

Staff Report

Report To: City Council
Report From: Tim Simmonds, City Manager
Meeting Date: June 30, 2025
Report Code: CM-25-023
Subject: Community Organization Meeting Regarding River District

Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CM-25-023 respecting Community Organization Meeting Regarding River District, City Council directs the City Manager to organize and plan a meeting regarding the River District as outlined in the report.

Highlights:

- The City will proceed with organizing a professionally facilitated meeting while recognizing that significant collaboration is already underway in response to the Owen Sound Police Services Board's request to discuss safety and business conditions in the River District.
- The Owen Sound Police Service, supported by significant City funding, leads community safety efforts, while the City and social service partners contribute within their respective mandates.
- The facilitated meeting will be scheduled for the week of July 28, with a preferred date of Monday, July 28 and an alternate of Tuesday, July 29.
- Addressing the complex challenges in the River District—such as homelessness, addiction, and public safety—requires the active participation of all partners, including OSPS, the City, businesses, and social service agencies.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

[Strategic Plan](#) Priority: Collaborative City.

Climate and Environmental Implications:

There are no anticipated climate or environmental impacts.

Previous Report/Authority:

[Resolution No. R-250526-003](#) Regarding Request for Council to Arrange Meeting Respecting Downtown Business Conditions

Background:

The Owen Sound Police Service Board sent a communication dated May 6, 2025, to Owen Sound City Council (Attachment 1), requesting City Council convene a meeting with the River District Board, the Chamber of Commerce, and all downtown business owners to discuss current business conditions in downtown Owen Sound. The communication was discussed at Council on May 26, 2025.

Council passed a motion in response to host a meeting with the Police Service Board as required in the Protocol Agreement, and following that meeting, to convene a meeting to discuss current business conditions as requested in the above-noted communication (refer to the link in the Previous Report/Authority section of this report). City Council further directed staff to extend invitations to representatives from the Owen Sound Police Service, local provincial and federal prosecutors, and the area's Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP).

Given the shared involvement and ongoing collaboration among stakeholders, staff will proceed with organizing the meeting in the context of the City's existing efforts and responsibilities, and in alignment with the broader work already underway in partnership with the Owen Sound Police Service and other community agencies.

Analysis:

With more than 100 full-time and part-time uniformed and civilian employees, the Owen Sound Police Service (OSPS) is the lead agency responsible for ensuring the safety and security of this community. Their

leadership role is made possible through significant financial support from the City. As outlined in the City's 2025 budget, OSPS operates with a gross budget of \$13.8 million, of which just over \$9 million is funded through the local tax levy.

As per the [OSPS 2023-2026 Operational Plan](#), the City relies on OSPS to lead efforts in addressing complex safety concerns and work with community partners—particularly in the River District. These issues have been the subject of ongoing discussions between the City, OSPS, local service providers, and business owners. At their core or by nature—all the groups involved (City, OSPS, service providers, and business owners) genuinely want the same thing: a vibrant and economically thriving downtown that is safe and welcoming for everyone—a place where businesses flourish, people feel a strong sense of belonging, and no one is left to face serious challenges like mental illness, addiction, or homelessness alone.

According to the OSPS 2023–2026 Operations Plan, the Police Services Board sets the strategic direction for the service, focusing on four key priorities:

- Community Safety,
- Community Wellbeing,
- Our Members, and
- Sustainability.

The plan also emphasizes collaboration with community partners to support a vibrant and healthy Owen Sound. Notably, during consultations for this plan, both community members and OSPS staff identified drugs, addiction, trafficking, enforcement, and overdoses as the top policing priorities. The priorities surrounding addiction and drug use are aligned with the priorities of the Community Safety and Well-being Plan.

While the May 6, 2025 communication from the Owen Sound Police Services Board outlines a range of contextual reasons for requesting the City to host a meeting, it is worth noting that a similar session was held on October 30, 2024. That meeting, organized by the Owen Sound Chamber of Commerce in a “Town Hall” format, included participation from both the City and the Owen Sound Police Service (OSPS).

Building on that meeting in 2024, the City has taken numerous steps and held several meetings to improve public safety in the River District—both in terms of perceived safety (how safe it feels), and how safe it truly is. The examples in the next few paragraphs highlight just some of the work that has been done. They are not meant to suggest that the City efforts are

complete. They are intended to help Council and the public see that the City is listening and working on the ideas that emerged during the Town Hall and other conversations and meetings to support a safer and more welcoming downtown for everyone.

As previously noted in this report, the City continues to rely on the Owen Sound Police Service (OSPS) to lead efforts in addressing complex safety concerns aligned with their mandate and expertise, as outlined in their Operations Plan. In addition, the City depends on its social service partners and Grey County for their leadership and specialized knowledge in supporting individuals with complex needs, including mental health, addiction, and housing challenges. These partnerships reflect the City's understanding of its role and responsibilities, as well as the importance of working within its mandate while supporting broader community efforts.

More recently, a major initiative undertaken by City Staff has been the rollout of a three-year video camera pilot program in the River District. The program includes 17 cameras funded through the Community Policing and Cannabis Reserve Funds. The City has worked closely with the Owen Sound Police Service (OSPS) to develop this initiative. Phase One was installed in the Summer of 2024, and Phase Two will be installed in the coming weeks to complete the full installation of cameras.

On May 5, 2025, the City supported the Owen Sound Police Service (OSPS) application for a Community Safety and Policing (CSP) grant to fund the OSPS City Guardian Pilot Project (Attachment 2). OSPS noted that this initiative, if approved, will place specially trained Special Constables in the River District to provide visible patrols and connect vulnerable individuals to services. Letters of support were coordinated and sent to the Ministry of the Solicitor General, with additional letters of support from Social Service Providers and the River District Board.

The City's By-law team plays a vital and often underappreciated role in supporting community safety and well-being, particularly in the River District, concerning encampments and homelessness. While not a social service agency, the team regularly engages with individuals experiencing homelessness, and works closely with Grey County Housing, Safe 'n Sound, SOS, and other partners to manage encampments and support vulnerable individuals.

In alignment with guidance from the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority (GSCA), By-Law staff have consistently worked to prevent encampments

from being established near the river due to safety risks. In 2025 to date, only three encampments have been located in the River District—all of which were promptly and respectfully relocated with the support of Grey County Housing. Currently, there are no encampments in or near the River District.

By-Law officers have also adjusted their patrol routes to include regular passes through key downtown streets such as 2nd Ave E and 8th to 10th St E. When time permits, officers stop to engage with individuals and offer support. Weekly coordination meetings with Grey County Housing ensure timely updates on encampment locations and next steps. Increasingly, the team is responding proactively—without waiting for complaints to be made.

When an encampment is found in a hazardous location (e.g., near the river, a playground, or obstructing public access), individuals are asked to relocate within a specified timeframe. If they do not comply, police support is requested to issue a trespass order. In non-hazardous locations, individuals are provided with information on available supports such as OSHARE, Safe 'n Sound, and shelter services. Grey County Housing is notified to follow up, and individuals are encouraged to maintain cleanliness and fire safety. Supplies like gloves and garbage bags are sometimes provided.

Follow-up inspections are conducted as time allows, with a goal of weekly visits. If large amounts of waste accumulate, clean-up is arranged through a third-party contractor, as Parks staff are not resourced for this work. If hazardous behaviour is observed, individuals are warned and, if necessary, asked to relocate.

Encampments are resolved in one of several ways:

- If the individual secures shelter, housing services assist with the move and a clean-up is scheduled.
- If the individual voluntarily relocates, the site is cleaned and cleared.
- If the individual refuses shelter or is restricted from accessing it, they are asked to move, and the site is cleaned.

In cases where individuals are not in hazardous locations, are not engaging in unsafe behaviour, and are actively working toward housing, they are not asked to leave and are given time to pursue a better solution.

The City's By-law team, comprising two full-time staff members, continues to focus on practical and achievable actions. Current initiatives under review include: a vacant building registry to ensure accountability from property

owners; a dedicated officer in the River District focused on property standards and nuisance behaviours; Shopping Cart By-law to reduce abandoned carts; updates to the Waste Management By-law to improve enforcement; and a shift toward more active street presence by reducing administrative demands.

From a marketing and promotions perspective, the City has continued to deliver on the [River District Action Plan](#) adopted in 2021, which is structured around four strategic pillars: Branding, Management, Experience Development, and Promotion. This plan has guided a wide range of initiatives aimed at revitalizing the downtown core and enhancing the River District's appeal and functionality; these initiatives are regularly reported to the River District Board.

Significant capital investment—exceeding \$3 million—has been directed toward the River District including redevelopment of Market Square, the full reconstruction of 1st Avenue East from 8th Street East to 9th Street East, and most recently, the completion of Downtown River Precinct Phase 2 (DRP2), which includes a new boardwalk and the complete redevelopment of 1st Avenue East from 9th Street East to 10th Street East. These major infrastructure projects have been complemented by ongoing beautification efforts such as new lighting, banners, landscaping, and enhanced waste collection. With the objective of revitalizing the space by ensuring it is actively used, the City and River District Board continue to plan and deliver events and activations that bring people to the area and support third parties in hosting events in the River District.

In addition, the City has expanded its Community Improvement Plan (CIP) grant programs to support accessibility upgrades, façade improvements, and landscaping enhancements.

And lastly, in summer 2024, the City, through its contracted waste service provider Miller Waste, began daily weekday emptying of trash receptacles in the River District from July 1 to September 1. Parks and Public Works Staff are aligned to provide additional waste collection support as needed.

In addition, letters have been sent to all property owners in the River District requesting their cooperation in addressing improper waste disposal by tenants, specifically, untagged garbage or items left at public street receptacles. These efforts reflect the City's ongoing commitment to maintaining a clean and welcoming downtown environment.

Proposed Meeting Logistics:

To support the request from the Owen Sound Police Services Board, staff will organize a facilitated meeting during the week of July 28. The preferred date is Monday, July 28, with Tuesday, July 29 as an alternative. The proposed time is 7–9 p.m. or 7:30–9:30 p.m. An evening session is recommended based on feedback from the Chamber of Commerce Town Hall, where a morning meeting proved challenging for retail business owners due to store opening hours. Staff are currently exploring venue options within or near the River District.

Given the complexity of the issues and the importance of fostering productive dialogue, the meeting will be professionally facilitated by local resident Joel Pennington, who brings extensive experience in community engagement and meeting facilitation. More recently Joel was a public member of the Corporate Services Committee and facilitated engagement sessions for the Owen Sound Vision 2050 initiative. To support this effort, Joel will be joined by a co-facilitator. The role of the facilitator is essential in setting clear expectations and ensuring that the conversation remains respectful and constructive, guided by the principles of Respect, Connect, Reflect, and Direct.

Invitations will be extended to the Owen Sound Police Service, River District businesses, the River District Board, the Chamber of Commerce, MP Alex Ruff, and MPP Paul Vickers. In recognition of the social challenges identified in the Board's letter and the OSPS 2023–2026 Operational Plan, social service partners will also be invited to ensure a well-rounded and collaborative discussion.

Financial Implications:

Hosting the event as proposed will involve associated costs, including facilitation, equipment and materials, room rentals, and other logistical needs. These expenses are estimated to total approximately \$1,000. Any costs incurred will be charged to the City Manager's 2025 operating budget and are expected to result in a budget overage.

Communication Strategy:

An email invitation will be prepared and distributed to all identified participants as soon as possible. To streamline coordination and track responses efficiently, staff may use a cloud-based RSVP platform such as

Evite or a similar tool. This will help ensure timely communication and allow for effective planning based on confirmed attendance.

Following the meeting, staff working with the facilitator, will prepare a summary document capturing key themes, feedback, and any identified next steps. This post-meeting report will be shared with Council to ensure transparency, support ongoing dialogue, and inform future actions related to the River District and broader community safety efforts.

Consultation:

Senior Leadership Team

City Clerk

Attachments:

1. Correspondence dated May 6, 2025, from the Chair, Owen Sound Police Service Board – Request to Arrange a Meeting
2. OSPS Application Support letter for a Community Safety and Policing (CSP) grant to fund the City Guardian Pilot Project

Recommended by:

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

Submission approved by:

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Tim Simmonds at tsimmonds@owensound.ca or 519-376-4440 ext. 1210.