

Opinion: Corporations should take the Eastside Stride

Opinion: The business community and the DTES neighbourhood could learn from one another

BY LIISA ATVA, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 10, 2013



The Pennsylvania Hotel, a Downtown Eastside landmark at the corner of Carrall and Hastings streets, was refurbished to house low-income residents. There is more to the DTES than a quick drive-by reveals.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, PROVINCE

Hastings and Main, the epicentre of Vancouver's drug-infested Downtown Eastside (DTES), is not a pretty sight; beer parlours, pawnshops, and a drug-injection centre. A horde of a hundred, some hyperactive, others stagger obliviously into traffic or slouched dejected in doorways.

But Hastings Street is also a main commuter artery to corporate offices downtown — more than 35,000 vehicles pass by daily. The impulse for many is to lock their car doors and look away. Few stop for a walk around and a chat with the locals. That's a shame as there is more to the DTES than a quick drive-by reveals, and both those in the DTES and the corporate/business world could benefit by getting to know each other.

The DTES has a myriad of serious issues; addiction, crime, unemployment, homelessness and housing shortages, to name a few. Although there are already a number of organizations helping address those, the DTES could use more corporate “involvement.” Many corporations donate money, some generously. That support is appreciated and often crucial to various programs. Involvement, however, goes beyond charity. Successful corporations often excel at solving problems, generating ideas and creating momentum within their own businesses. Bringing those skills to the DTES could help build sustainable solutions in this community.

Perhaps there is also something to be learned from the DTES. With the focus typically on the problems, what is working in the DTES is often over-looked. A more vibrant community than many others, the DTES has a high rate of volunteerism, not just from outsiders but from within the community itself, recycles to such a degree that almost nothing is wasted, and is rich in community support and entrepreneurial spirit. Qualities that many a community or organization might wish to emulate.

To raise awareness about the DTES, the Union Gospel Mission, with partnership from Mission Possible and support from the City of Vancouver, developed a two-hour walking tour dubbed the “Eastside Stride.” Launched in October 2012 for Homelessness Action Week, the Union Gospel Mission trained nine local residents from drug and alcohol recovery programs, or dealing with homelessness, as guides. The public was invited and 336 people took the tour.

Last May, 60 partners from Urban Systems, a multidisciplinary professional consulting practice, did the Eastside Stride as part of their annual general meeting. To be as unobtrusive as possible, out of respect for area residents, participants broke into smaller groups. Initially, some partners were apprehensive, perhaps even more so after being asked to sign Urban Systems’ “hazard assessment form,” which noted that there could be street debris, including needles, and to politely decline requests for money, sex, drugs and cigarettes. They needn’t have worried. Although some felt conspicuous, or out of their comfort zone, most, if not all, felt safe.

“I was surprised at how large the area is. I thought the DTES was just a few blocks along Hastings,” one partner said.

The DTES covers more than 100 square blocks and includes Chinatown, Gastown and Strathcona. The tour focused on the grittier, lesser-visited central core, but to show the history and diversity of the area touched on all areas.

The tour included architecture; the Sam Kee Building with its rumoured tunnels to opium dens, heritage houses in Strathcona as well as the revitalized Woodward’s Building with its harmonious blend of old, new and vintage — and the iconic giant W. There were unexpected oases; a carefully tended community garden in a vacant lot, Oppenheimer Park with its totem poles and Crab Park, a lovely, small beach tucked in behind railroad tracks with an amazing view of the city skyline.

But it was hearing the guides’ own stories and opinions that impacted the groups the most:

“I went to 27 different elementary schools.”

“The first time I shot heroin, I was 12.”

“That elderly woman in a wheelchair is selling crack.”

“I’d be dead if it wasn’t for the UGM.”

One of the guides, Buzzard — a colourful character who, with his tattoos and head scarf, would have looked at home on a Harley — mentioned several organizations that provide free or low-cost meals in the DTES.

“Anyone that goes hungry is too lazy to go and get food,” he said. Union Gospel Mission’s Keela Keeping added, “Providing a meal is often the starting point in building relationships with people in the community.”

Buzzard pointed out his SRO (single room occupancy hotel) in the “Zoo,” the busiest strip along Hastings Street near Main. “The worst SROs are like jail cells with bed bugs, rats and cockroaches.”

He explained that for those on disability, the DTES is often the only place they can find somewhere to live for \$400 a month, and that some social housing had five-year waiting lists. One SRO was next door to another that had been converted into luxury condos renting at twice the price for the same 300 square feet. The windows of the condo were decidedly bare, while those of the SRO looked lived in, one proudly displaying a Luongo Canucks hockey jersey.

Controversial sites weren’t ignored. The guides pointed out Insite, a legal, supervised drug injection site, and explained how it operates. Further down the block was Pigeon Park Savings, an innovative financial institution serving those who, for various reasons such as a lack of suitable ID, are ineligible for regular banks. Several of the partners were dismayed to learn that the bank has also become a major hangout for drug dealers, and that customers are constantly watched and vulnerable to robbery. The issue of gentrification arose as groups passed a new, upscale restaurant that has been the site of recent protests.

“Are they pushing people out of the community or helping?” one partner pondered. Even the guides had differing opinions.

“The DTES is more vibrant than Coal Harbour,” one of Urban Systems’ partners observed.

In Coal Harbour, a luxury waterfront district close to downtown Vancouver, which the Urban Systems group visited just prior to the DTES, the streets were empty. In contrast, the DTES streets were filled with people, and many seemed to know each other. The guides high-fived friends they passed and others shouted out encouragement. Although Vancouver has often been described as a lonely city, that was less apparent in the DTES.

“Residents seem to look out for one another, something you might not find on Howe Street,” a partner said.

“It’s a more livable community than is obvious from the outside,” suggested another.

“I didn’t know that there were so many different kinds of businesses there, especially all the social enterprises,” one participant noted.

The social enterprises — revenue-generating businesses with a primarily social objective — include The Window Community Art Shop,” an art and craft showcase for local artists, the HAVE Café, a culinary training school for those with barriers to employment, Megaphone, a local magazine, and Quest Food Exchange which rescues excess food to sell to those in need.

Many DTES residents create their own work collecting beverage containers — 700 people a day, according to a recent article quoting United We Can, the major recycling depot in the DTES. Others sell second-hand goods displayed on shopping buggies along the sidewalks.

Keeping addressed the groups, “As you learn more about this neighbourhood it’s our hope that solutions can be discovered and that you’ll never hear the words Downtown Eastside again without thinking about the context learned today.”

She hoped that tour participants would come to see the DTES as a beloved part of Vancouver, be challenged to find ways to help without hurting, and to perhaps consider hiring those that may have a past.

One partner wrote, “It was such a moving and eye opening experience ... an ongoing topic of conversation over the weekend and continues to be talked about across our company’s hallways ... now that we’ve been there we have a responsibility to do something.”

The myriad of ways in which businesses or organizations can get involved in the DTES are as varied as the area itself. Be it as a mentor, customer, marketer, DTES business partner, educator, employer, micro-financier, or adviser, challenge yourself to discover your own unique way to help.

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