

SOCIAL STATUS UPDATE FOR THE CITY OF NANAIMO

Summary Report

January 12, 2007

Introduction:

This document is comprised of two components. The first provides a social status update for Nanaimo since the publication of the Social Development Strategy in September 2004. This update is organized according to the six major areas of focus as found in the strategy and is based on a questionnaire, which was completed by representatives of 20 community and social service organizations in Nanaimo. The second, starting on page 17, lists a number of suggested actions to address social development issues in Nanaimo. These actions were identified as part of the meeting on October 4, 2006 and should be seen as preliminary and as a basis for further discussion.

SOCIAL STATUS UPDATE FOR NANAIMO

Executive Summary:

Purpose:

The purpose of this document is to provide a social status update for the City of Nanaimo since the publication of the Social Development Strategy in September 2004. This update will provide background information with regard to setting strategic priorities for 2006/08 and moving the social agenda forward in Nanaimo. It will also be useful in the review of the Official Community Plan.

Social Development Strategy:

This strategy defined a social vision for Nanaimo, goals to achieve that vision and strategies to achieve those goals. The strategies addressed identified social issues in the following six major areas of focus: Education and Learning; Employment and Income; Community and Health Services; Housing and Shelter; Safety and Security; and Community Life.

Document Organization:

This document is organized according to the above six major areas of focus. For each area starting on page 4, it includes a brief introduction; a summary of questionnaire responses and benchmark information related to that area; and questionnaire respondent quotes that reinforce the issues and suggestions made.

Limitations:

It should be noted that the questionnaire results reflect the issues, opinions and suggestions of the 20 respondents who answered on behalf of their agency, organizations or society and its client base. Given the limited number of responses, caution should be exercised in making extrapolations that the information provided is reflective of all social service agencies, organizations and societies in Nanaimo.

It should also be noted that one of the main sources of secondary information is the Census, which is collected and reported every five years by Statistics Canada. Given that the Census has just recently been conducted, the earliest possible release time for 2006 Census information will be 2007, with the majority of it available in 2008. Of the 26 benchmarks included in the strategy, seven relied on Census information. Thus, while the lack of Census information is a concern, it is not a major impediment in preparing the social status update.

Questionnaire Results:

Representatives from 20 social service agencies, organizations and societies responded to the questionnaire which included questions about their agency, organization or society, their use of the strategy and the major social challenges facing Nanaimo, as well as what can be done to address them.

Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

The City is too focused on economic development. This focus all but ignores social development. A healthy community must address social, economic and environmental issues.

I looked at the strategy for the first time. It looks good; however, the challenge will be gaining commitment (both money and resources) to follow-through with implementation. Most times, reports get dusty and outdated and the process gets started again without little progress being made in addressing the issues.

For years, social service agencies were criticized, rightfully, for their lack of coordination with regard to service delivery. In response, they participated in a process in which they developed an overall vision and priorities for action to improve social conditions. Despite their efforts and good will, the strategy fell on deaf ears. This strategy, along with the economic development strategy and other initiatives, are essential to the future wellbeing of Nanaimo.

The Social Development Strategy, which facilitated coordinated planning and provided hope, has, for the most part, been abandoned by the City. There is a need to revive this document and to work towards its implementation. Social issues are interrelated and we need a comprehensive, coordinated response.

Some of the major highlights included:

- The majority (65%) of respondents had used the strategy; with most using it as a resource to inform funding requests, program planning and service delivery.
- The areas of focus (as contained in the strategy) of most interest to respondents were: housing and shelter (80%); community and health services (70%) and education and learning (60%).
- The most often cited strategies included: addressing homelessness and housing related issues; improving access to primary health services, including dental care, for people who are homeless or living in poverty; increasing treatment options, including supported and transitional housing, for people with mental health and substance misuse issues; and reducing wait time for early diagnosis and intervention services targeting at-risk children and youth.
- There were a number of positive initiatives identified, including developing the Living Room (for people with psychiatric disabilities); establishing the Nanaimo Alcohol and Drug Action Coalition; increasing the number of shelter beds; and recognizing secondary suites; as well as a number of initiatives emphasizing the importance of the early years to child development.
- Despite these positives, respondents expressed frustration over the lack of City support for the strategy and its implementation. They felt that economic issues were given much higher priority than were social issues. They also questioned why they should be involved in this process, given that previous consultation efforts had “fallen on deaf ears.”

For complete verbatim responses, refer to Appendix #1.

Benchmark Information:

This document highlights 16 benchmarks, one of which is awaiting updated information. In general, the economic and employment benchmarks have exhibited significant positive movement, while many of the other benchmarks have remained relatively constant or have deteriorated. Additionally, when comparing the City of Nanaimo, the Local Health Area or the School District to the Province, the former three jurisdictions do not compare favourably.

The above summary suggests that the improved local economy has not, at least to this point in time, translated into improved social conditions for all residents, especially the most needy. In fact, in some cases, for example, the cost of housing, it has exuberated problems.

Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

Nanaimo has the potential to be a truly great city. Unfortunately, we choose to do little or nothing to address homelessness, poverty, substance misuse and other social issues. There is the mistaken belief that improving the economic health of the community will resolve these issues. As evidenced by a walk downtown, they are not going away and may have worsened. We need to commit to the strategy and start working towards their resolution.

The strength of the strategy is that it takes a comprehensive, interconnected look at social issues. Let's not fall into the trap at looking at issues in isolation. This was the failing of past initiatives.

There will likely not be a great response to this survey. Too often, social service agencies have been consulted and plans developed but little action has resulted. City Council needs to recognize that if we are truly to become a great city, then we need to address the needs of everyone, including our most needy.

There has been a marked change at the City Council level to address social issues. Perhaps, the Social Development Strategy was a key prompter. The New Nanaimo (Conference) Centre and no negative imaging remain as impediments to acknowledging and addressing our social issues.

Ensure that the Official Community Plan includes polices to address social issues. The City must be seen as partner with the senior levels of government in addressing social issues.

Area #1: Education and Learning

Introduction:

Education and learning are of vital importance today, especially given economic restructuring and technical innovation. As part of the consultation in support of the Social Development Strategy, it was noted that high school completion is now the minimum standard of entry into almost all areas of employment and that post-secondary education and training are increasingly important in ensuring steady employment. It was also noted that workers need to continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills throughout their working years to maintain their employability.

Questionnaire Results:

Based on the questionnaire, 60% of respondents stated that this area was important to their agency, organization or society and its client base. This high level of support likely reinforces the fact that people with low levels of literacy and education, especially those without high school completion or post-secondary education, are less likely to be employed or to have stable incomes.

Respondents cited the need to target the early years, with one respondent stating that the “research shows that the first six years of life set the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.” It was noted that a number of initiatives are in place, including the Early Development Instrument, the Nanaimo Early Years Coalition and Success by 6; however, it was felt that much more needed to be done.

Benchmark Information:

Six benchmarks were included as part of the Social Development Strategy; two of which are dependent on the Census. These dealt with school performance, high school completion and post-secondary transition and they are updated in the right hand column.

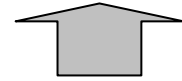
In general, there was positive movement with regard to three of the four benchmarks, with the exception being the Dogwood Completion Rate, which measures the percentage of Grade 8 students who graduate with Dogwood Certificate within six years. Of note, all four benchmarks were lower for School District #68 than for the Province.

Other Research:

The University of British Columbia’s Human Early Learning Partnership conducted a development assessment of all kindergarten children within School District #68 using a statistical index called the Early Development Instrument (EDI). This index measures the readiness for school in five dimensions of child development: language and cognitive development; communication skills and general knowledge; emotional maturity; social competence; and physical health and wellbeing. Of the 56 participating School Districts, School District #68 ranked tied for 45th, with 8.84% of its kindergarten students being vulnerable on three or more EDI scales. By comparison, 6.45% of kindergarten students in the Province were vulnerable on three or more EDI scales.

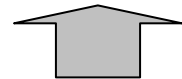
FSA – Meeting or Exceeding Expectations – Grade 4 Reading Comprehension

(68% in 2002/03; 74% in 2004/05)



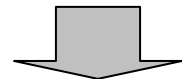
FSA – Meeting or Exceeding Expectations – Grade 7 Reading Comprehension

(70% in 2002/03; 74% in 2004/05)



Dogwood Completion Rate

(79% in 2002/03; 77% in 2004/05)



Immediate Entry Transition Rate to Malaspina University-College

(43.6% in 2001/02; 45.6% in 2003/04)



Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

In the area of education and learning, initiatives involving children from birth to six are acknowledged but not included in the goals and strategies. This age group needs to be included as education does not begin at school entry and, currently, the document does not address the crucial preschool years.

There is a need to create educational and learning opportunities that recognize that not everyone learns or retains information in the same manner.

Area #2: Employment and Income

Introduction:

Employment and income are linked to health and social wellbeing. Studies in provinces and cities consistently show that people at each step on the income scale are healthier than those on the step below.

As part of the consultation in support of the Social Development Strategy, frequent references were made to the new economy in Nanaimo and to the shift from resource based industries to information, knowledge and service based industries. It was noted that while many initiatives have been undertaken to ease the period of adjustment; it was also noted that some people find themselves on the “outside looking in” – they are ill prepared or their skills are no longer required.

Questionnaire Results:

Based on the questionnaire, 30% of respondents stated that this area was important to their agency, organization or society and its client base. This low level of support may be explained by the following respondent quote: “There is little we can do in this area, besides advocate for enhanced funding to address literacy and training needs and lobby for higher income assistance rates.”

Respondents cited the high levels of poverty, including child poverty, in Nanaimo. They also stated that the community was becoming more polarized between rich and poor, with the latter having few options to improve their economic circumstances. It was suggested that ‘prohibitive’ regulations which restrict access to income assistance be eased and that welfare rates be increased to reflect higher housing costs.

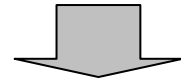
Benchmark Information:

Five benchmarks were included as part of the Social Development Strategy; two of which are dependent on the Census. These dealt with employment, government assistance and personal income and they are updated in the right hand column.

In general, there was significant positive movement, signaling an improved provincial and local economy. However, it should be cautioned that the reduction in government assistance cases may be partially explained by tightened eligibility criteria. Additionally, the median total income for Nanaimo in 2004 was still lower than that for the Province.

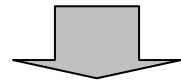
Annual Average Unemployment Rate

(9.3% in 2002; 7.0% in 2005)



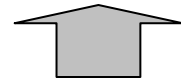
Percentage of the Population (19 to 64) on Government Assistance

(10.6% in 2002; 6.3% in 2005)



Median Total Income (\$)

(\$21,779 in 2002; \$23,529 in 2004)



Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

There are high levels of poverty, including child poverty. For families with hungry children, addressing the developmental needs of children become secondary.

There is a need to institute positive changes within the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance to reduce poverty and related issues.

There is the perception that everyone can work and that there are suitable jobs available.

Area #3: Community and Health Services

Introduction:

Community and health services play an important function in promoting healthy lifestyles; supporting people with debilitating illnesses and disabilities; and addressing health and social issues such as inadequate nutrition, mental illness and substance misuse. As part of the consultation in support of the Social Development Strategy, it was emphasized that these services contribute to a high quality of life.

Questionnaire Results:

Based on the questionnaire, 70% of respondents stated that this area was important to their agency, organization or society and its client base.

Respondents emphasized that too little attention is being focused on early diagnosis, intervention and prevention services. It was noted that it is far more cost effective to prevent potentially harmful behaviours than it is to treat them.

Respondents cited the high rates of mental illness and substance misuse, including dual diagnosis cases, and the limited treatment options available. It was noted that while some positive steps have been taken, including opening the Living Room (for people with psychiatric disabilities) and establishing the Nanaimo Alcohol and Drug Action Coalition; much more needed to be done.

Respondents emphasized the need to improve access to general practitioners and to primary health services. It was noted that there is continued overuse of the emergency room.

Benchmark Information:

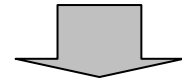
Five benchmarks were included as part of the Social Development Strategy; two in which similar and current information are available. These dealt with alcohol-related deaths and suicides and they are updated in the right hand column. Two other benchmarks – low birth weight and teenage pregnancy – are also cited and compared against the provincial rate but not against historical information for Nanaimo, due differences in the system of measurement.

With regard to alcohol-related deaths and suicides, there was little movement either up or down. As for low birth weight and teenage pregnancy in 2004, the former rate was slightly lower for Nanaimo than for the Province, while the latter rate was far higher for Nanaimo than for the Province.

Other Research:

The Vancouver Island Health Authority recently released a discussion paper entitled Understanding the Social Determinants of Health (May 2006). As part of this paper, it makes the case that there is a socio-economic gradient of health. It cites the work of BC Stats, which produces a composite socio-economic index that combines 24 measures of the following factors: economic hardship; crime; health; education; and children and youth at-risk. Based on this index, Nanaimo ranked 10th out of 13 Local Health Areas on Vancouver Island and “was among the worst performing areas in the Province.”

Number of Alcohol-Related Deaths per 10,000 Population
(6.81 in 2002; 6.24 in 2004)



Number of Suicides per 10,000 Population
(1.57 in 2002; 1.58 in 2004)



Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

There is a need to enhance access to early diagnosis and intervention services for at-risk students, especially with regard to emotional disorders and mental illness.

It is difficult to refer clients after 10:00 p.m. Often the only option is emergency, which is not the best practice when it comes to supporting the mentally ill.

There is a need to develop a pediatric short-stay clinic; encourage and support fathers; enhance community and family capacity to promote mental wellness; place greater emphasis on transition services; and provide culturally sensitive programs and services.

There are increasing addiction related issues, including gambling, in Nanaimo.

Area #4: Housing and Shelter

Introduction:

Housing and shelter play an important role in the health of the community. As part of the consultation in support of the Social Development Strategy, it was noted that shelter is essential to survival and that affordable, safe and sustainable housing is the basis for building stable lives and neighbourhoods.

Questionnaire Results:

Based on the questionnaire, 80% of respondents stated that this area was important to their agency, organization or society and its client base. As one respondent stated: "shelter is a basic need; it is the foundation upon which stable lives are built."

Respondents cited the increasing cost of housing, both owned and rental. They also cited the increasing incidence of homelessness and raised concerns about the declining stock of market rental housing.

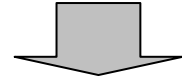
Respondents stated that positive steps included developing the Community Plan to Address Homelessness and recognizing secondary suites; however, they emphasized that far more needed to be done.

Respondents felt that the municipality needed to play a more active role in facilitating the development of non-market housing. They also called for more emergency shelter beds and supported and transitional housing.

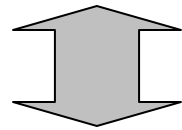
Benchmark Information:

Five benchmarks were included as part of the Social Development Strategy; three of which are dependent on the Census. With regard to the market rental housing and row house vacancy rate, it decreased from 3.4% in 2002 to 1.4% in 2005.

**Market Rental Housing and Row
Housing Vacancy Rate**
(3.4% in 2002; 1.4% in 2005)



**Number of Turnaways at
Emergency Shelters and Transi-
tion Houses**
(000 in 2002; 000 in 2005)



Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

The lack of affordable housing leads to multiple moves. This creates instability for children and causes difficulties for service providers trying to stay connected.

There is a need to develop appropriate housing and support systems to enable seniors to live independently for as long as possible. If this occurred, it would relieve demand for more costly facility care arrangements.

There is a need to provide more funding to address the priority areas as outlined in the Community Plan to Address Homelessness.

There is a need to dedicate municipally owned lands to facilitate the development of non-market housing.

Area #5: Safety and Security

Introduction:

Safety and security concerns tend to dominate public discussions regarding social issues. As part of the consultation in support of the Social Development Strategy, the elderly and women felt particularly at-risk. Cited concerns included open alcohol and drug use and the presence of sex trade workers in the downtown, as well as drug dealers actively targeting youth, both in and out of school.

Questionnaire Results:

Based on the questionnaire, 35% of respondents stated that this area was important to their agency, organization or society and its client base. Unlike the public, respondents tended to focus on the root causes of criminal activity, including homelessness, poverty and substance misuse; and not on the criminal justice system.

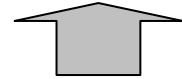
Respondents cited the SAFER Downtown Nanaimo Project and the School Liaison Officer Program, as well as recent efforts to address crystal meth. It was suggested that strategies targeting mental health and substance misuse issues be supported, including expanded treatment options and supported and transitional housing.

Benchmark Information:

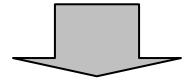
Three benchmarks were included as part of the Social Development Strategy; two in which current information is available. These dealt with the crime rate (the number of criminal code offences per 1,000 population) and the number of youths charged with criminal code offences and they are updated in the right hand column.

While the crime rate in Nanaimo increased by 13.4% between 2002 and 2005; the number of youths charged with criminal code offences decreased by 32.7% between 2002 and 2005. Additionally, the number of youths charged as percentage of all persons charged decreased from 15% to 11% between 2002 and 2005.

**Number of Criminal Code
Offences Per 1,000 Population**
(157 in 2002; 178 in 2005)



**Number of Youths Charged with
Criminal Code Offences**
(321 in 2002; 216 in 2005)



Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

The lack of treatment options and the long waitlists for substance misusers are contributing factors to criminal activity. Treatment, and not incarceration, is the answer.

The public perception is that crime, especially youth crime, is increasing. This is fueled by media reports, often originating outside of Nanaimo.

There is a need to address the root causes of criminal activity, including homelessness, poverty and substance misuse.

Area #6: Community Life

Introduction:

Community life was raised as an area of focus in the Social Development Strategy. This area, which is difficult to measure, addresses such attributes as:

- civic pride and spirit;
- community involvement and volunteerism;
- inclusiveness and sense of belonging;
- neighbourliness and sense of community.

These attributes have been described as the “glue that hold a community together.” They have also been referred to as social capital by Robert Putnam in his Social Capital Theory, and are catalysts for economic growth and prosperity.

Questionnaire Results:

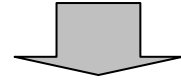
Based on the questionnaire, 35% of respondents stated that this area was important to their agency, organization or society and its client base. This low level of support may be explained by the following respondent quote: “We need to deal with the basic needs of our clients, such as adequate food, affordable shelter and a livable income, before addressing other less urgent needs.”

Respondents called for improved outreach services targeting at-risk families and the elderly. Regarding the latter, it was noted that there have been a number of recent efforts to ‘connect’ the elderly, including offering free book delivery for shut-ins and opening the library on Sundays. It was suggested that a one-stop information and service centre for seniors be developed.

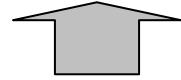
Benchmark Information:

Three benchmarks were included as part of the Social Development Strategy. These dealt with charitable giving, civic involvement and volunteerism and they are updated in the right hand column. There was little movement with regard to the first two benchmarks (i.e., charitable giving and civic involvement) but a significant increase with regard to volunteerism as tracked by Volunteer Nanaimo.

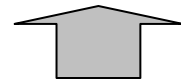
**Percentage of Eligible Voters
who Voted in Municipal Elections**
(37.1% in 2002; 35.7% in 2005)



**Percentage of Taxfilers Who
Made a Charitable Donation**
(21.4% in 2002; 22.8% in 2004)



**Number of Volunteers Registered
with Volunteer Nanaimo**
(719 in 2002; 1,452 in 2005)



Questionnaire Respondent Quotes

There is a lack of social connections, with many seniors reporting that they feel isolated in the community.

There are more opportunities for seniors to get connected – e.g., free coffee for seniors at country club, free concert in the park each August, inexpensive monthly movie at the Avalon Cinemas, library open on Sundays and free book delivery once every three weeks to shut-ins.