



Report to Council

From the Office of Councillor Amy Lubik

Date: May 15, 2021

Subject: Developing Social and Mental Health Wellbeing Guidelines for Buildings in Port Moody

Purpose

To propose that the City of Port Moody develop design guidelines for new multi-family developments that support social and mental well-being and would be integrated into or accompany the sustainability checklist.

Recommendations

WHEREAS Council has prioritized “healthy city” considerations for the evolution of Port Moody, and has often cited and shared ideas aimed at supporting social cohesion and mental wellbeing in our community;

AND WHEREAS developers welcome and benefit from getting clarity up front about goals and expectations in this regard before proposals go to Council;

AND WHEREAS Port Moody has established an advisory panel of design experts well suited to help us in proposing and assessing healthy-city guidelines

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council direct the Advisory Design Panel to strike a working group that, working in collaboration with staff, shall draft for Council consideration a set of proposed guidelines to enhance social cohesion and support general resident wellbeing and mental health in the design of new multi-family buildings, including townhouse developments, smaller multi-family unit buildings, and high-rises, as recommended in the report dated May 15, 2021 from Councillor Amy Lubik regarding Developing Social and Mental Health Wellbeing Guidelines for Buildings in Port Moody.

Background

Port Moody is evolving, as is our understanding of how to create a welcoming and inclusive community and what actions can be taken to encourage built environments that support this goal. Port Moody Council has prioritized the creation of a “Healthy Community” and identified support for social inclusion, sense of community connection, and resident mental health and wellbeing at the core of this priority. In order to achieve these outcomes we have moved the

levers on inclusion in a variety of ways. We have asked that a healthy community lens be applied to our pending OCP update; we have supported grants that provide support for working with other community groups to promote inclusion; we are becoming an age- and dementia-friendly city; we recognize those who support the community in a number of ways; we encourage and support place-making and community gatherings, wherever safe; and we are in the process of updating our housing policies to ensure that people can continue to reside in their communities no matter their income level. When evaluating new developments, our Council and staff have had many conversations regarding how buildings can impact mental health and social connectivity.

At the same time, our City has not established clear guidelines to help real estate developers understand better what they should be looking to achieve in designing to support better mental and social health in our city

Community mental and social health is significantly affected by our built environment. Factors that positively affect mental health include a safe, clean and welcoming neighbourhood, opportunities to look at and go into greenspaces, and spaces for accessible community gardens.¹ Conversely, studies have shown that *lack* of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure. What's more, research suggests that socially isolated citizens tend to be more vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change, due to weaker support during heat events and flooding.²

Seniors especially face challenges from social isolation.³ These include impacts on physical and mental health (more drinking and smoking, poor eating, more falls, more heart disease and strokes, higher rates of depression and mental health crises), and increased fear of crime and theft, making seniors even less likely to participate in social activities.”

Although there is no consensus on what is the optimal density for neighbourhoods, it is generally accepted that urban sprawl can be detrimental to community connectivity and mental wellness for some community members.⁴ There is a point where density becomes too great and cities too crowded, making people want to withdraw and not interact; and paradoxically, this withdrawal increases feelings of isolation.⁵ Citizens living in very-high-density neighbourhoods where people are mainly housed in high-rises report experiencing social isolation and

¹ BC Centre for Disease Control, 2019. Mental Health & Well-being Considerations for the Built Environment. <http://www.bccdc.ca/pop-public-health/Documents/mental-health-built-environment.pdf>

² BC Centre for Disease Control, 2019. Is Mitigating Social Isolation a Planning Priority for British Columbia (Canada) Municipalities? http://www.bccdc.ca/Our-ServicesSite/Documents/Social_Isolation_Report_17Sept2019.pdf

³ Government of Canada. Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors. <https://www.canada.ca/en/nationalseniors-council/programs/publications-reports/2014/social-isolation-seniors/page05.html>

⁴ **Happy City**: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Montgomery, Charles, 1968-, **Happy City**: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

⁵ Boyko CT, Cooper R: Clarifying and re-conceptualising density. *Progress in Planning* 2011, 76(1):1-61.

depressive symptoms⁶ ; although one study contests this idea.⁷ Elders and students living in inner-city high-rise buildings experience social isolation.

The inclusion of vertical structures in developments can but does not inevitably present social health concerns, provided that the built environment has been carefully designed, from the start, to ameliorate them.⁸ For example, buildings with common spaces for interaction (inside and out), as well as welcoming, stimulating and varied layouts, can mitigate social isolation issues to some extent.^{9,10} Ultimately, we need to active promote a better balanced approach to development that ensures our residents have housing and neighbourhoods that support their mental, physical, social, and economic health.

Though Port Moody is our own unique community, , some relevant background and framing on this issue from the town of Esquimalt in their work to develop a similar guide¹¹:

“What can [a municipality] do to promote more social connectedness in multi-family housing?” That is the question may communities are starting to consider, with supporting questions such as:

- Why is social connectedness important to our mental and physical well-being?*
- What makes multi-family homes a desirable housing choice (or not)?*
- How can we increase the attractiveness and livability of multi-family housing to families, especially those with young children?*
- What are the things that the Township can do to support social connectedness?*

We all need social connectedness. As human beings, once our basic needs of housing, food and safety are met, the next most important thing is a sense of social connection. This includes time spent with friends and family, or a smile from a stranger in the street. When we learn to recognize our neighbours, get to know them by name, feel comfortable stopping and chatting, and perhaps even become friends, this is an important part of our happiness as individuals, and this type of interaction (or its absence) can have an impact on our mental and physical health. Positive effects of social connection include:

- *We live longer, by perhaps as much as 15 years.¹²*

⁶ Evans GW, Wells NM, Moch A: Housing and mental health: a review of the evidence and a methodological and conceptual critique. *Journal of social issues* 2003, 59(3):475-500.

⁷ Verhaeghe P-P, Coenen A, Van de Putte B: Is living in a high-rise building bad for your self-rated health? *J Urban Health* 2016, 93(5):884-898.

⁸ Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Montgomery, Charles, 1968-, Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

⁹ Chile L, Black X, Neill C: Experience and expression of social isolation by inner-city high-rise residents. *Housing, Care and Support* 2014, 17(3):151-166.

¹⁰ Carstens DY: Site planning and design for the elderly: Issues, guidelines, and alternatives: John Wiley & Sons; 1993.

¹¹ Township of Esquimalt. Designing Density Final Report (2019).

https://www.esquimalt.ca/sites/default/files/docs/business-development/Designing_Density_Report_Final_to_Township_of_Esquimalt_Dec_2019.pdf

¹² Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris, David Stephenson. “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review.”

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691614568352>

- *We are healthier: Our immune system is stronger and we recover faster from disease.*¹³
- *We are happier: We have more friends, lower rates of anxiety and depression, and higher self-esteem.*¹⁴
- *We build community: We have greater empathy towards others, leading us to be more trusting and cooperative with others,*¹⁵ *and we are more likely to be engaged in community through volunteering.*¹⁶
- *We are more productive at work.*¹⁷
- *We are more resilient: Social support helps to buffer the effects of an adverse event or stressful life circumstance.*¹⁸

We eat and sleep better: Healthy behaviours like physical activity and eating fruits and vegetables are more likely to be reported by those with greater social connectedness.¹⁹

The purpose of this report is to request council support tasking the Advisory Design Panel to develop mental/ social wellbeing guidelines for multi-family housing developments. Around the council table, we have had many conversations, especially regarding townhomes and large developments about the mental and social health aspects of housing developments.²⁰ These conversations often occur at early input or first reading; however, it would be more beneficial to our residents and developers alike to have a common understanding of a) what elements are important to consider in new buildings to support mental and social wellness and b) clear guidance on what we as a community expect. This could be an adjunct guidance document to our sustainability checklist.

Discussion

“Social well-being is an important component of overall health and well-being and the homes we live in can either enhance or impede social connectedness, inclusion, and trust between neighbours.

For example, design features such as shared gardens, common areas (i.e. recreation rooms, rooftop decks, communal kitchen spaces), and on-site local shops and services can enhance

¹³ Emma Seppälä Ph.D. “Connect to Thrive: Social connection improves health, well-being, and longevity.” In Psychology Today, August 26, 2012. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/feelingit/201208/connect-thrive> <https://myhealthmycommu>

¹⁴ Charles Montgomery. A Recipe for Urban Happiness: Nine essential ingredients for happier, healthier cities. <https://medium.com/happy-cities/happiness-framework-ead6430997ca>

¹⁵ Emma Seppälä, op cit. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/feeling-it/201208/connect-thrive>

¹⁶ Plan H. Social Connectedness Guide.

<https://planh.ca/sites/default/files/toolsresources/socialconnectednessactionguideweblinks.pdf>

¹⁷ Charles Montgomery. A Recipe for Urban Happiness: Nine essential ingredient

¹⁸ J. Jetten, C. Haslam, S.A. Haslam, and N.R. Branscombe, “The Social Cure,” Scientific American Mind 20 (2009), 26-33. Quoted in Social Connectedness Action Guide. Plan H. p.2. <https://planh.ca/sites/default/files/tools-resources/socialconnectednessactionguideweblinks.pdf>

¹⁹ My Health, My Community

https://myhealthmycommunity.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/05/MHMC_SocialConnections_web.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com/journal-3---happy-homes.html>

social connectedness and social well-being”²¹ This expanded in attachment 1: *Creating Better Shared Spaces in Apartment Complexes and their Local Areas 2021*.

Based on best practices in other jurisdictions, current academic and grey literature, categories of design features for consideration in a Port Moody guidance document could include but not be limited to:

- Common areas within building complexes that are sufficiently attractive, stimulating and welcoming enough to encourage gathering there instead of elsewhere,
- Shared spaces for age-friendly activity (8-80 years),
- Prosocial placement of seating and other furnishing in social spaces
- Spaces designed for all ages for shared game, sports or other daily recreational activities, that include spaces for casual viewing,
- Ratios of private/ semi-private/ shared space
- Green spaces and/or selective green integration into predominantly non-green gathering spaces
- Considerations for healthy corridors
- Entrance and building perimeter designs that support social connection
- Parking considerations vs open space [for townhomes]
- Prioritizing social and green areas around residences ahead of space allocations for driveways and garage entries.
- Human-scale development
- Considerations of natural light, fresh air, and a feeling of openness
- Other elements to be identified.

Any guidelines we develop as a community need to be rooted in evidence. The members of the Advisory Design Panel are experts in their fields with experience in research and report development.

There is a wealth of sociological and design research at hand for reference, when drafting Port Moody’s building guidelines and best practices. These include:

- BC Centre for Disease Control, 2019. Mental Health & Well-being Considerations for the Built Environment.²²
- A Well-being Framework for High-rise Housing (Thesis) ²³

²¹ Township of Esquimalt. Designing Density Final Report (2019).

https://www.esquimalt.ca/sites/default/files/docs/business-development/Designing_Density_Report_Final_to_Township_of_Esquimalt_Dec_2019.pdf

²² <http://www.bccdc.ca/pop-public-health/Documents/mental-health-built-environment.pdf>

²³ Blay, Meghan (2019). A Well-being Framework for Highrise Housing (Thesis)
<https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/17396>

- Supporting Friendlier, more Neighbourly Multi-family buildings in Vancouver (2017)²⁴
- Happy Homes Report (2017)²⁵
- Study of Interior Public Spaces for the Promotion of Social Interaction in High-rise Residential Buildings (2018)²⁶
- Passages through High-rise Living (2014)²⁷

Where do People Interact in High-Rise Apartment Buildings? Exploring the Influence of Personal and Neighborhood Characteristics (2020)²⁸

- Helping Cities Plan High-Rise Growth (2018)²⁹
- Jurisdictional Examples:
 - Townhouse designs in Victoria³⁰ (Parking considerations and considerations for open space and neighbourliness.)
 - Multi-family designs in Esquimalt³¹ (Research and *What we Heard*)
 - Milton Tall Building Guidelines³²
 - Ottawa Urban Design Guidelines High-rise Buildings³³

In summary, where we live has a great impact on our mental and social well-being. This is an important and emerging topic, much of this is already being done elsewhere and there is ample research to draw from. A climate emergency, as well as the lack of affordable and regional plans for emphasizing compact communities indicate that new housing is and will continue to be mainly multi-family dwellings in a variety of forms. However that looks, the focal point must be the wellbeing of residents. Guidance on what needs to be in new developments to promote wellbeing will be important for community wellness and transparency for the development communities. However, Port Moody is currently very stretched on both staff capacity and funding for projects. We do have a wealth of knowledge in our community volunteers on the Advisory Design Panel and have some access to Health Authority experts, depending on their

²⁴ https://sustain.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/2017-45_Supporting%20Neighbourly%20Vancouver%20Multi-Unit%20Buildings_Tavakoli.pdf

²⁵ <https://thehappy.city.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/HappyHomesReport.pdf>

²⁶ <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=11120&context=theses>

²⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295927193_Passages_through_High-rise_Living

²⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7369851/>

²⁹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90021073?seq=1>

³⁰ <https://www.victoria.ca/assets/Departments/Planning~Development/Community~Planning/OCP/Replaced/Design%20Guidelines%20for%20Attached%20Res%20Dev%20-%20adopted%20May%2010%202018.pdf>

³¹ https://www.esquimalt.ca/sites/default/files/docs/business-development/Designing_Density_Report_Final_to_Township_of_Esquimalt_Dec_2019.pdf

³² <https://www.milton.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Tall-Building-Guidelines.pdf>

³³ <https://ottawa.ca/en/urban-design-guidelines-high-rise-buildings>

capacity as well. This is a project which would enhance Port Moody's stance as healthy community leaders and provide a precedent for other communities to emulate, while, most importantly, enhancing well-being for Port Moody community members.

Other Option(s)

1. THAT the report dated May 15, 2021 from Councillor Amy Lubik regarding Developing Social and Mental Health Wellbeing Guidelines for Buildings in Port Moody be referred to ADP for investigation of potential grant possibilities to fund the work referenced in the report.
2. THAT the report dated May 15, 2021 from Councillor Amy Lubik regarding Developing Social and Mental Health Wellbeing Guidelines for Buildings in Port Moody be referred to the Tri-Cities Healthy Communities Partnership for potential action.
3. THAT the report dated May 15, 2021 from Councillor Amy Lubik regarding Developing Social and Mental Health Wellbeing Guidelines for Buildings in Port Moody be received for information.

Financial Implications

None

Communications and Civic Engagement Initiatives

Possible feedback from community on social/ mental wellness guidelines

Council Strategic Plan Objectives

Council's strategic plan objectives are met by demonstrating dedication to:

- The health and wellness needs of residents;
- Access to housing;
- Social inclusion; and
- Courage to lead and embrace new ideas.

Attachment(s)

1. Creating Better Shared Spaces in Apartment Complexes and their Local Areas 2021.