

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide a brief summary of the Greater Victoria Housing Security and Rent Bank Project to date and introduce the CSPC 2022 funding request, to be considered for approval during the 2022 Financial Plan process.

OVERVIEW

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 44% of renter households in Greater Victoria identified as being housing insecure, (spending more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities) with 20% spending more than half of their income on shelter costs (Census 2016). The pandemic put many of these households at greater risk, unable to pay their rent or spending an even greater portion of their income on housing due to decreased earnings or job loss.

In February 2021, the CSPC launched the Rent Bank and Housing Security pilot program as a response to increasing housing insecurity in the region. On March 4, 2021, staff presented a report to Council for information on the launch of the pilot program and sought direction on future reporting and City involvement. See Attachment B for the previous report and Attachment C for the Council motion:

1. *That Council receive the Greater Victoria Rent Bank Pilot Program report for information;*
2. *That Council direct staff to:*
 - a. *Provide a progress report on the Greater Victoria Rent Bank Pilot Program as part of the next Victoria Housing Strategy Annual Review;*
 - b. *Report back on an as-needed basis if rent bank funding requests arise; and*
 - c. *Report back near completion of the pilot program in 2022 to report on program effectiveness and to determine if City support is needed for longer-term sustainability of the program.*

The Rent Bank and Housing Security pilot program ran from February to April 2021 and offered a range of services depending on eligibility:

- 1) A Rent Bank Loan Program providing repayable loans for low-to-moderate income households at risk of losing their housing due to a temporary financial crisis. The loan program also provides participants a low-risk way to build credit.
- 2) A Housing Security Emergency Grant Program to provide eligible applicants with financial support for rent, essential utilities, and basic needs.
- 3) Advocacy and service navigation supports to help identify and access any income supplement, housing subsidy, alternate housing, employment search, financial literacy or other supports needed to stay securely housed.

Over the three-month trial period, the program provided support to over 150 households, distributing almost \$350,000 in grant funding. Most applicants qualified for the grant program, rather than the loan program, which helped to pay for rental arrears, utility arrears, the next month's or first month's rent, security or pet deposits, and grocery gift cards.

While the Housing Security Emergency Grant component of the program ended in April, after the three-month pilot phase, the Rent Bank Loan Program and associated service navigation support will continue until March 2022. The funds required to maintain the program beyond its initial pilot phase were primarily provided by the BC Rent Bank project and the United Way. The City also awarded the CSPC a Strategic Plan Grant for \$24,000 to supplement the program in June of 2021.

Program highlights:

- 46% of the pilot program participants live in the City of Victoria.
- 34% of applications were from households with children.
- Approximately 10% of applicants had lived experience of domestic violence.
- 14% of applicants had already received a ten-day notice of eviction.
- On average, applicants were spending over 70% of their income on housing expenses.
- The average grant disbursed was for \$2,388.

Please see Attachment D for a summary of the Housing Security Program COVID-19 Pilot.

City staff participate on the Housing Security and Rent Bank Program advisory committee along with the CSPC, non-profit representatives, the Capital Regional District, and other interested municipalities including the Township of Esquimalt and the City of Colwood, which enables the City to support the program and to provide guidance as long-term sustainability of the program is considered.

The CSPC is in the process of fundraising \$351,000 to continue the Housing Security and Rent Bank Program in 2022. The attached letter (Attachment A) includes a request for a one-time grant of \$110,000, of which \$70,000 will support the loan program, and \$40,000 will go toward reopening the grants program; the funding would also sustain the service navigation support that the CSPC provides to applicants as part of the program. The letter also proposes a potential sustainable funding commitment from the City, which will be brought back to Council when additional information is available about the ongoing Rent Bank Program.

At the Renters' Advisory Committee (RAC) meeting on September 21, 2021, committee members discussed the rent bank and passed a motion in support of providing stable funding for the Rent Bank Program in Fiscal 2022/2023 (see Attachment E).

OPTIONS & IMPACTS

Option 1 – Consider approval of CSPC’s funding request for both the Rent Bank Loan Program (\$70,000) and Housing Security Emergency Grants Program (\$40,000) as part of the 2022 Financial Plan process (\$110,000 total) (Recommended).

This will provide CSPC with the matching funds required to secure BC Rent Bank funding, as well as additional funds to support the Housing Security Emergency Grant Program in 2022. This option will support the City’s housing and homelessness, community development, social equity, and community well-being objectives. The program has identified the need in Victoria for an emergency fund to respond to housing insecurity that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Option 2 – Consider approval of a lesser amount of funding for the Rent Bank Loan Program and Housing Security Emergency Grants Program.

Option 3 – Decline CSPC’s funding request for the Rent Bank Loan Program or Housing Security Emergency Grants Program as part of the 2022 Financial Plan process.

Accessibility Impact Statement

There are no accessibility impacts associated with this report.

2019 – 2022 Strategic Plan

This program achieves progress toward the actions in Strategic Objective Three: Affordable Housing. Rent Banks are a homelessness prevention tool that seek to address temporary financial crises caused by unforeseen circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative may prevent homelessness in Victoria and the region.

Impacts to Financial Plan

The CSPC is requesting a \$110,000 grant. The City has a number of grant programs and one option for CSPC is to apply under the Strategic Plan Grants program. CSPC's timeline does not align with the Strategic Plan Grants process, so this request has been included as part of the 2022 financial planning process.

Official Community Plan Consistency Statement

The Greater Victoria Rent Bank and Housing Security Program advances housing and homelessness, community development, social equity and community well-being objectives within the Official Community Plan (OCP). In particular, the OCP includes the following relevant policies that:

- encourage the coordination of community and regional efforts to enable stable housing with support services for people who are homeless or at-risk-of homelessness (policy 13.37);
- encourage working with partners to improve the economic and social condition of citizens who are unemployed or living in poverty through support for community services (policy 14.12);
- support efforts of senior government, business and community organizations to reduce poverty through enabling stable housing with support services (policy 15.3.2); and
- encourage collaboration among community service providers and community organizations across the city and at the regional level (policy 15.17).

CONCLUSION

Since February 2021, the Greater Victoria Rent Bank and Housing Security Program has helped over 150 households in the region experiencing a temporary financial crisis, often related to the COVID-19 pandemic. To continue to serve residents of Victoria and the region, staff recommend considering CSPC's request for \$110,000 in grants from the City of Victoria to match funds from senior government and support the long-term sustainability of the grant program throughout 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

Margot Thomaidis,
Planning Assistant

Karen Hoese, Director
Sustainable Planning and Community Development
Department

Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager.

List of Attachments

Attachment A: Letter: Regional Rent Bank Request for Funding

Attachment B: Regional Rent Bank Pilot Program Motion from March 11, 2021 Council Meeting

Attachment C: Regional Rent Bank Pilot Program Report from March 4, 2021 COTW Meeting
Attachment D: Regional Rent Bank Pilot Program Summary
Attachment E: Renters' Advisory Committee Motion from September 21, 2021 Meeting