

# Rebuilding Owen Sound

## *A Practical Plan to End Homelessness, Restore Community Confidence, and Support Recovery*

When it comes to the growing homelessness problem in Owen Sound, public opinion appears increasingly divided between two opposing camps: one demanding the removal of the homeless from the community, and another focused solely on compassion and support services. Yet both groups ultimately want the same outcome — fewer people living on Owen Sound's streets. This editorial proposes practical solutions aimed at achieving that common goal.

### Introduction

Owen Sound stands at a crossroads. For decades, the city has struggled with economic stagnation. Despite its natural beauty, strong healthcare sector, and proud industrial history, the population has remained largely unchanged for more than fifty years while economic opportunities have steadily declined. The manufacturing jobs that once sustained working families disappeared generations ago. Today, many residents feel the city has lost both momentum and direction.

At the same time, homelessness, addiction, visible street disorder, and public safety concerns have increased dramatically. Downtown businesses are struggling. Residents increasingly feel unsafe in public spaces. Taxpayers are frustrated by rising costs and declining results. Confidence in municipal leadership is eroding.

Yet despite mounting public concern, local policy continues to treat homelessness as though it were a single issue with a single solution. It is not.

Owen Sound is facing two distinct crises:

1. People who are economically unhoused and actively seeking stability; and
2. People suffering from severe addiction and chronic instability who often reject treatment, structured housing, and accountability.

These groups require fundamentally different responses. Treating them as one problem has guaranteed failure. We can no longer afford policies rooted in denial, political caution, or symbolic gestures. Owen Sound needs practical leadership grounded in compassion, accountability, measurable outcomes, and fiscal responsibility, if we are to restore downtown safety.

The notion that chronic homelessness cannot be reduced is simply untrue. Too often, community leaders shift responsibility to the county or province in an effort to deflect growing public frustration over the loss of safe, accessible public spaces. Yet the evidence shows that meaningful progress is possible when local leadership is willing to act decisively. The small Alberta city of Medicine Hat, with a population of roughly 60,000, demonstrated exactly that by virtually eliminating chronic homelessness

over the course of a decade through focused leadership, coordinated services, and a clear commitment to measurable results

## Medicine Hat Proved Change Is Possible

Medicine Hat became the first Canadian city to significantly reduce chronic homelessness through a coordinated “**Housing First**” strategy combined with treatment supports, accountability, and measurable performance targets.

Their results were substantial:

- A dramatic reduction in chronic homelessness between 2009 and 2019;
- Faster placement into stable housing;
- Lower emergency service and policing costs; and
- Better coordination between healthcare, housing providers, law enforcement, and social agencies.

Medicine Hat succeeded because it refused to normalize disorder or accept permanent street homelessness as inevitable. The city established clear expectations, coordinated services, measured outcomes, and focused relentlessly on helping people move toward stability and independence.

Owen Sound can do the same — but only if it is willing to confront reality honestly.

## Two Problems — Two Solutions

### 1. *The Economically Unhoused*

Many people experiencing homelessness are victims of economic forces largely beyond their control: rising rents, inflation, low wages, mental health challenges, family breakdown, and a severe shortage of affordable housing.

For these individuals, housing is the solution. Most do not want to live on the streets. They want stability, safety, employment, and a chance to rebuild their lives. They need: affordable housing, rent supports, employment assistance and pathways back to independence. Helping these individuals regain stability is both compassionate and economically responsible.

### 2. *The Chronically Addicted Street Population*

A second population consists of individuals suffering from severe addiction and chronic instability who often refuse treatment, reject structured housing, and remain trapped in cycles of substance abuse, criminality, and public disorder.

This problem cannot be solved through unlimited tolerance or endless enabling. Compassion without accountability has failed both the addicted individual and the broader community.

Public spaces cannot continue functioning as open-air drug markets and encampments while residents, businesses, seniors, families, and visitors are expected to simply tolerate worsening disorder.

Real compassion means helping people recover — not abandoning them to addiction in parks, sidewalks, alleys, and encampments.

## **Housing Solutions for the Economically Unhoused**

### *A Bold Housing Strategy for a Small Town*

Owen Sound cannot claim financial helplessness while tens of millions of dollars in artwork remain protected in climate-controlled storage as vulnerable residents sleep in tents, shelters, vehicles, and unsafe temporary accommodations.

The art collection is a community asset that has been accumulated over many years. Today it is estimated to have a value of approximately \$30 million. If liquidated and invested into a professionally managed housing endowment fund, those proceeds could conservatively generate millions of dollars annually to support affordable housing initiatives — without increasing taxes.

This is not an attack on art or culture. It is a question of priorities.

To put this issue into perspective, imagine a temporarily unemployed father of five with no money to feed his children, while a recently purchased luxury vehicle worth \$130,000 sits in the driveway — bought with an inheritance because his spouse had always dreamed of owning it. Most people would recognize the obvious solution immediately: sell the luxury asset to meet essential needs.

Owen Sound now faces a similar decision.

A community that allows people to sleep outdoors while protecting a multimillion-dollar art vault has lost sight of its most basic responsibilities. Paintings, however valuable, cannot take precedence over safe shelter, public safety, human dignity, and community stability.

The responsible and compassionate solution is clear: convert dormant luxury assets into a permanent housing endowment capable of funding affordable housing initiatives for generations.

Those annual revenues could be used to:

- Incentivize construction of affordable apartments;
- Support rent supplements for low-income residents;
- Convert vacant or underused buildings into housing;
- Partner with non-profit housing providers;
- Create transitional housing for working individuals, seniors, and families in crisis.

This approach would transform passive assets into active community infrastructure — turning stored wealth into measurable social impact while protecting taxpayers from continual financial escalation.

## Addiction Recovery, Enforcement, and Public Order

Addiction is a health issue — but public disorder is a public policy issue.

Addiction will not be solved through tolerance alone. Owen Sound must take a leadership role in expanding access to detoxification and rehabilitation programs, increasing recovery-oriented supportive housing, and working in close partnership with healthcare providers, the county, and provincial agencies. While the county has an important role to play, municipal leadership cannot simply shift responsibility elsewhere and hope the problem resolves itself. Our municipal council has a duty to lead, coordinate, and drive real solutions that protect both vulnerable individuals and the broader community.

Public parks, sidewalks, and downtown streets cannot remain open-air drug zones. Existing bylaws and laws must be consistently enforced. Illegal encampments, shopping cart theft, public drug use, and chronic disorder cannot simply be ignored. Council must work with prosecutors to ensure all crimes, regardless of magnitude, are prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The objective is not cruelty. The objective is to stop enabling destructive behaviour while encouraging recovery, personal responsibility, and reintegration into society. Addicts will choose the path of least resistance — the city needs to ensure that that path involves recovery and rehabilitation.

A compassionate city must protect both vulnerable individuals and the broader public.

Owen Sound should work with the county to expand access to:

- Detoxification services;
- Rehabilitation programs;
- Recovery-oriented supportive housing;
- Mental health treatment;
- Partnerships with healthcare providers and provincial agencies.

When someone in active addiction chooses the path to recovery, the necessary resources must be readily available — any delay in providing help could jeopardize recovery.

### [Harm Reduction: Saving Lives While Recovery Systems Expand](#)

Owen Sound cannot ignore the reality that people are dying from overdoses today.

A tightly controlled safe injection site should be established on a three-year trial basis as an emergency harm-reduction measure while long-term recovery and housing strategies are implemented. The purpose is not to normalize addiction, but to save lives, reduce public drug use, remove needles from parks and sidewalks, and connect addicts with healthcare professionals and treatment services.

Such a facility would also move drug activity away from public spaces and provide frontline workers with daily opportunities to encourage detox, rehabilitation, mental health treatment, and recovery.

At the conclusion of the three-year trial, the program should be independently evaluated based on measurable outcomes, including: the number of overdose deaths, crime statistics, and the number of public disorder complaints.

Any decision regarding continuation should be based on evidence and results — not ideology.

## **Fiscal Responsibility and Public Priorities**

Owen Sound taxpayers are already under immense financial pressure. We cannot continue spending on strategies that fail to reduce homelessness, addiction, or disorder while public confidence continues to decline.

Our municipal council must refocus on core responsibilities, most importantly: housing, public safety, and clean and safe public spaces.

Hard decisions are unavoidable. Leadership is not measured by avoiding controversy. Leadership is measured by the willingness to confront difficult realities honestly and act decisively in the public interest.

### *A Call for Courageous Leadership*

The future of Owen Sound will not be decided by slogans, studies, or symbolic gestures.

It will be decided by whether leaders have the courage to acknowledge that current approaches are failing — and the determination to pursue practical reform.

Owen Sound deserves leadership that confronts reality with honesty, protects public spaces, supports people who are working to rebuild their lives, demands real accountability, and restores pride, safety, and confidence throughout the community.

This fall's municipal election represents more than a routine political contest. It is a referendum on the future direction of Owen Sound. Residents must decide whether the city will continue managing decline — or begin rebuilding order, safety, accountability, economic opportunity, and hope.

Additional information on the need for change is available at: [VoteLocal.net](http://VoteLocal.net)