

**CITY OF BELLEVILLE
Karen Poste, Manager
Economic and Strategic Initiatives
Report No. ECDEV 2020-32
November 9, 2020**

To: Mayor and Members of Council

Subject: Vagrancy Issues – Business Impact

Recommendation:

“THAT Manager of Economic and Strategic Initiatives Report No. ECDEV 2020-32 regarding the impact of vagrancy, loitering and trespassing on local business operations, be received.”

Strategic Plan Alignment:

The City of Belleville's Strategic Plan identifies nine strategic themes. This report relates to the Community Health, Safety and Security theme but will also have an impact on the Residential Development, Industrial and Commercial Development and City Centre Revitalization themes identified in the strategic plan.

Background:

For more than two years now, the Economic and Strategic Initiatives department has been dealing with complaints from local businesses regarding vagrancy throughout the City. Although most prominently noticeable in and around the downtown, it is an issue for businesses throughout the community.

In general terms, the vagrancy complaints include issues of people loitering, swearing, fighting, making inappropriate comments, illegally occupying private property, sleeping, consuming drugs and alcohol, vandalism, begging, public urination, etc. These actions have escalated in the last two years and are having a greater impact on our local business community.

In particular, loitering in downtown bank vestibules was addressed as an urgent issue. Despite the best efforts of the Belleville Police Service (BPS), loitering, trespassing,

sleeping, begging and other inappropriate behaviour has continued to happen in these areas on bank property. Bank customers and staff have had to deal with vagrants hanging out in and around the vestibules, causing damage and intimidating and harassing individuals. Several banks have had to lock the door access to their instant tellers in order to keep vagrants from gathering and/or sleeping on their property. Once locked, customers can no longer use the bank machines from early evening to early morning which negatively impacts the experience these customers have with these financial institutions. Many of our residents work shift work and they rely on being able to access their bank 24/7 and these vestibule closures will limit their access.

Discouraging bank customers from visiting the downtown branches, in particular during the overnight hours could reduce their customer traffic and eventually cause more financial institutions to close their downtown locations. Losing these valuable anchor tenants in our downtown is inconsistent with the community's significant downtown revitalization efforts.

City staff did speak and meet with BPS staff on several occasions and the BPS has tried to increase their patrols throughout the City looking for vagrancy and public disturbances but they are limited in the time they have to devote to these situations. Higher priority calls must be answered and often the private business owners and managers are left to deal with loitering and other issues on their own. The BPS also arranged to have economic development staff meet with a crown prosecutor to discuss the impact of this situation – although some suggestions for change were discussed, all agreed that this issue is much larger than anything the BPS or court system can influence on their own. Staff have been advised that mental health challenges and substance abuse are often at the base of these situations and both the police and court system are not set up to adequately deal with these issues. The police are frustrated because they take the time to arrest someone, put them into the court systems but then the court system lets them go with no punishment. The prosecutors are frustrated because they understand the individual is likely suffering from a mental health or addiction issue and the court system just isn't designed to deal with these situations resulting in offenders being back on the street.

These issues are having a dramatic impact on our business community and staff are compelled to ensure Council and others are aware of the impact these situations are having and/or could have on the local economy.

Financial:

This report does not include any recommendations that will have a direct impact on City finances or the budget process.

Analysis:

The City's Economic Development office works with stakeholders to help improve the local business climate and the local economy. The calls we are receiving regarding the

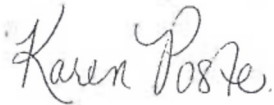
negative impact of vagrancy, loitering, trespassing and public disturbances has been increasing and it's clear there is a major impact on the ability of some entrepreneurs and managers to conduct their business. Customers and staff are being negatively impacted and the impacts can affect the success of local business. Although the impact is not limited to the downtown area, it is clearly most apparent in the downtown.

Although staff understand this is not a problem that is unique to Belleville, it is a problem never-the-less and needs to be effectively addressed. It is a multifaceted issue that requires the cooperation of a variety of stakeholders and staff and the first step in dealing with an issue is acknowledging that it exists.

Conclusion:

Management is providing Council with this update to ensure decision makers are aware of the impact our changing social environment is having on business. Our public spaces are to be enjoyed by everyone and private property deserves a measure of protection from those that are trespassing or causing damage. The clear increase in vagrancy throughout the City is having a negative impact on residents and the City's business community. A discussion of potential solutions with those that can effect change is needed and this report is intended to encourage that discussion. Perhaps a meeting of all relevant stakeholders is warranted.

Respectfully submitted,



Karen Poste, AMCT
Manager, Economic & Strategic Initiatives