

WAYNE STATE
UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
AND SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND URBAN PLANNING

To: Mayor and Council, City of Vancouver
Cc: Brent Toderian, Director of Planning, City of Vancouver
Rich Coleman, Minister of Housing and Social Development
Yaletown Residents Association, Vancouver

17 September, 2008

Dear Mayor and Council,

Members of the Yaletown Residents Association have asked me to provide you with my expert opinion regarding the supportive and social housing developments of between 51 and 147 units in the City of Vancouver that are currently planned under the 12 Sites Initiative, and especially the development proposed for 1050 Expo Boulevard.

I am the Hilberry Professor of Urban Affairs in the Department of Geography and Urban Planning at Wayne State University, Detroit. I hold a PhD in Economics from MIT, and have over 30 years of experience in researching urban housing markets. I have published over 125 scholarly articles on this subject, and co-authored the 2003 book, *Why NOT in My Back Yard?*, on the neighborhood property value and crime impacts of assisted housing. My work has shown that various types of assisted housing need not have adverse consequences on the nearby neighborhood, but only if it is not done at too large a scale, with too large a concentration of assisted residents. I am often asked to provide testimony for groups seeking to develop assisted housing, so I am in the unusual position here of arguing against such a development.

Perhaps of more relevance here, I am the lead author of the HUD-sponsored "Denver study" entitled *The Impact of Supportive Housing on Neighborhood Crime Rates* that the City of Vancouver references at

<http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/supportivehousingstrategy/faqs.htm>

in answer to the Frequently Asked Question, "Is there evidence of increased crime rates in communities with supported housing?"

Although you have quoted the Denver study in apparent support of the 12 Sites Initiative, I am dismayed for three reasons. First, virtually all existing statistical research applying appropriate methodology investigating the crime and/or property value impact effects of supportive housing has investigated smaller-scale developments, in most cases developments with 12 units or less per complex. The one exception (Goetz, Lam & Heitlinger, 1996 in Minneapolis) was for a SRO with 25 units. It is true that these studies almost without exception find no adverse impact on crime or values, however it is completely unjustified for you to generalize these results to developments of the much larger scale being proposed in the 12 Sites Initiative.

Second, my Denver study did investigate several projects that ranged in scale from 53 to 164 units, and found for them a statistically significant increase in criminal nuisance police reports after they opened. Although we cannot be certain as to why crime increased or who was

committing crimes, I think it is disingenuous to ignore these results, since this large scale of development appears to be what you are proposing.

Third, you appear to have overlooked the spirit of my Denver study's clear recommendation that developers of supportive housing should avoid

“behaving purely opportunistically and acquiring properties that might serendipitously present themselves on the market, regardless of scale or concentration effects.”

Indeed, in an earlier study that I did in an Ohio town, even a small-scale supportive housing development was shown to have deleterious property value impacts because it was poorly sited, in a highly visible location where it could be easily stigmatized. Moreover, the consistent evidence presented in my book above for several kinds of assisted housing is that there is a threshold point of concentration of assisted units where negative impacts ensue. Unfortunately, there have not been sufficient studies of supportive housing developments to be precise about where this threshold is. Nevertheless, it is my expert opinion that these planned developments in Vancouver are well above a threshold where neighborhood harm is likely to occur.

In light of these research findings, the 100-unit development originally proposed for 1050 Expo Boulevard, and those of similar sizes proposed for others of the 12 Sites, are much larger than is advisable. I believe these developments are very likely to engender negative effects of the kinds outlined above. A much more sensible, conservative, scientifically proven approach would be to keep each site at 12 units or less.

Furthermore, while the 1050 Expo Boulevard development was originally proposed as containing 100 units, the number of units has subsequently been increased to 133 (making it the second largest of the 12 Sites by number of units). In my expert opinion, this makes a poor decision even worse. The rationale given on page 16 of the Development Permit Staff Committee Report dated July 30, 2008 for this increase is that:

“Once the architect was hired and preliminary concepts were examined, it was determined that 133 units would be possible, under the existing zoning. Staff from both BC Housing and the City feel that it is appropriate to utilize each and every one of the 12 sites to the best advantage given the Provincial Government’s willingness to proceed with these projects as fast as possible. Consequently, increased numbers of units have been achieved on several of the sites including 1050 Expo Boulevard.”

On the contrary, the research I have described above demonstrates that utilization of the 12 Sites to the best advantage of their surrounding communities, would in fact involve a significant *reduction* in the number of units, not an increase.

The engagement and support of neighboring communities is vital to the long-term success of supportive housing. My understanding is that members of the Yaletown Residents Association are very much in favor of a housing development at 1050 Expo Boulevard, but it has been represented to me that they have not yet had an adequate opportunity to discuss their justified concerns with you. Accordingly, I strongly suggest that you take up their offer of a meeting in order to modify the current proposals. It is not too late to rectify the situation by bringing these proposed housing developments into line with best practices.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for clarification or further information.

Sincerely,

George C. Galster, PhD
Hilberry Professor of Urban Affairs