



FASTFACTS



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June 24, 2005

Panhandling, Poverty and the Role of a City Government

This month, one year after taking office, Winnipeg mayor Sam Katz released his proposed by-law to address aggressive panhandling in downtown Winnipeg. There has been plenty of discussion as a result, but most importantly, many have pointed out a couple of fundamental issues. First, panhandling is a symptom of a much larger issue—poverty. Focusing on punitive rather than preventative solutions is misguided at best. Second, aggressive panhandling, or any threatening behaviour for that matter, should not be tolerated. But there are already laws in place to address this behaviour. Enforcement of these existing laws is the answer, not creating new laws that jeopardize human rights and punish the poor.

But there is a bigger discussion that needs to happen. The Katz by-law and other actions he has taken in recent months tell an important story about our Mayor. He does not understand poverty and he does not understand the important role a city government can play in addressing poverty.

While Katz is correct that the provincial and federal governments are responsible for the income and housing needs of the poor, he is wrong to suggest, as he does, that the local government does not have a role to play in fighting poverty. City governments can, and many do, play an important role in preventing poverty by supporting collaborative initiatives in high needs communities. They do this because they know that investing in vulnerable communities has physical, social and economic benefits for the entire city.

What Cities Can Do

The City of Edmonton is an example of a government that

does this very well. The Edmonton Community Services Department is actively involved in working with communities to fight poverty. They have been instrumental in working in partnership with community groups and other levels of government to kick-start several community initiatives. They have recently contributed \$347,000 to the Edmonton *Vibrant Communities Initiative*, a comprehensive community initiative aimed at poverty reduction. The City of Edmonton also plays a central role in the development of affordable housing through the Edmonton Housing Fund.

The City of Vancouver has stepped up to the plate to address poverty in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. Vancouver has drafted a housing plan for the Downtown East Side; a drug strategy that has produced tangible results such as a supervised injection site; an economic revitalization and employment strategy aimed at attracting businesses to the Downtown East Side and creating jobs for local residents. The City is also an active participant in the tri-level Vancouver Agreement and has realigned programs to be consistent with the objectives of the Agreement. The City of Vancouver faces significant challenges in addressing the problems in the Downtown East Side but they have demonstrated a commitment and are working with community groups to find creative solutions.

While Mayor Katz wipes his hands of housing for the poor, the City of Montreal takes a leadership role. They have implemented an *Urban Plan* that includes the objective that 30% of all new housing built in Montreal will be affordable. They have recently put forward a strategy for consultation that identifies how this will be done and who needs to be at the table to make it happen.



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So What Does the City of Winnipeg Do?

Mayor Katz continues to point to other levels of government as having responsibility for the poor. Not his jurisdiction, he says. And to emphasize his point, Katz is systematically pulling out of several important initiatives that are critical for Winnipeg's poor communities. While the Province has recently scaled up their commitment to the inner city by expanding the Neighbourhoods Alive! Initiative, and the federal government is investing in the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, the City of Winnipeg has withdrawn funding from several community initiatives. Most recently, they have refused to renew funding for the successful North End School Resource Officer Partnership Initiative, a celebrated program that the City has cost-shared for the past 3 years. Ironically, the Mayor has stated that policing is an area over which the City has jurisdiction over, yet he has cut funds for this program that adopts a preventative approach to policing.

The Winnipeg Partnership Agreement, a five year, \$75 million dollar agreement with a strong focus on support for community development, is virtually being ignored by the City. In spite of being recognized as a partner with the federal and provincial governments as a signatory of the Agreement, the City has no plans of putting a single dime toward the initiative.

The City's support for housing through the Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative is also on the chopping block. The Mayor backed off from his plan to cut the City's annual contribution of \$1 million because of a well-organized outcry from inner-city organizations. But the result has been a significant decrease in funding to community organizations that have demonstrated success in developing affordable housing in the inner city. This will compromise their ability to continue their good work. And while funds – at a reduced level - are in place for 2005, the City has cautioned that funding may not be available in 2006.

The City Can't Afford to Contribute?

The Mayor has been relentless in making the point that Winnipeg needs a greater share of revenue from the federal and provincial governments. Fair enough. Most would agree that cities need more money to do their job. But the Mayor's cry for more money becomes difficult to support when he is eliminating his ability to raise revenue through the mechanisms that are available to him. The Mayor has already proceeded to make good on his promise to eliminate the business tax, which will reduce City revenue by \$60 million dollars annually, once fully implemented. So any gains to be made by increased revenue from other levels of government will be offset by lost revenue through business tax cuts.

But it is not just the money. Winnipeg is known nationwide for its efforts to tackle poverty through community economic development (CED) activity. The level of collaboration in Winnipeg has been impressive with several inner city organizations, non-government funders and even provincial and federal government bureaucrats working together to establish long-term, comprehensive solutions. The City has been visibly absent from this activity.

The entrepreneurial Katz, who so skilfully negotiated with governments and the private sector to develop a multimillion-dollar baseball park, has proven to be less than creative as a Mayor tasked with the social and economic challenges of the city. So, while other cities roll up their sleeves to work toward solutions to poverty, our Mayor comes up with short-sighted, unimaginative ideas like aggressive panhandling by-laws.

I wonder if Mayor Katz has ever asked himself **why** we have people panhandling on the streets? Because until the leader of our city understands that poverty actually exists, and until he acknowledges that his government like all levels of government has an important role to play to address it, we won't likely see our City government actively working with the community to improve the quality of life for **all** Winnipeggers.

- Shauna MacKinnon

Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives - Manitoba. An edited version of this appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on Thursday June 23rd.

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