

September 2, 2020

By email: mayorandcouncil@victoria.ca

Dear Mayor and Council

Re: Hazards to child safety and the need for safe schoolgrounds at – and access to –South Park School

We are parents of a young child that is currently registered at the South Park School. We are writing concerning hazards that are jeopardizing child safety in the vicinity of South Park School that have arisen in recent months. As you know from other parents and citizens, there have been a number of incidents in and immediately around the school area that constitute real hazards and safety concerns for Victoria's children, including ours. Without action by the city, events we have experienced with our children and that have heard about from other South Park parents make us concerned that the risks to child health and safety are becoming untenable and too great to ignore.

At present, the City's decision to encourage the existence and continued growth of the homeless encampment at Beacon Hill Park is having the unfortunate effect of compromising the safety of young children in our community, and the safety of South Park school grounds.

To elaborate, the safety of schoolgrounds at South Park Elementary are being degraded by the hazards and safety risks associated with found needles, drug paraphernalia, broken glass, vandalism, human feces and litter. Our 5 year old has been subject to individuals exposing themselves in the area we use to access South Park School from Beacon Hill Park and our family has experienced verbal harassment when transiting the area on designated routes. On top of these hazards, young children in our community are losing the availability for safe outdoor space for physical distancing in Beacon Hill Park, something that is important for preventing COVID.

Young children returning to school in the age of COVID-19 should not have to worry about the lack of safe outdoor space for physical distancing at school or have to deal with preventable hazards such as indecent exposure, broken glass in the school yard, vandalism and risks from needles. They should not have to ask why the windows on their school have been broken on multiple occasions and whether that means that their school is unsafe.

Now is a critical time for action given that school is set to begin in early September and recent incidents confirm that the encampment is compromising our ability to ensure the safety of South Park elementary school grounds. Respectfully, the city has clear authority and jurisdiction to address these hazards without waiting for provincial or federal action.

We understand that the City will be considering amendments to the Parks Regulation Bylaw to put into place a buffer zone of approximately 50 meters around South Park School to mitigate some of the documented negative effects and hazards that have emerged since the city stopped enforcing its existing bylaw that prevents continuous camping in Beacon Hill Park. While we fully support proceeding expeditiously with a bylaw amendment to create a buffer (shelter-free)

zone in the portion of Beacon Hill Park near South Park School, we are concerned that the proposal may not be defined with sufficient precision and, as a result, may not achieve its intended purpose of mitigating negative effects and hazards that currently exist. We are also concerned that allowing the encampment to persist along the western side of Beacon Hill Park may not sufficiently reduce the ongoing health and safety risks to young children or the sufficiently improve the safety of the South Park schoolgrounds. For example, moving the encampment a few metres away will not reduce the mobility or habits of those with addictions challenges from accessing South Park schoolgrounds.

We urge you as Mayor and Council to act expeditiously to take all available action to prevent further, foreseeable hazards to young children and to reverse the adverse effects (needles, broken glass, drug/needle paraphernalia) that have resulted from the current situation in Beacon Hill Park.

At a minimum, the buffer (or shelter-free zone) in the proposed bylaw amendments must:

1. be defined to include the entire length of South Park as that area is used by South Park School for recess and outdoor learning pursuant to a licencing agreement between the City and School District 61 (in other words, extending the shelter-free zone in BHP along the entirety of South Park School and South Park to the corner of Toronto and Douglas rather than treating the buffer zone for South Park School as ending at the corner of Michigan and Douglas); and
2. given the specific contours of Beacon Hill Park across from South Park School and South Park, create a buffer along South Park School that is no less than 60metres, but preferably something closer to 100metres.

In closing, we fully support the timely amendment of the Parks Regulation Bylaw in a manner that is properly defined and scoped to create an effective buffer (shelter-free) zone along South Park School and the areas it uses for recess and outdoor learning under the licencing agreement with the City. While we believe that additional actions by the city are likely needed to reduce the hazards and safety risks that city staff have identified within Beacon Hill Park, a 60-100metre buffer (shelter-free) zone in Beacon Hill Park across from South Park school that extends to the corner of Toronto and Douglas is an essential and immediate step the city must take to start reducing current risks to young children using Beacon Hill Park to access South Park School and those attending the school.

Sincerely,

Mark Gustafson and Jaela Shockey

cc: Carmen Gauvreau, Principal of South Park School
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