

Safe River District Strategy: A Proposed 10-Point Plan for a Safer, Healthier Downtown River District

Richard Thomas for Owen Sound Mayor

The Downtown River District should be a place where businesses can succeed, residents can feel secure, visitors want to return, and vulnerable people can get meaningful help. Those goals are not contradictory. This strategy aims to bring balance back to the Downtown River District.

Owen Sound already has substantial resources devoted to homelessness, mental health and addiction. The challenge is to make those services work together, create genuine exits from street homelessness and addiction, and manage the impact of disorder on the surrounding downtown.

1. Create a River District Action Team

Numerous organizations are dealing with homelessness, addiction, mental health and public disorder in Owen Sound. For a business owner or resident faced with an issue, it can be difficult to know who to call.

I will ask City Council to establish an operational River District Action Team comprised of representatives from the City of Owen Sound, Grey County, Owen Sound Police Service, Neighbourhood Response Team, Safe 'n Sound, Supportive Outreach Services, OSHaRE, Brightshores Health System, Canadian Mental Health Association, the River District Board of Management, and other key agencies. This will not become another advisory committee; it will be an operational group whose purpose is to solve problems as they arise.

This group will create a process to track issues across organizational boundaries and identify people who repeatedly cycle among organizations. The objective will be a single coordinated case plan, rather than several organizations independently managing the same person.

2. Guarantee Rapid Downtown Cleanup

A business owner should not arrive in the morning and be expected to clean up human waste, discarded drug equipment, abandoned belongings or hazardous debris before opening their business. I will ask Council to establish a rapid-response cleanliness standard for the River District and transform public works to include a rapid-response team.

The program should include appropriate sharps disposal, emptying trash cans, and sidewalk cleaning. The existing Neighbourhood Response Team already provides a base to build on and can report to a public works contact when and where the rapid response team is needed.

The operating principle should be: report it once, and the system determines who responds. A business owner should not have to telephone several agencies trying to determine whose jurisdiction a problem falls under.

3. Establish Well-defined Standards of Behaviour in Public Spaces

A caring community doesn't have to accept threatening behaviour, violence, vandalism, theft, obstruction of businesses, persistent intimidation, destructive behaviour or litter. Our policy should be simple: establish expectations and enforce standards for the use of our public spaces.

The same basic standards of conduct should apply to everyone using public spaces. The system should distinguish between a vulnerable person quietly occupying a public space, someone in a mental-health crisis who needs intervention, nuisance behaviour appropriately handled through outreach or by-law enforcement, and criminal conduct requiring police intervention.

Owen Sound already has relevant tools, including the Owen Sound Police Service Community Oriented Response Unit (CORE) and the Mobile Mental Health and Addiction Response Team (MMHART). The city should develop a written response matrix so residents, businesses, police, by-law officers and social agencies understand who responds to what.

The response matrix should also set clear expectations for consistent enforcement when conduct crosses the line into criminal or by-law offences. This includes open illegal drug use, harassment, intimidation, theft, property damage, littering, nuisance behaviour, and panhandling or other conduct where it violates applicable law or municipal bylaws. Where a particular property is repeatedly associated with serious nuisance conditions or unlawful activity, I will ask City Council to review every lawful remedy available under provincial legislation and municipal bylaws and take action when the applicable legal threshold is met.

4. Extend the Neighbourhood Response Team and Measure Results

The Safe 'n Sound Neighbourhood Response Team is a favourable model because it can respond directly to concerns from businesses and individuals, while connecting vulnerable people to services. In a pilot that ran from November 1, 2025 to March 30, 2026, the team reported providing 2000 direct supports to individuals on the streets. This should continue, subject to measurable performance standards. I will ask Council to explore a funding agreement with our partners.

Council should receive quarterly information on response times, the number of incidents resolved, referrals resulting in housing or treatment, repeat calls involving the same individuals, reductions in unnecessary police or EMS calls, cleanup requests and business satisfaction.

5. Introduce Good Neighbour Agreements

Organizations providing essential social services should be welcomed as partners, but they should also recognize that their operations affect the neighbourhood surrounding them. Where municipal funding, municipal property or formal City agreements are involved, we should require a Good Neighbour Agreement.

These agreements could address exterior litter, sharps, smoking, belongings left in public spaces, congregation around entrances, washroom availability, communication with neighbouring businesses and fast response to problems immediately surrounding a facility.

A service provider should not be held responsible for everything one of its clients does elsewhere in Owen Sound. However, it is reasonable to expect an organization to actively manage the foreseeable neighbourhood impacts of its own operation. The objective should be cooperation, not punishment.

Good Neighbour Agreements could be complemented, where the City has lawful authority, by a municipal licensing and regulatory framework for emergency shelters and organizations operating facilities that provide services to people experiencing homelessness and addiction. Subject to legal review, annual licensing requirements could specify clear standards for health, safety, staffing, security, property maintenance, neighbourhood management, appropriate staff-to-client ratios and procedures for responding to problems around a facility. Renewal would provide a regular opportunity to assess compliance and resolve recurring neighbourhood impacts.

6. Stop Further Concentration of Services in a Few Downtown Blocks

Owen Sound is a regional centre for homelessness, addiction, and mental health services. Some centralization makes sense because services need to be accessible and near transportation. But concentrating too many services in one small geographical area has unintentionally created a permanent congregation point.

Future services should be distributed where practical through satellite locations, mobile outreach, supportive housing throughout the community, and treatment delivered outside the downtown core.

This should not mean abruptly closing existing services or simply moving vulnerable people from one neighbourhood to another. It simply means not automatically assuming that every future service belongs downtown.

7. Make Housing the Primary Exit Strategy

I will ask Council to explore using surplus municipal property, expediting approvals for supportive housing projects, partnering with non-profits, and securing senior-government funding. Every person moved from chronic street homelessness into appropriate permanent housing is a success.

Managing street disorder will never solve homelessness if people have nowhere to go. Owen Sound needs to aggressively partner with Grey County, non-profits, and builders to accelerate supportive and deeply affordable housing.

8. Create a Clear Pathway from Addiction to Recovery

Grey County, local health-care providers, addiction and mental-health agencies, shelters, outreach organizations, housing providers and other social service agencies have been doing an excellent job. I'd like to bring them all together so we can improve communication and understand the pathway from addiction to recovery.

The goal should be to reduce gaps between services, so that people are not lost between one agency and the next. Wherever possible, service providers should coordinate referrals, share responsibility for transitions and help individuals move quickly to the next stage of care. In the case of addiction, outreach and harm-reduction services should continue. For those who are ready, the system should respond rapidly. The objective should be a coordinated community response that makes recovery readily available when an individual chooses it.

9. Give Downtown Businesses and Residents a Formal Voice

People who operate businesses and live in the downtown River District experience these conditions every day and should have a way to evaluate responses. I propose the River District Board of Management act as liaison for residents and businesses.

Its role would not be to run social services. It would spot recurring problems, evaluate whether interventions are working and flag unintended consequences.

It could conduct a short, independently administered annual survey asking businesses and residents whether they feel safer than one year earlier, whether disorder has increased or decreased, how quickly problems are addressed, and whether they would recommend downtown Owen Sound as a place to shop, live or operate a business. The results would be published.

10. Publish a River District Dashboard Aimed at Accountability

While government measures how much money is spent and how many services are delivered, people need to know whether the situation is improving.

Data from the Owen Sound Police Service and the Neighbourhood Response Team, would provide tracking for several indicators: chronic homelessness, people housed, returns to homelessness, people entering treatment or recovery, repeat high-frequency service users, River District police calls, violent and property crime, NRT response time, hazardous cleanup incidents, business and resident perception of safety, vacant storefronts and downtown pedestrian activity.

Combined, these factors will measure our success.

During My First 120 Days as Mayor, I will:

Days 1-30: Convene the City, County, Police, Safe 'N Sound/SOS, Brightshores and other principal organizations and establish the River District Action Team. Request an inventory of every publicly funded program addressing homelessness, addiction, and street disorder, including mandate, operating hours, funding, geographic area, and quantifiable impacts. Ask Police and by-law to develop the common response protocol.

Days 30-60: Meet directly with River District businesses and residents, including walking the area with them. Recognize recurring locations and problems rather than relying on anecdote. Ask city staff to begin developing the rapid-cleanup service standard and proposed Good Neighbour framework and to report on the City's legal authority and options for a licensing and regulatory framework for emergency shelters and service facilities, including standards, enforcement mechanisms and annual renewal.

Days 60-120: Bring Council the first consolidated report covering homelessness, policing, downtown sanitation, housing and service gaps. Seek Council approval for the Safe River District Strategy, establish baseline measurements for the public dashboard, and begin formal discussions with Grey County and the Province about housing, addiction treatment and mental-health resources.

Owen Sound City Council does not control all of the organizations necessary to solve these problems. All levels of government must participate if we are to find solutions. My plan may not be perfect, but we have to start somewhere if we are to save the Downtown River District. Compassion cannot come at the expense of the safety, livelihoods and quality of life of residents and businesses in the Downtown River District. Respect and compassion must work both ways. My objective is not to abandon compassion, but to restore balance in the Downtown River District.