

Homelessness forum a beginning

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A forum on homelessness in Penticton was a good start, but it was only a start, according to Mayor Andrew Jakubeit.

“We hope today is the start, a catalyst,” said Jakubeit, adding that about 80 people attended city’s Forum on Homelessness, Addiction and Mental Health, representing 50 to 60 agencies, groups and interested parties.

He said until an ongoing collaborative structure forms, the city will continue to encourage the groups to work to that goal.

“I think the city will help facilitate that,” said Jakubeit.

“Because of the scope of the problem, there is that expectation that we need to do more. Council has asked staff to put more energies in dealing with homelessness, addictions and mental health.”

However, Jakubeit pointed out that these related problems are not necessarily the city’s jurisdiction.

“The key thing is it shouldn’t be the city underwriting or being solely responsible. There are other agencies and other levels of government; getting them involved is crucial,” he said explaining that bringing the groups together to present a combined voice will strengthen Penticton’s voice with provincial and federal agencies.

Jakubeit said the problem isn’t unique to Penticton, but it seems to be growing in communities throughout the province.

“My colleagues up and down the valley and throughout B.C., are seeing a lot more people struggling with mental health. We have an addiction issue in the province,” said Jakubeit. “We have to start being a bit more proactive, so we don’t have a tent city and we don’t have a bigger problem than we already have.

“We don’t want to be the champions of this, but we want to help. At least our role right now is facilitating these groups coming together and creating a solution.”

The forum kicked off with a keynote address by Joe Roberts of Push for Change. Roberts, a successful CEO of a multimedia company, has pushed a shopping cart 9,220 kilometres — so far — on a cross-country journey. But before he was a CEO, Roberts was a drug addict and homeless youth in Vancouver who turned his life around, got clean and returned to school.

Jakubeit said Roberts’ speech helped inspire the groups to get the conversation going.

That conversation, he said, helped identify some of the gaps and overlaps among the different agencies, which he hopes will meet again this fall to share research and information to build a co-ordinated approach.

“Part of that was getting all these people together in one room so the left hand has a better idea what the right hand is doing or saying and vice versa, but also what is sort of the best model to move forward,” said Jakubeit. “We want to transform this into action steps and get some of these nonprofits and actually implementing some hopefully simple strategies and work towards some of the more complicated ones.

“It is fair to say it is a problem, not unique to Penticton and we are trying to be a bit more proactive and get out in front of it. By that time it is more difficult or more expensive, or just too late.”

