

URBAN MAYORS CAUCUS BLUEPRINT FOR BC'S URBAN FUTURE: A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

ISSUE

The BC Urban Mayors Caucus was formed to draw attention to issues affecting the largest urban communities in the province. The group produced a document entitled *Blueprint for BC's Urban Future*¹, that calls for greater action on four specific areas including Mental Health, Substance Use and Treatment; Affordable Housing; Public Transit; and A New Fiscal Relationship.

Established prior to the last provincial election, the Caucus has recently been leading a province wide effort to garner further support for the recommendations included in the document including seeking support from individual Chambers and Boards of Trade across BC. The Caucus has had several meetings with provincial officials and while specific details of those meetings have not been disclosed, the Mayors Caucus has stated publicly that they have been encouraged by the reception they have received from the province.

Given the significance of the four areas identified by the Urban Mayors Caucus, and the reality that the issues noted already have a significant impact on the business community and BC's economy, the BC Chamber should have a unified position on the *Urban Mayors Caucus Blueprint*. This policy resolution attempts to capture such a position.

BACKGROUND

Mayors from 13 of BC's biggest cities came together prior to the last provincial election and formed the BC Urban Mayors Caucus to encourage all provincial parties to put a high priority on the significant issues impacting the province's most urbanized communities. The Caucus bills itself as an informal, non-partisan group of mayors from urban areas across British Columbia. Co-chaired by Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps and Kelowna Mayor Colin Basran, the group includes:

- Abbotsford - Mayor Henry Braun
- Burnaby - Mayor Mike Hurley
- Coquitlam - Mayor Richard Stewart
- Kamloops - Mayor Ken Christian
- Kelowna - Mayor Colin Basran
- Nanaimo - Mayor Leonard Krog
- New Westminster - Mayor Jonathan Côté
- Prince George - Mayor Lyn Hall
- Richmond - Mayor Malcolm Brodie
- Saanich - Mayor Fred Haynes
- Surrey - Mayor Doug McCallum
- Vancouver - Mayor Kennedy Stewart
- Victoria - Mayor Lisa Helps

Since last fall's provincial election, the caucus has called on the province to commit to addressing mental health and substance abuse while also seeking greater provincial investment in affordable housing and public transit, as well as a new funding framework for municipalities.

The Urban Mayors Caucus made several specific recommendations that are summarized below.

¹ BC Urban Mayors Caucus - Blueprint for BC's Urban Future <https://www.kelowna.ca/our-community/news-events/news/bc-big-city-mayors-call-provincial-parties-address-mental-health-and>

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Mental Health, Substance Use and Treatment

The Caucus seeks the province to commit to:

1. Immediately expand the availability of the full range of substance use and mental health treatment and recovery options in urban communities for both youth and adults, including appropriate facilities for those with complex needs. Treatment on demand is needed so people get it when they need it.
2. Make the recent public health order regarding expanding the number of health professionals authorized to prescribe safer pharmaceutical alternatives to the toxic drug supply permanent and urge all relevant regulatory colleges to scale up access to safer pharmaceutical alternatives for people at risk across BC
3. While reviewing changes to the Police Act, consider alternative approaches for responding to mental health and substance use calls in the community on a 24/7 basis.

Affordable Housing

The Caucus seeks the province to commit to:

1. Accelerate investments in affordable, supportive, and social housing on a priority basis, and simplify the funding application process.
2. Continue to ensure there is a regulatory and taxation climate that prioritizes housing for people who live and work in our cities, rather than housing as an investment.
3. Ensure there is a rental housing system that balances the security of tenure for renters with the needs of landlords.

Public Transit

The Caucus seeks the province to commit to:

1. Complete the financial recovery of the projected long-term losses facing TransLink, BC Transit and BC Ferries once the recently announced Safe Restart operating funding expires in late-2021, so that service levels are maintained, allowing ridership to quickly bounce back through the pandemic and the economic recovery period.
2. Redesign the transit funding model that has relied too heavily on regressive transit fares and local property taxes to one that is more resilient and equitable.
3. Prepare for a quick return to the transit expansion cities will need to maintain competitiveness by ensuring that current planning processes are not paused due to the pandemic. Investments in planning studies and developing business cases now will ensure future service expansion and capital investments are ready to go in the rebuilding stage.
4. Make the investments required over the coming decade to support BC Transit and TransLink's ambitious low-carbon fleet plans.

A New Fiscal Relationship

The Caucus seeks the province to commit to:

1. Convene an implementation committee comprised of local and provincial government officials to revisit and implement relevant recommendations in the Union of BC Municipalities report, Strong Fiscal Futures: A Blueprint for Strengthening BC Local Government's Finance System.
2. Pursue municipal finance reform to provide municipalities with a broader range of sustainable, predictable, and reliable funding tools in order to address increasing financial pressures related to a growing asset base, aging infrastructure, climate change, housing challenges and the opioid crisis as per the recommendation from the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

Given the importance of the four areas noted by the Caucus as needing the attention by the Province, many Chambers of Commerce in BC have positively responded to requests from their local Mayor for letters of support. The complexity and scope of the specific recommendations put forward by the Caucus have also left other Chambers more cautious about providing unconditional support not knowing the full impact to businesses with each of the 12 recommendations. Adding to this concern is the specific reference under A New Fiscal Relationship to "revisit and implement" a previous UBCM report tabled in July 2013 that called for a significant overhaul of the financing system for local government.²

There are also several other important strategies that aren't identified in the Mayors Caucus Blueprint document that local governments could consider as a means to help businesses and the economy including:

- A focused and concerted effort to reduce the total cost of government at all levels.
- Expand shared services and/or amalgamations to better serve urbanized areas where municipal governments share common boundaries.
- Capping property tax rates for business (Class 6) and/or Industry (Class 4) as a ratio of the residential rate (Class 1).
- Requiring harmonization of all regulations across local governments within growing regions of the province.
- Reforming regional governance in large urban areas to avoid the multi-layered local government structure that currently exists by having both regional districts and municipal governments. Regional Districts are still needed as a means to ensure representation (electoral areas) and services in unincorporated areas of the province but in growing urban areas this antiquated governance structure is not needed and should be replaced by a single regional governance model (i.e. regional municipality).

² Strong Fiscal Futures: A Blueprint for Strengthening BC Local Governments' Finance System
https://www.ubcm.ca/assets/Resolutions~and~Policy/Policy/Finance/LocalGovernmentFinance_Report_Web_Final.pdf

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the BC Chamber:

1. Supports the Urban Mayors Caucus call for greater action to address Mental Health, Substance Use and Treatment in BC's communities.
2. Supports the Urban Mayors Caucus call for greater investment in Affordable Housing but in doing so also encourages all levels of government to examine ways to reduce the total cost of taxes, levies, and development fees that are incorporated into all housing developments and eventually passed onto consumers who are facing ever increasing costs for housing.
3. Supports the Urban Mayors Caucus call on the province to commit to:
 - a. Helping TransLink, BC Transit and BC Ferries once the recently announced Safe Restart operating funding expires in late-2021, so that service levels are maintained, allowing ridership to quickly bounce back through the pandemic and the economic recovery period.
 - b. Redesigning the transit funding and governance model that has relied too heavily on regressive transit fares and local property taxes to one that is more resilient and equitable.
 - c. Preparing for a quick return to the transit expansion cities will need to maintain competitiveness by ensuring that current planning processes are not paused due to the pandemic.
 - d. Making the investments required over the coming decade to support BC Transit and TransLink's ambitious low-carbon fleet plans.
4. Request that the Province:
 - a. Reinstatement of the unconditional grants that were in place to help local governments with core infrastructure prior to the cancellation of the program in the late 1990's.
 - b. Work with the UBCM to require local governments in growing regional urban centres to dedicate their share of the federal gas tax program to transit or similar regional transportation initiatives as is the case in Metro Vancouver (TransLink).
 - c. Engage with the BC Chamber prior to any discussion on reforming the financial model for local governments so that any such discussion includes consideration of reducing the cost of government and streamlining regulations that limit BC's competitiveness.