



British Columbia Urban Mayors' Caucus 2021 Blueprint for B.C.'s Urban Future

COVID's Impact on B.C.'s Urban Communities

British Columbia's urban areas are facing unique challenges coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to ensure the next federal government is ready to work in partnership with local government to address the most pressing issues facing cities across B.C., as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for the future, including a changing climate.

Over 80 percent of Canadians live in cities and cities are Canada's economic engines – home to key industries and their workers, medium- and high-density housing development opportunities, world-class healthcare facilities and post-secondary education institutions. The British Columbia Urban Mayors' Caucus (BCUMC) represents 55% of the population of British Columbia, 2.8 million people. The cities that the BCUMC represents are diverse – from the south-western coast from Vancouver Island, Lower Mainland, Interior to the North – but the vital economic role that each plays and the challenges we each face, are shared.

Our cities are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, which have exacerbated existing challenges related to mental health and addictions, homelessness, and a lack of affordable housing. With vital support from the provincial and federal governments, cities have maintained critical services, such as public transit, but ongoing financial challenges put the long-term sustainability of these services at risk. In addition, we are in danger of falling behind on planning for infrastructure expansion, economic development and climate change, as our respective populations continue to grow, and British Columbia moves to rebuild post-pandemic.

Our Shared Proposal

We are asking the next federal government to commit to working with leaders from B.C.'s cities to address the issues we face today, while we work together for the restored prosperity and

growth expected as we emerge from the pandemic. Moreover, putting our cities on paths to a strong recovery will support neighboring smaller and rural including Indigenous communities and Canada as a whole.

This collaborative partnership in leadership will require ongoing investments in key areas such as housing, health, and infrastructure. A strong recovery will also depend on the creation of a new fiscal relationship between federal, provincial and local governments – one that provides cities with sustainable, predictable and reliable funding tools, so that we can support inclusive, equitable urban economies well into the future.

2021 Blueprint for B.C.'s Urban Future

1. Mental Health, Substance Use and Treatment

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an unprecedented escalation in the challenges facing our cities stemming from the mental health and substance use. Too many of our residents are affected by mental health and substance use issues and, increasingly, brain injuries.

These crises existed before COVID-19 but have been exacerbated by a toxic drug supply, the level of pandemic-related homelessness and encampments, and increasing stigma and anger from some people that reside in, have businesses and visit our cities. Our businesses – already struggling from the economic impacts of COVID-19 – are facing break-ins and other challenges, as a result of increasing social disorder and challenging behaviour from people in crisis.

We call on the federal government to:

1. Increase the Canada Health Transfer so that our provincial government can immediately expand the availability of the full range of substance use and mental health treatment and recovery options in our communities for both youth and adults.
2. Expand access to a safe drug supply and drug testing.
3. Partner with the Province to fund the implementation of Complex Care Housing that the Province will be rolling out this fall to provide adequate and appropriate supports for those currently falling through the cracks and unable to live stably in existing supportive housing.
4. Work with health authorities and police agencies to establish national overdose data collection standards, including the collection of disaggregated and racial data in a culturally-safe way.

2. Affordable Housing

The federal and provincial governments have made significant investments to address the lack of affordable housing in our cities. Yet many young families can't afford to buy homes

in our cities. Seniors living in market-rental units have pensions that don't keep pace with rent increases. Low-wage workers are forced to commute long distances to access their jobs in our cities, severely impacting their quality of life. Too many of our vulnerable residents are looking for a path out of homelessness and people that identify as Indigenous remain disproportionately represented in the homeless counts.

There is not enough housing in our cities that is affordable to the people who work and live in them. This is causing economic fallout for businesses in terms of worker recruitment and retention, thereby reducing the overall productivity of B.C.'s economy.

We know it's far cheaper to hold on to existing units of rental supply than to build new units, yet between 2011 and 2016, we lost over 300,000 affordable private rental units in Canada. In addition, the financialization of housing is a concern, including Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) purchasing older affordable housing and raising rents to maximize returns for shareholders. In the past decade, investment in Canadian multi-unit residential buildings tripled to \$10 billion annually. Average valuations of rental buildings continue to set new records.

We call on the federal government to:

1. Make the Rapid Housing Initiative permanent with at least a \$2 billion investment per year until the goal of ending chronic homelessness has been reached.
2. Implement a non-market acquisition strategy to enable the non-profit sector to purchase low-end-of-market rental buildings that are affordable due to the age of the stock, to preserve them as affordable in perpetuity.
3. Build on the Indigenous & Northern Affairs capital funding program and develop and fund an urban, rural and northern Indigenous strategy to enable Indigenous housing organizations to provide culturally-supportive housing.
4. Use federal tax policy to disincentivize the financialization of housing and to incentivize the construction of more market rental units annually that are within reach of local wages.
5. Enhance the National Housing Strategy (NHS) by accelerating the timeline for committing unused NHS funding to projects and increasing the flexibility of NHS programs to accommodate a wider range and scale of cost-sharing proposals.
6. Implement the "Vote Housing" calls to action. Vote Housing is a grassroots campaign that advocates to end homelessness and make housing safe and affordable in Canada.

3. Public Transit and Active Transportation

Affordable, reliable and accessible public transit is critical to the economic, social and environmental future of our cities. Pre-COVID-19, ridership across British Columbia was growing faster than anywhere in North America, as residents increasingly turned to transit as a viable alternative to single-occupancy vehicles.

Although the pandemic has cut ridership by over 50 percent and devastated the financial sustainability of TransLink and BC Transit, this setback is temporary. For our cities to remain competitive in a post-pandemic economy, we must keep building transit-friendly communities and continuously invest in high quality transit that reduces road congestion and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, keeps our goods moving efficiently on limited road space, and offers an affordable transportation mode to all residents, especially those without other options.

The federal-provincial Safe Restart funding has helped to sustain BC Transit and TransLink operations through the pandemic, helping us to continue to provide this essential service to our residents.

We call on the federal government to:

1. Top up the Safe Restart funding for TransLink and BC Transit to fill the gaps in operating expenses while our transit agencies rebuild ridership to pre-pandemic levels.
2. Invest at least \$3 billion per year nationwide through a new national Permanent Transit Fund beginning no later than 2026, as committed in Budget 2021, to provide BC with over \$400 million annually to support needed transit expansion identified in TransLink's and BC Transit's long-term plans.
3. Invest at least \$2.5 billion nationwide over the next five years in stimulus transit funding as committed in Budget 2021 to support shovel-ready major transit projects across BC.
4. Invest at least \$2.7 billion nationwide in stimulus transit funding over the next five years for zero-emission buses as committed in Budget 2021 to support TransLink's and BC Transit's ambitious, accelerated plans to transition to zero-emission bus fleets to meet provincial and national GHG emissions targets in 2030 and 2050.
5. Work with provincial government to redesign the transit-funding model that has relied too heavily on regressive transit fares and local property taxes into one that is more resilient and equitable
6. Allocate funding from the \$400 million federal Active Transportation fund directly to local government as a COVID-19 recovery stimulus opportunity.

4. A New Fiscal Relationship

COVID-19 has made abundantly clear that the fiscal framework set up in 1867 is wholly inadequate to meet the challenges and opportunities cities are facing in the 21st century and the future. The current pandemic created a fiscal shock that has revealed the fragility of the local government finance system. Reliant on property taxes and utility fees and unable to run deficits, local government are ill-equipped to respond to fiscal shocks like COVID-19, sudden increases in RCMP wages, and other unpredictable events. Local government is also under increasing financial pressures related to a growing asset base, aging infrastructure, climate change, housing challenges and the opioid crisis.

As city leaders, we have been on the front lines responding to COVID-19 without resources to provide the services needed to keep our most vulnerable residents healthy and safe, and at the same time, offer additional supports to the businesses and neighbourhoods most impacted by the pandemic-driven challenges. We are also ill-equipped and under-resourced to mitigate and adapt to climate change and the housing affordability crisis.

We call the federal government to:

1. Create a federal, provincial/territorial and local government working group to modernize the local government finance system in Canada that includes providing cities with a broader range of sustainable, predictable and reliable funding tools.
2. Permanently double the Canada Community Building Fund to provide stable predictable funding to local government for infrastructure renewal and job creation.
3. Provide financial support to local government to help mitigate the impact of a 25 percent wage increase for the RCMP. Local government was not included at the during the negotiations of these increases and should not be solely responsible to cover the significant incremental costs.

About BC Urban Mayors' Caucus

The BC Urban Mayors' Caucus is an informal, non-partisan group of mayors from urban areas across British Columbia that came together in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will continue to meet as a group to learn from one another and to act as a unified voice on critical issues facing our communities. Find out more about the caucus here:

