



# POTENTIAL USES OF A DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE FACILITY

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This GCS project was conducted under the mentorship of City staff. The opinions and recommendations in this report, and any errors, are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the City of Vancouver or The University of British Columbia.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

The Evelyn Saller Centre will be vacating its present facility at 320 Alexander Street in approximately 1.5 years once its new facility is ready. The City of Vancouver's lease agreement with the owner of the building ends in 2026.

As the facility possesses a commercial kitchen and is located within the Downtown Eastside, there is a unique opportunity to help develop options to serve community needs and advance the City's social policy goals. The focus of this report is an assessment of the challenges and opportunities associated with the facility, as well as potential uses and tenants.

The research for this report was conducted from May to August 2018 as part of the Healthy City Scholars Program.

## Objectives

The **overarching goal** of this project is to gain an understanding of the facility's ability to meet different community needs in order to guide decision making as to its future use. Several objectives emerged throughout the project in working towards this goal:

1. To identify the challenges and opportunities associated with the facility
2. To gain a better understanding of present community priorities
3. To determine the views of different City departments of the facility and potential uses
4. To identify both potential uses and tenants for the space
5. To outline potential 'next steps' for the project

## Methodology

The research for this project was comprised of two primary stages.

The first stage aimed to create a better understanding of both community needs and the facility. This work consisted of reviewing relevant documents, as well as conducting a media scan and a site tour of the facility.

These documents included policies and plans specific to the DTES, as well as the **Healthy City Strategy** and the **Vancouver Food Strategy**. Prior reports, community needs assessments and consultation efforts undertaken by both the City and community members were also reviewed. While the focus was on social needs, attention was paid to feedback regarding arts and culture. A media scan was conducted in order to gain additional insight into emerging issues and the perspectives of residents, community members and local businesses.

There was also a focus on procuring and reviewing documents pertaining to the facility's condition and key features. These included the lease, the floorplan, as well as different records of the monthly operating costs and the facility's capital maintenance and repairs. This research was complemented by an early site tour.

The latter stage was highly iterative and focused on identifying potential uses and tenants. This research primarily consisted of interviews with **9 City Staff**, and **18 community members**, as well as **1 broader conversation with community members and residents** facilitated by Exchange Inner City. **Four site tours** were given to potential tenants. Interviews were selected through snowball sampling, and were limited in number due to the short duration of the project.

Correspondingly, it should be noted that the list of potential tenants is not all encompassing. If the City oversees the lease and introduces a Request for Proposal, then other potential tenants could emerge. The present list is intended to provide a starting point for assessing the viability and community impact of different potential uses.

### **320 Alexander Street**

Throughout the research it became clear that several factors pertaining to the facility 320 Alexander Street are important for any discussion of potential uses. These

considerations frame the analysis of different programming options:

- a) The building is zoned for social services and light-industrial uses.
- b) After 2021, the facility becomes rent-free for the City for the last 5 years of the lease.
- c) The building is in need of substantial and on-going capital maintenance.
- d) The City is the owner of the land, but not the building. The long-term future of the building is presently unknown.
- e) After the Evelyn Saller Centre relocates, the majority of the tenants in the social housing units above will remain in their homes.
- f) The facility has a fully functional commercial kitchen. After the Evelyn Saller Centre relocates, the majority of the kitchen equipment will remain in the facility at 320 Alexander Street.

### **Potential Uses and Recommendations**

The following broad categories of potential uses and users emerged throughout the research:

- a) The Community Impact Real Estate Society (CIRES)
- b) Food Focused Organizations
- c) Incubating Programming

- d) Shelter Use
- e) Non Profit Organization in Need of Primary Space
- f) For Profit Companies

Many organizations expressed interest in operating the facility or helping assist the City in securing a new tenant. These organizations were made aware that the facility is in poor condition and that the City does not have any funds allocated to its maintenance after 2020. These organizations were also made aware that if the City oversees the lease it would likely be through a Request For Proposal.

The specific recommendations regarding potential uses and tenants found within the report are grounded in a) the ability of the proposed use to meet community needs; b) the viability of managing the space and the interest of different operators; and c) different scenarios regarding costs and length of tenure.

### **Lessons Learned**

Throughout the research process, many issues arose that both addressed questions specific to this project and went beyond the original scope. These ‘lessons learned’ pertain to:

- a) Food Security in the Downtown Eastside
- b) Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Women
- c) Low-barrier Entrepreneurial Space
- d) Organizations in Need of Space
- e) Community Storage
- f) Community Perceptions of City Processes
- g) Request for Proposals

### **Conclusion**

Many viable and valuable options for the facility have been identified. However, the ability to program the space to benefit the community will largely depend on the outcome of upcoming conversations regarding the lease and the future of building. High levels of coordination between different City departments will help ensure the facility’s health and affordability are maintained.

Investigating potential options for the site far in advance allows community members and City staff to meaningfully consider how to best program the space. This research underlines how planning centered on social infrastructure can support the full utilization of community assets.