

An open letter to Mayor Cleveland and the citizens of Cobourg From social service agencies serving people experiencing homelessness

Dear Mayor Cleveland,

We write as organizations that work every day – on the ground, in our community – with the people your statement describes as a threat to Cobourg’s future. We ask you, and all residents, to consider a different perspective: one grounded not in ideology, but in law, in evidence, and in the lived reality of our most vulnerable neighbours.

Housing is a human right – this is Canadian law, not advocacy language

You describe the phrase “housing is a human right” as inflammatory and ideological. We must respectfully but firmly correct that characterization.

Canada is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which enshrines the right to adequate housing. More directly, in 2019, the Government of Canada passed the National Housing Strategy Act, which enshrined housing as a fundamental human right in federal statute.

This is not social services advocacy language.

Our shelters are full. So where do people go?

You ask, implicitly, why unhoused people are in our parks. We will answer that directly: because there is nowhere else for them to go.

Cobourg’s emergency shelter capacity is consistently at or beyond its limits. On any given night, there are people in this community who have sought shelter access and been turned away – not by choice, not by preference, but because the beds simply do not exist.

When a person cannot access a shelter, they do not disappear. They sleep somewhere. For many of our unhoused neighbours, that somewhere is a park.

The Parks Master Plan acknowledges this reality honestly. You have criticized it for doing so. But a plan that ignores where vulnerable people actually are is not a plan – it is a wish.

Our unhoused neighbours belong in this plan

Cobourg’s parks are public spaces – for all members of the public.

People experiencing homelessness are members of this community. They pay taxes when they can, they have families here, they have histories here. Many of them grew

up in this town.

The Parks Master Plan includes them not to turn parks into campgrounds, as you suggest, but because any responsible stewardship of public space must account for all the people who use it.

The section you quote – explaining why some individuals choose parks over shelters – is not advocacy. It is an accurate, research-supported description of why people make the choices they do.

Understanding this is not capitulation. It is competent planning.

On syringe disposal and public health

Safe syringe disposal bins are a public health measure – recommended by public health agencies, used successfully across Ontario, and designed to protect everyone who uses parks, including children.

Their presence does not encourage drug use. It reduces the risk of discarded needles in public spaces.

If your goal is safer parks, this measure serves that goal. Opposing it on ideological grounds means accepting more needles on the ground in Victoria Park.

On the Safer Municipalities Act

You cite Ontario's Safer Municipalities Act as reason to reject this plan.

We note that legislation compelling encampment clearances does not create housing. It relocates suffering.

Communities across Ontario and Canada that have used enforcement-only approaches have not reduced homelessness – they have displaced it, often at enormous cost to taxpayers, and often temporarily.

Cobourg experienced this firsthand.

The plan before Council is an attempt to think more carefully about what comes next. Dismissing it entirely returns us to the same cycle.

What we are asking for

We are not asking Cobourg to become a laboratory.

We are asking Council to adopt a parks plan that honestly reflects the community it serves – all of it.

We welcome the removal of any language that genuinely conflicts with provincial law. We do not accept the removal of factual public health recommendations, or the erasure of our unhoused neighbours from a planning document simply because their existence is uncomfortable.

There is no simple solution to our current housing and homelessness crisis. We know it will only be through working together as a community that we will be able to make headway toward a Cobourg where everyone is cared for and safe.

We invite Mayor Cleveland, and any member of Council, to meet with our Homelessness Leadership Table to discuss the next steps in this important journey.

Respectfully,

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