



North Park Neighbourhood Association
PO Box 661 #185-911 Yates Street
Victoria, BC, Canada
V8V 4Y9

December 21, 2020

Re: Request to Open Save On Foods Memorial Arena (SOFMA) for Immediate Indoor Shelter

Attention: BC Housing, Ministers Malcolmson, Eby, Dix, Rankin, Simons, MP Collins, MLAs Lore and Fleming, and City of Victoria Mayor and Council,

The North Park Neighbourhood Association is urgently calling on BC Housing to enter into a contract with GSL Group, the operator of the Save on Foods Memorial Arena (SOFMA) to provide immediate and temporary indoor housing to the ~45 individuals currently sheltering outdoors across the street from the Arena in Central Park.

Since May, Central Park has been the epicentre for outdoor sheltering in Victoria. Currently, there are 45 structures concentrated in one quarter of the park - encircling the children's playground, outdoor gym, tennis court, and basketball court.

As the weather worsens so do the circumstances for those in Central Park. Further concentration of structures into a smaller area of the park with fencing (Nov. 20) has amplified tensions and stress without achieving any reduction in the number of structures. Housed and unhoused residents in and around Central Park are reporting an increase in criminal activity, assaults, and declining health conditions that come with living outdoors in the winter in a concentrated encampment and a more deeply entrenched and parasitic criminal element.

The housing prospects for the individuals in Central Park are dismal. We acknowledge that more supportive housing is being built and/or acquired at an unprecedented pace, but it still is not coming fast enough. Moreover, many of the individuals living in Central Park remain there in order to access daily services from The Harbour, SOLID, Our Place, AVI, Peers, and the other services located nearby for safe supply and injection. These support services could be provided on-site along with other counselling, mental health and harm reduction services were the SOFMA to be used as an indoor temporary shelter.

This urgent request to provide indoor shelter in the SOFMA is in response to both the rapidly deteriorating conditions in Central Park, and the proven success of sheltering in this space as demonstrated between May-August 31, 2020 when the Portland Hotel Society (PHS) operated a 48 bed shelter in the arena. All of the residents from this summer sheltering program at SOFMA were successfully transferred to permanent supportive housing.

SOFMA is a City owned facility intended to provide benefit to the community. As it stands, SOFMA has been unoccupied for months and will continue to be for as long as we have orders from the Ministry of Public Health around social distancing, small gatherings, and organized sports. This publicly-owned facility is providing no community benefit when it could be providing an urgently needed life saving service

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in the face of several public health emergencies: housing crisis, overdose crisis, and COVID-19 pandemic.

If the operator, GSL Group is not amenable to entering into a contract with BC Housing, we call on the Province of BC to invoke paramountcy through the provincial state of emergency. Running concurrently to the negotiations with GSL Group, we urge the Province to secure funding and a service provider for this facility. We expect the duration of the contract with GSL to cover the period of time until permanent supportive housing from BC Housing can accommodate these residents. North Park is happy to coordinate volunteers to help re-establish the pods and other furnishings and supplies at SOFMA.

As of today, December 21, BC Housing, has indicated it has submitted a funding request to the provincial government to address shelter demands (not limited to the City of Victoria), and are working with its real estate team to assess multiple locations for indoor shelter. In regards to the service provider staff that would be required to operate any additional indoor sheltering, BC Housing has confirmed with Victoria service providers that there is the capacity to staff additional shelter locations within ten days.

We request your assistance in providing indoor shelter at the Save on Foods Memorial Arena to those currently sheltering in Central Park as soon as possible. Please advise what steps are being taken to respond to this urgent request.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors

Allison Ashcroft
Katie Fillion
Jennie Greven
Sean Kahil
Alastair McCollum
Harold Stanley

Executive Director

Sarah Murray
613-888-2106 | executivedirector@npna.ca

Land Use Planning Advisor

Eleni Gibson

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CC:

Minister of Mental Health & Addictions, Sheila Malcolmson,
Attorney General and Minister responsible for Housing, David Eby
Minister of Health, Adrian Dix
Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, Murray Rankin
Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Nicholas Simons
MP Laurel Collins
MLA Grace Lore
MLA Rob Flemming
Murray Langdon, BC Housing
Angela Moran, BC Housing
Heidi Hartman, BC Housing
Malcolm McNaughton, BC Housing
City of Victoria Mayor and Council