

December 3, 2024

Dear Niagara Regional Councillors,

As the Executive Director, and on behalf of our Board of Directors of Bethlehem Housing and Support Services (BHSS), I am writing to express our strong support for the Welcoming Streets Pilot Project and to request that the Niagara Region consider funding this initiative to be launched in Downtown St. Catharines.

BHSS is a service agency and has been providing supportive affordable housing to vulnerable at-risk populations for 36 years in the downtown St. Catharines area. I see firsthand the challenges faced by businesses, residents, and vulnerable individuals in our downtown area. As a community housing organization with three buildings located downtown, we experience vulnerable members of the street community coming into our buildings on a nightly and daily basis looking for a warm place to find refuge and to sleep. From our observations when reaching out to assist, they express a mistrust of the system services, the greater community, and demonstrate a fierce independence, which motivates them to remain outside of the system and be more reliant on their street community network for “support”.

I believe very strongly that The Welcoming Streets model is the creative initiative we have been looking for with a new approach to reach severely underserved members of our community. It has the greatest potential to tap into the existing street community culture, to humanely engage and address their needs, while at the same time reducing the negative impact on the residential and business sectors of the neighbourhood community. It will be a unique additional tool in our toolbox that will fill a service gap and integrate well with other housing-focused street outreach services such as NASO. This model has demonstrated real, tangible success in other municipalities, and I believe it has the potential to significantly improve public safety, community relations, and support for those experiencing homelessness and substance use in St. Catharines.

The program framework is deliberately designed as a learning model. Through implementation, we will be given the opportunity to engage, build relationships and understanding, learn and improve as we go until we get it right; then grow and share a best practice model with other municipalities for a coordinated effort and Niagara Region wide impact.

To implement the Welcoming Streets Pilot in Downtown St. Catharines, I strongly urge the Niagara Region to allocate the necessary funding for this initiative. The budget for the program, including outreach workers, training, supplies, and community engagement, is an investment in the well-being and safety of our community. The program's proactive and cost-effective approach to addressing homelessness, substance use, and community safety makes it a worthy and impactful use of regional resources.

I believe that with your support, we can make Downtown St. Catharines a safer, more inclusive, and compassionate community for all. This initiative has the potential to create lasting change, not just for those who are vulnerable, but for the businesses, residents, and stakeholders who make up the fabric of our downtown.

Thank you for your attention and consideration. I am hopeful that you will support this important initiative by ensuring it receives the funding and attention it deserves.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lori Beech". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lori Beech

Executive Director

cc Clerk Niagara Region