

CREATING HOUSING FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

A Case Study



Featured Project:

Bridget Moran Place, Prince George, Active Support Against Poverty

Introduction

Bridget Moran Place (BMP) is named for Prince George author, activist and social worker Bridget Moran, who wrote several First Nations biographies, before her death in 1999. Located in downtown Prince George, BMP has an emergency shelter on the first floor, with 10 beds in summer and 25 in winter (with extra funding from the Cold/Wet Weather Strategy) and, on the top two floors, 28 studio suites of permanent housing. The project opened in June 2002, after confronting strong opposition from downtown businesses.

What spurred the development of Bridget Moran Place was the demolition of two downtown hotels to accommodate a new courthouse. The hotels housed 40 to 50 low income people, who were displaced. Many ended up on the street. Many could not be accommodated in existing shelters, which did not have the resources to serve people with addictions and/or mental illness. Some died on the street in the middle of winter.

Active Support Against Poverty (ASAP) wanted to replace a condemned downtown heritage building to provide shelter for hard-to-house homeless people in Prince George. The old building had to be almost completely torn down. Since the building had a heritage designation, ASAP was required to retain some of the heritage façade.

Bridget Moran Place is surrounded by businesses, tourist accommodations and restaurants, but not housing. The project did not need rezoning, and the mayor and council supported the idea right from the beginning. In fact, several city councillors championed the development. However, the Downtown Business Improvement Association (DBIA) vehemently opposed the project. DBIA called the project a “welfare hotel” and said it would warehouse low income people on a single site, stigmatize residents and the neighbourhood, and perpetuate a negative image of the downtown. DBIA challenged the development in letters to the editor, city and provincial housing minister. The association’s lawyer questioned whether this use was permitted under the zoning, and the city had to get a legal opinion on the zoning bylaw.

BC Housing approved funding for BMP through the Provincial Housing Program, which became an issue for opponents, who questioned why prospective tenants should receive government funding for their housing. BC Housing staff gave ASAP advice to help the agency keep going in the face of these challenges. To address community concerns, ASAP added a courtyard so residents could gather outside without collecting in groups on the street.

In the end, the new development improved the neighbourhood. Property taxes in the area have gone up, reflecting an increase in property values. After BMP opened, the ASAP manager went door-to-door to visit everyone in neighbourhood, soliciting any continuing concerns about BMP from local businesses, but complaints had died down by this time.

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Highlights

Residents served	<p>Low income, single men and women, 19 and older, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents with mental health and/or substance use issues • Residents involved in the criminal justice system • Residents with HIV/AIDS • Women who have left violent relationships • Transgendered individuals • Seniors
Project goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The shelter is minimal barrier to provide a safe place to stay for people with substance use issues/mental illness/involvement in the criminal justice system • The permanent housing provides safe, secure apartments for low income residents to help stabilize their lives • ASAP provides advocacy, housing and services for people with low incomes
Timeframe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASAP started working on BMP 10 years before breaking ground, and went through several sites and three attempts for funding • The city became aware of the project in early 2000 • The present site was identified in 2001 by a private developer ASAP hired • A pre-application consultation was held with planning staff, where the city outlined project requirements, including retaining some of the heritage façade • The developer presented a submission with technical design drawings, materials, façade, accesses, etc., to staff and the Advisory Design Panel • A typical development permit process takes four to six weeks, but this application took more than three months, because the developer had to address comments from the Advisory Design Panel • The project did not require rezoning, so no public meetings were required, but citizens had an informal opportunity to comment on the project at the council meeting • DBIA first expressed concerns just after the development permit had been considered and unanimously accepted by council • DBIA questioned whether this use was allowed in the C1 zone, and the city obtained legal advice on the zoning bylaw • BMP was first occupied in January 2002

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Building features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An emergency shelter with 10 beds in summer and 25 beds in winter (the extra beds are funded by the Cold/Wet Weather Strategy) • 28 self-contained studio units of permanent housing on the top two floors, two of which are wheelchair-accessible • Each floor has an office for services that have yet to be funded • There is a common room shared by tenants and shelter guests • The building has internal security and cameras to promote the safety and security of residents • Cameras and a security patrol in the neighbourhood in the day and evening support safety and security in the neighbourhood
Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASAP runs Bridget Moran Place, and staff provide tenant support • BC Housing provides operational funding through the Homeless At Risk (HAR) component of the Provincial Housing Program, and funds the cold/wet weather beds • The federal program, Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), funds a support worker to help tenants with grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and accessing community services
Keys to making the project effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenants sign a detailed tenancy agreement with provisions about disturbing behaviours • ASAP monitors tenants and guests entering and leaving the building, and if a guest is too intoxicated, they are not allowed inside • Neighbours call ASAP to pick up intoxicated people from in front of their businesses • Most services are within walking distance of BMP • Mental health workers don't have to wander the streets looking for their clients • Formal/informal meetings are held with service providers, when needed

Successful practices

How Prince George facilitates special needs housing

- The City of Prince George has a history of offering the public a chance to comment, even when a public hearing is not required. When a development permit comes up at a council meeting, the mayor will typically ask if there is any input from the public attending, and comments are taken into consideration.

Innovative strategies to address opposition

- ASAP staff and drive-by security conduct a security patrol in the neighbourhood in the day and evening. Staff will pick up someone passed out on the street, or call the RCMP if the person is too intoxicated. This service to the community (as well as to residents) was instituted as part of the strategy to overcome opposition.
- Support from the city and BC Housing was crucial to the successful development of the project, and also for ASAP staff to weather the opposition attacks.
- ASAP worked on responses to community opposition as the process unfolded, and relied on advice from BC Housing staff.

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- ASAP was responsive to people and businesses who expressed concern.
- ASAP's first development, McQuaid Place, which opened in November 1998, built confidence within the organization for developing another project. Unlike BMP, opposition to McQuaid Place was led by residents in the neighbourhood.

Lessons learned

Best practices for mitigating NIMBY

The municipality identified the following effective practices for addressing community opposition to this development:

- The sponsors were responsive to people's concerns. For example, ASAP added a courtyard to the design so residents can gather outside, without being on the street where they could be accused of loitering. The building has controlled access and the frontage is kept clean. Good management practices have helped the community accept the development.
- By retaining some of the heritage façade, the new building is aesthetically pleasing, and an improvement on the previous dilapidated structure.
- The project is similar to a multi-family development, and only requires a property manager. If the residents needed a higher level of care, this type of project might prove to be outside the zoning guidelines for this particular site. Other zones in Prince George would support more complex care facilities.

In addition, ASAP identified the most effective practices as:

- With the McQuaid project, ASAP formed a committee with local residents before opening that did not meet until after the opening. The group met twice and had only good things to say. ASAP decided a committee was not useful for BMP and decided to go door-to-door instead.
- Ensuring funding for client support is in place is important before launching a development like BMP. Adequate funding for support services has not been available at BMP, which has placed a burden on existing ASAP staff as they attempt, as best they can, to successfully serve residents.

Municipal leadership

City council	BMP had support from council and the mayor right from the start, and continues to have strong support. Several city councilors were champions for the development over a long period.
City staff	City staff supported BMP throughout the development process. Staff and members of the Advisory Design Panel provided constructive feedback on the development proposal.

Making a difference in residents' lives

Residential stability – Turnover in the 28 studio suites is four to six units a year, and there is a large waitlist. Some tenants have chosen to move because they found the rules too strict, especially the requirement for guests to sign in and out. A few tenants have died.

Reducing substance use – Some tenants have stabilized and others continue to stabilize. Alcohol and drug use is allowed in private living areas, but not in common areas, indoors or

out. Tenants sign a Crime Free Addendum to prevent the sale of drugs onsite, which has needed to be enforced only once. Tenants also sign a detailed tenancy agreement that governs disturbing behaviours. ASAP monitors tenants and guests arriving and leaving the building. If guests are too intoxicated, they are not allowed in.

Improved health – The tenant support worker has helped residents with mental health issues maintain their medications, resulting in fewer hospital visits and less use of emergency services. Residents' self care has improved, with people cooking for themselves, maintaining good hygiene and doing their laundry. Residents are encouraged to re-establish contact with family and friends; ASAP pays for long distance calls to family members.

Employment and education – Some residents have found jobs and usually move out once they have a steady pay cheque. Others are volunteering. Most collect income assistance or a pension.

Support services

- BMP has 24/7 staffing: three staff during the day and two at night for both the shelter and the permanent housing.
- In winter, the shelter is open all day. The cold/wet weather funding allows more staff during the winter months. In warmer weather, the shelter closes during the day, as ASAP does not have enough staff to keep it open.
- The shelter is minimal barrier to provide a safe place to stay, even for people with mental health issues/addiction/involvement in the criminal justice system. ASAP wanted to model the facility after shelters run by Lookout in Vancouver, but did not receive enough funding to provide the level of services that Lookout offers.
- ASAP offices are also located in the building, with four staff members who serve as a resource for shelter clients and tenants (they have some training in counselling), and handle cleaning, maintenance and security.
- A tenant support worker provides services as-needed, rather than through fixed programs, helping tenants with grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc., and connecting them to mental health and addictions services, the Native Health Centre, the John Howard Society, the Elizabeth Fry Society, etc. (The funding has been renewed to August 2006 but, as yet, no further.) Evicting people is difficult for staff when the person turns up in the shelter as a result, so any program that attempts to avoid eviction helps both tenants and ASAP staff.

Relevance to other municipalities

Challenges

- The Downtown Business Improvement Association organized the opposition to Bridget Moran Place. Association members expressed concerns in letters to the editor, the city and the provincial housing minister, and calls to BC Housing and ASAP.
- Every time a hint of this project hit the press, opposition swelled.
- DBIA called the project a "welfare hotel" that would warehouse low income people on a single site, stigmatizing them and the downtown area.
- DBIA said there was adequate low income housing in Prince George.
- Opponents concerns included parking, density, property values and safety, but mostly they objected to the clients. The objections included racist remarks.
- The opposition became quite personal, especially against Audrey Schwartz, ASAP Executive Director, and one councillor. People thought it was okay to challenge Ms. Schwartz in public places like the grocery store.

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- DBIA questioned whether this project use was permitted under the zoning, making it necessary for the city to obtain legal advice on the zoning bylaw.
- The old building had to be almost completely torn down. But the property was designated heritage, and the community was concerned about retaining the façade.
- The gruelling nature of the opposition caused burnout and made ASAP cautious about taking on another similar project. The organization decided funding for client support would have to be in place before considering another development like BMP.
- Although the emergency shelter has 10 beds in summer and 25 in winter, BMP averages 33 people a night, year round, with over 10,000 stays a year. The extra costs for these additional clients are absorbed by ASAP, and badly stretch ASAP staff and its finances.

Conditions necessary to implement this approach elsewhere

- Consider a broad community consultation process before purchasing a site, where input can be solicited and adjustments made before a project comes up for rezoning or a development permit. Consultation after the fact elicits a negative response.
- Confirm the project complies with the zoning bylaw standards.
- Social service organizations that are not development savvy should get help from someone who can guide them through the consultation, land purchase and zoning process.

Contact

Audrey Schwartz
Executive Director
Active Support Against Poverty
1188 6th Avenue
Prince George, B.C. V2L 3M6
Phone: 250-563-6121
Fax: 250-563-1612
Email: asap@princegeorge.com

Dan Milburn
Manager, Current Planning and Development
City of Prince George
1100 Patricia Blvd
Prince George, B.C. V2L 3V9
Phone: 250-561-7614
Fax: 250-561-7721
Email: dmilburn@city.pg.bc.ca