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Outreach work identifies biggest worry in Vancouver: homelessness

More than 2,200 people weigh in with city staff in ongoing feedback

By [Calley Hair](#), Columbian staff writer
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Vancouver City Council chambers. (Alisha Jucevic/The Columbian files)

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Among the major issues facing Vancouver, residents are most worried about homelessness.

That was the unsurprising conclusion of an outreach campaign aimed at nailing down some priorities in A Stronger Vancouver, a proposed package of public investments that touches on an array of topics; from pedestrian safety to fire sprinklers to a new public arts program.

“A few outreach activities are still ongoing, and we’re compiling and encoding a massive amount of data,” Carol Bua, the city’s communications director, said during a workshop before the Vancouver City Council on Monday afternoon.

“We really wanted to hear ideas from people, and connect with them about what their priorities are for the future of Vancouver.”

From July to September, staff heard from more than 2,200 people (and plan to hear from at least 400 more) about what matters most to them. The effort included staffing 17 tables at local events, five focus groups, three open houses and an online survey with 932 responses.

The two most popular programs in the package both revolved around homelessness — responders were most enthusiastic about a homeless assistance resource team, as well as new day centers and overnight shelters.

“There were some overarching themes to take away from the feedback,” Bua said. “The No. 1 topic overall was homelessness. Everywhere we went, people talked about homelessness.”

Another major theme that came up over the course of the outreach campaign: Traffic, many said, is terrible.

Responders were also less enthusiastic about funneling money into new recreational areas than they were about restoring existing ones. A Stronger Vancouver proposes building eight parks and improving 14.

“A common theme that we heard was that the city should take care of the assets it has before we build new parks,” Bua said.

And people were afraid that, at its current rate of growth, Vancouver might lose the community atmosphere of which many residents are so fond, Bua said.

“Everybody said, I love the small-town feel here,” she told the council. “And they’re worried about pushing up the cost of living, and making it unaffordable for them.”

Hanging over this whole process is the price. To fund the full Stronger Vancouver as currently written, the city would need to collect an additional \$30.1 million annually. The Executive Sponsors Council, a stakeholder group that wrote the plan over two years, proposed a three-way split to shoulder the burden: \$9.7 million from an increase in property taxes, \$9.7 million from beefed-up business taxes and \$10.7 million from other miscellaneous taxes and fees.

Among survey respondents, the concept of spreading the cost equally across three different groups was the most popular way the city could collect additional revenue, Bua reported.

“But I also want to note that no one was in favor of raising taxes,” Bua said. “There was a major concern over the impact of increase on taxes for people with lower incomes, and older people on a fixed income.”

The outreach phase of this process isn't quite complete. Staffers plan to hold two more discussion groups, Bua said, targeted at Vancouver's deaf and blind population. The city is also contracting with a polling company to conduct a statistically valid survey with at least 400 randomly selected residents.

A final report on the community's response to the Stronger Vancouver package will be ready on Oct. 7, Bua said.

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The format of some of the outreach events forced staff to narrow its focus.

At 15 different community events, including concerts, festivals, outdoor movies and farmers markets, staff spoke to around 1,000 people. But they could only get feedback on the capital projects in A Stronger Vancouver, and so nearly half of their outreach so far only focused on one portion of the plan.

When seeking feedback from the community on A Stronger Vancouver, the package's sheer size is a hurdle. The plan is huge — too complex to cover in any kind of depth when conversing with residents from a booth at an outdoor concert.

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The proposal consists of around 60 items. Roughly half are capital projects, including building parks, constructing new fire stations and a new city operations center, and investing in infrastructure within under-served areas like the Fourth Plain corridor.

The other half cover new services and programs, which unlike the one-time expense of a capital project would need to rely on a sustainable source of funding. Those proposals include new homeless response teams, traffic and pedestrian safety programs and low-cost recreation options.

That, along with a hefty price tag, is one of the most oft-cited criticisms of the plan.

As Mayor Anne McEnerny-Ogle told the council back in May, there's a limit to how much information a typical homeowner or business owner can be expected to absorb. People have lives outside tracking municipal tax proposals

“We can't ask the citizens to play what-if games with 60 different projects,” McEnerny-Ogle said.

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