

Priorities for the 2023 Municipal Budget





Introduction

Over the last number of years, the City of Kamloops has engaged in robust community outreach on a wide range of issues including the downtown and north shore neighbourhood plans, climate change mitigation planning, annual budget consultations, and other areas. We at the Thompson Rivers University Students' Union (TRUSU) want to start by commending the city for their excellent work on community engagement and community outreach. These opportunities have been valuable experiences for students to engage in to share their experiences, ask questions, and develop life-long civic engagement habits. It is with this in mind that we are making a submission for your consideration that include some of the priorities students would like to see considered during upcoming budget deliberations.

Housing

Access to safe and affordable housing continues to be a major issue for students at Thompson Rivers University, as it is for many others in our community. While we recognize that this issue must be addressed in conjunction with the provincial government, federal government, non-profits, the private market, and other areas, we are calling on the City of Kamloops to continue to proactively work on a housing affordability approach as a top priority. There is a strong role for municipal governments to advance housing solutions through a wide range of measures.

In 2018 Council adopted an affordable housing strategy that included a wide range of strategies to improve affordability across the housing continuum. Part of this document was a commitment to continue to do things such as develop long-range housing policy, work with partners to advance affordable housing projects, monitor and research housing issues and trends, as well as other areas. Given the current housing crisis that many members of our community find themselves in currently we ask that the City treat this plan as a living document and continue to look to develop, update, and enact affordable housing strategies here in Kamloops.

Outside of the continued work on a broader housing affordability strategy, there are two key housing solutions we would like to highlight. First, we at the TRU Students' Union plan to partner with a Canadian non-profit called Canada HomeShare to launch an intergenerational housing program in Kamloops

in 2023. This program would match students to live with seniors in their homes throughout the community. The model is distinct from programs such as homestay because it includes very rigorous matching completed by a social worker with multiple interviews to ensure that individual students and seniors are a good fit. The emphasis of the program is to target seniors who wouldn't otherwise rent out a room but are interested in some company and help with basic tasks. We believe this housing option is a good fit for Kamloops because it can be launched quickly to provide additional housing stock, scaled up over time, and also provides community building benefits to older folks in our community.

The second area of specific interest to students

Transportation

Transit

Transit is a vital mode of transportation for students and young people across our city. Not only are TRU students currently the single largest rider group, but by ensuring that their transit experiences are positive we can help set the stage for a generation of life-long transit riders in our community.

What are the current challenges in the transit system that we are hearing from students? They largely mirror those of other transit riders, but students also face some unique challenges. One of the most common challenges we have heard from students is that many of them work on weekends due to being in class Monday-Friday so reduced transit schedules on Saturday and Sunday create a larger obstacle. Of note, the federal government has announced that starting November 15 until the end of 2023 they are removing the 20-hour per week limit of off-campus work for international students to help address the Canadian labour shortage. This is important to account for in transit planning because more international students, many of whom are transit riders, will be looking to get to and from work while this change is in effect.

In terms of broader challenges, it will be no surprise

is the continued ability for homeowners to easily and legally densify neighbourhoods across the city through adding both secondary suites and garden/carriage houses. This type of densification will generally lead to more affordable options for students and young people compared to larger scale densification such as condo towers. The city has already taken steps in this direction through allowing secondary suites and carriage houses across large areas of the city. Despite these changes though, choosing to densify your property can often be a long, confusing, and expensive process. We believe that simplifying this process could pay dividends back to our community through providing additional safe housing supply.

that students are facing issues with transit reliability recently, both due to cancelled buses and winter weather conditions. While significant parts of these issues fall outside of the control of the City and BC Transit, there are improvements that could be made to help improve the experience for riders. Particularly, continuing to improve communications systems around bus tracking and notifications for cancelled buses would be helpful as many riders are not currently signed up to receive notification of cancelled routes. Further, if transit reliability continues to be a large issue due to labour shortages and weather events, expanding the investment in bus stop infrastructure such as lighting and shelters would also help riders.

Finally, the TRU Students' Union continues to recommend an expansion in budgeted transit hours to make transit a more seamless experience for all riders in Kamloops. Main routes in the city already have 15 minute service at peak times of day. Expanding the range of time transit operates, as well as making rapid service available on more routes, will pay dividends in making the service viable for more riders and improving the reputation of transit.

Active Transportation

Active transportation to the TRU campus is increasingly important for students, faculty, and staff. We would like to start by acknowledging the work that the City has already completed in this area. Particularly, this has included reducing the speed limit in areas near campus, the building of the Xget'tem' multi-use path connecting downtown and Sahali to areas nearby the campus, reviewing light timing for safety, and other measures. These changes have represented significant advancements over the last five years for active transportation users.

There are still large gaps in active transportation linking the TRU campus to other parts of the city though. Notably, the Xget'tem' Trail and Summit Multi-Use Path safely connect runners, walkers, and cyclists from Upper Sahali and Downtown to Summit Drive, but this connection does not yet reach the campus. A connection along Summit Drive or McGill Rd could link TRU students, faculty, and staff to large areas of the city. Particularly as E-Bike usage continues to expand this infrastructure improvement will become increasingly important.

Culture and Recreation

Parks Infrastructure

Kamloops has some of the best park spaces in the interior of BC, ranging from small neighbourhood parks such as Cowan Park, to destination parks like Riverside, to expansive nature parks such as Kenna Cartwright. Many of these spaces are well used and appreciated by students at TRU.

There are two key areas for parks improvements we have heard from students. The first is improving access to the water in summer months. Specifically, the beach access at Overlanders Park is very well used by students and young people, but signage and the trail network see very little upkeep. With a relatively small investment, this space could be significantly more accessible for all Kamloopsians.

The long-discussed Summit Drive overpass is also a key part of active transportation to campus. It would significantly improve safety for students who frequently cross the road in that area, as well as for drivers along the corridor. With the current construction of a new residence building in that area, as well as densification in the broader neighbourhood, an increasing number of pedestrians will be in this area over the next five years. The proposed overpass would also serve as the connection between Kenna Cartwright Park to the South-West, the TRU campus, and the rest of the city. This project has been discussed for well over a decade and we believe it would serve as an integral part of knitting active transportation corridors together across the city.

Broadly, we ask that the City continue the excellent work they have started on active transportation corridors, with a specific focus on ensuring that the TRU campus is well connected as this is currently one of the least served neighbourhoods in active transportation infrastructure, but has one of the highest densities of pedestrians using the space.

The other area students have identified is continued investment in nature parks. These spaces are seeing expanded usage by hikers, runners, mountain bikers, and others. Continuing to actively maintain these spaces as they see growth in users will be important for having strong access to nature in Kamloops.

Neighbourhood Vibrancy

Continuing to invest in making our neighbourhoods in Kamloops more livable and vibrant is one of the best ways to attract and retain both students and young people, but also in-demand professionals such as doctors. There are a wide variety of initiatives that cities around the world are engaging in to increase vibrancy that could easily be piloted in neighbourhoods across Kamloops.

On the business side, some of the suggestions we have heard include creating pop-up business opportunities for students and new graduates to be able to pilot ideas with low barriers of entry. Some cities have done this through setting up food/drink locations and leasing these locations for time-limited opportunities to applicants. Other cities have looked at tax rebates for university graduates who start businesses and stay in the community – similar to what Saskatchewan has done for student loan forgiveness across the province to incentivize staying in the province.

The other key way to make neighbourhoods more vibrant is to invest in place-making initiatives. This includes a wide range of possibilities, but generally refers to creating animated public spaces that welcome all and can be reconfigured in a variety of ways. A good example many cities have implemented is public market spaces that can be used year-round in both warm and cold weather. It can also include plans to bring more people to areas such as parks to increase feelings of safety by residents. A good example of this type of work is a project completed by the Project for Public Spaces in New York's Bryant Park way back in 1980 which included adding lighting, furniture, and programming to encourage increased usage of the space.

The final direction we want to highlight that other cities have successfully piloted in recent years to increase neighbourhood vibrancy is legalizing drinking of alcohol in select parks and public spaces. Particularly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was strong demand from residents to be able to use public spaces with their friends and families to enjoy alcoholic beverages. There are a variety of successful approaches that have been tried, including legalizing drinking anywhere in select parks, or as Calgary did, creating an online booking system to be able to reserve picnic tables to drink at in advance. The broad purpose though of this initiative is to help animate public spaces.



Student Voices:

In fall 2022 we asked students at TRU what they want us to tell government when we talk to them. Here is some of what we heard.

I've been a resident in Canada since birth and have never been able to find a family doctor.

Obviously, the financial burden is there- high tuition fees, and costs of numerous textbooks that are oddly only seldom used- but otherwise the largest for me personally is transit, just getting to my classes on time, is a struggle. I have to live away from campus to afford to attend school, and have to bus nearly 2hours a day just to get to and from campus.

Thinking about the current situation in Kamloops, housing is one of the biggest issues and I do believe this needs to be addressed. In addition, TRU is also a part of this issue by accepting more students than the city could support. They're now profiting with their new residences and with the insane prices students pay for those. They need to be held accountable and this situation needs to be addressed.

Building up and availability of more accommodation options which are budget friendly

One of the things is about the transit system. In Winters it gets really difficult to wait for the buses as it doesn't show up even when it is scheduled. I am living in gleneagles and the bus takes 25-30 minutes from university to reach there because it goes all the way around from Monteith. Also to go to Aberdeen mall which is just 5 minutes away I have to change 2 buses because no bus goes straight from gleneagles to Aberdeen.

Lower the price of housing or be more helpful with students trying to afford school

Support student housing co-operatives to help with affordability and also give students useful skills in management and working together. Maybe do something to discourage universities from putting private non-student housing on campus while students are forced to live in motels and SROs.

I would really appreciate it if the Student's Union could ask BC transit to have the busses run on time at least the majority of their routes. I understand they are understaffed, so having fewer buses that are scheduled to do a slower route is fine. The problem is when the bus is late the vast majority of the time.

That education should be universally accessible and free, and the increasing privatization of education and other public goods is a total con. That saddling students, especially international students, with debt and financial stress is a great way to immiserate the future of the province. And that I love how we're given access to therapy dogs instead of addressing the root causes of why we need therapy, like debt, precarious housing and unstable/underpaid employment.

Tell them about the issue of affordability amongst students. Speaking for someone else please tell them to have effective systems when it comes to government benefits such as EI so the people who need and truly qualify for it can be reached.

On my behalf the tuition fee for international students are unfair and way too much higher even though they are from under developed or developing countries. There are almost no right for international student to deal or directly connect with government. Many times it make me feel, neglected and not so important as citizens. Even though I work hard and contribute in economy.

Students should be valued. Students will eventually be the ones contributing to society and shaping its future.



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