of 2020, in District 1, reports of unwanted persons and annoying circumstances each increased by 14%. Numerous local businesses, who are struggling to cope with the pandemic's economic implications, have documented and expressed to the VPD the negative impact that such issues have on their businesses. As with any situation, VPD officers take a balanced and measured approach to such situations that seeks to address the needs and rights of all persons involved.

Mental Health

The VPD is a recognized leader in policing for its multifaceted and innovative approach to supporting persons living with mental illness. The VPD acknowledges that each year approximately one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness. Further, the VPD appreciates that persons living with mental illness are, sadly, often targeted by offenders – resulting in them being 15 times more likely to be the victim of a crime. As such, ensuring that police services support persons living with mental illness is a critical component of the VPD's commitment to serving our community. Accordingly, beginning in 1978, the VPD has integrated mental health professionals into its frontline policing to support persons living with mental illness.

Impressively, due to the multifaceted programming that the VPD delivers in concert with health partners, the percentage of calls involving mental health has systematically declined over the past 13 years. While mental health was previously overrepresented in VPD calls for service and workload, it is now underrepresented – with mental health being a factor in 16% of VPD calls for service today, down by nearly half since 2008 when it was 31%. Additional details on VPD mental health programming are contained within the [VPD Mental Health Strategy](#) and the accompanying [Pathway to Wellness](#) video.

DTES Street Market

The market has operated for almost ten years, most recently moving from an open-air site at 62 East Hastings Street to 58 West Hastings Street in November 2019. The market is operated by the Vancouver Community Network (VCN) under an agreement with the CoV. The market was closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic and recently reopened under modified operations from 8 am to 4 pm daily. The onsite manager oversees operations, including the employment of peers, and is responsible for ensuring the market operates safely. The CoV Security and Protection team also provides risk-based program delivery, specifically providing a uniformed security deployment and oversight, reporting evidence of suspicious or criminal activity.

While the VPD supports dedicated street vending areas, there is a need to ensure that these spaces are not used to commit crime or take advantage of vulnerable persons. The VPD has worked with the CoV staff and the onsite market manager since the DTES Market's inception to emphasize regulation of goods allowed. Where stolen property is identified, the VPD will seize it and conduct an investigation. Also, the VPD maintains a full-time Street Disorder officer who is part of the Community Services Section. This officer focuses on citywide illegal street vending and disorder. The officer works proactively and liaises with the Street Vending Team, fielded by two members of the DTES Beat Enforcement Team, and works collaboratively with civic and community partners. The VPD responds to all calls for service related to the market and acts on owners' requests for assistance in having stolen property returned. Officers will recommend criminal charges when the requisite legal authorities and evidence exists.

CONCLUSION:

The complainant's primary concern was the perceived failure by the VPD to preserve peace and prevent crime in the DBD. The VPD met with the complainant and the owner or operator of three local businesses to investigate the crime and disorder incidents described in the complaint. These meetings and discussions were very well received by all of the business operators. Meeting with the complainant addressed much of the concern expressed in the letter and the complainant appreciated the numerous measures being taken by the VPD to address these matters.

Public safety has always been the priority for the VPD, and the VPD continually takes proactive steps to address street disorder. District 1 staff regularly engage with businesses and citizens regarding ongoing concerns in the DBD. The VPD has introduced several proactive police initiatives and has conducted operations to target problem locations and chronic offenders. In addition to these actions, the VPD welcomes current and future discussions with the community on how we can further improve public safety and prevent crime.

Some of the crime and disorder issues that are increasingly prevalent in the DBD are the manifestation of broader social issues. These broader social issues are beyond the VPD's ability to solve unilaterally; however, the VPD actively works with partner agencies to seek lasting resolutions to these underlying issues. The VPD assures the complainant that there is no political influence on how such concerns are responded to or policed. The VPD encourages all business owners and operators, along with residents and visitors, to report *all* crime; the VPD wants people to know that their incident will be responded to and investigated.

Based on the information detailed in this report, it is recommended that the Committee conclude its review of this complaint.

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Submitting Executive Member:

DCC Howard Chow Date: October 14, 2020