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Economic & Community Development Committee
City of Toronto
100 Queen Street West, 10th Floor, West Tower
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

May 28, 2024

Attention: Councillor Alejandra Bravo
Chair, Economic & Community Development Committee

By email: ecdc@toronto.ca

Dear Councillor Bravo and members of the Economic & Community Development Committee,

This letter is submitted in response to **Item EC13.8 - the City's Encampment Approach and Strategy**. At Downtown Yonge, we believe in collaborative, partnered solutions and recognize that community safety and well-being requires a group effort. We see the Strategy as a critical step forward to enhancing community safety and well-being by addressing encampments in a cohesive and transparent way, that ensures the inclusion of all stakeholders in the process. We specifically support:

1. The recognition that encampments can have a negative impact on safety, not only for encampment residents but also for the surrounding community of residents, families, businesses and visitors. Safety risks can include fire hazards, sexual exploitation, needle litter, assaults, overdoses and human trafficking.
2. The commitment to communicating with Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) as part of the Interdivisional Protocol for Encampments in Toronto. We ask that the City see BIAs as not only stakeholders in the Encampment Strategy, but active partners for finding solutions.
3. The request for the Province to fund urgently-needed 24/7 crisis stabilization spaces for people experiencing mental health or substance use crisis. This aligns with the ask in the City's *Health, Our City* which we supported in the City's 2024 Budget.

However, we also have some concerns, specifically:

1. Much of the Strategy depends on financial support from the Federal and Provincial governments. What is the City of Toronto's plan if those funds are delayed – or, worse – are not forthcoming at all?
2. There is little mention of performance metrics to measure the effectiveness of the Strategy. What metrics will be used for tracking success or failure? What are the stated goals that the Strategy aims to achieve?

Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area (DYBIA), with a membership of some 2,000 businesses and property owners and a combined commercial property value of \$7.2 billion, is one of the City's largest BIAs. We have been actively investing in a safe and inclusive neighbourhood since 2015, notably through collaborative partnerships that include social agencies, businesses, police and other community stakeholders. We also note that DYBIA represents businesses and commercial properties that generate over \$850 million in annual fiscal revenues for different levels of government.

One of our Strategic Priorities is ***Creating a safe, clean and welcoming environment for all***. As part of our commitment to this goal, we have funded a full-time crisis outreach team called the Community Engagement Team (CET) since Summer 2018. We also coordinate partnered outreach, initiated during the pandemic, to maximise access to resources for community members on-street. The CET currently undertakes weekly sessions with eight different, regular partners including various social agencies, harm reduction and housing workers, TTC Special Constables and the Yonge Neighbourhood Community Officers (NCOs). We believe strongly in multi-disciplinary and collaborative solutions in our neighbourhood.

As part of their outreach efforts, the CET engages with people living in encampments, most notably in Trinity Square Park where there has been an encampment for several years.

Despite these efforts, and while our commitment to our most vulnerable community members is unwavering, Downtown Yonge is increasingly perceived as a neighbourhood that is unsafe. This is a serious reputational risk that compromises the health and well-being of our residents, employees, businesses, visitors and students as well as those seeking services. We increasingly see open drug use, overdoses, erratic and aggressive behaviours, shootings, assaults on retail and security staff in the area as well as the victimization of extremely vulnerable people on-street.

Nowhere do these challenges play out more visibly than in the Trinity Square Park encampment. Through our outreach programs, we see how the most vulnerable and complex individuals in our community end up in an encampment because of a lack of access to housing, mental health and addiction treatment services. With multiple barriers, encampment residents face unsafe, unsanitary conditions – including, but not limited to – fire hazards, drug paraphernalia and needle litter, as well as sexual and physical victimization. We are aware of multiple cases of sexual exploitation, violence, overdoses and assaults that have occurred in this encampment.

As always, DYBIA stands ready and willing to play our part in both economic recovery and community safety and well-being:

- We are working with the City's 10-year community safety and well-being program, SafeTO, to identify community safety concerns for BIAs throughout the city, including the impact of encampments;
- We will continue to invest directly in on-street crisis and traditional outreach for street-involved individuals and encampment residents as we have done since 2018;
- In partnership with the BIA Office at the City, we will continue to offer de-escalation training for streetfront businesses throughout Toronto as we have done since 2020;
- We will continue to participate in the Yonge-Dundas operations and leadership tables;
- We will continue to provide resources for those seeking access to social programs and to those wondering how to report different types of security incidents.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter in response to **Item EC13.8 - the City's Encampment Approach and Strategy**. We see it as one piece of a larger imperative to invest in an integrated approach to community safety and well-being, ensuring that all community stakeholders are included as part of the process.

Sincerely,



Pauline Larsen

Executive Director & COO

