

Dear Red Deerians,

While I have been on the campaign trail, one of the most common questions I hear is: “What do we do about downtown?” More specifically, “What do we do about the homelessness, addiction, and mental health issues that are present every time we step downtown?”

I am not an expert on this issue, but I am committed to learning as much as I can, from as many different perspectives as I can. The message I hear from residents is clear: we cannot keep doing what we are doing and expect a different result.

Because this is such a complex issue, I wanted to write this paper not to provide all the answers, but to acknowledge where we are today and to recognize that solutions will require a strong council willing to humble ourselves, work together, and create made-in-Red-Deer approaches — while also learning from the success of countries like Japan and Finland.

And in all of this, we must remember something important: those who are addicted, those who are struggling with mental health, and those who are homeless are someone’s son or daughter. They have value, and the goal must always be to treat them as such.

Sincerely, Calvin Goulet-Jones

Acknowledging Where We Are Today

Homelessness in Red Deer has grown at a pace that should concern every one of us. In 2018, the official count identified 144 people experiencing homelessness. By 2022, that number had jumped to 334 — a 132% increase in just four years. The Red Deer Chamber of Commerce has since reported that 766 people are connected to homelessness supports in our city — more than five times the number we saw just six years ago — and the true number may well be higher today.

This increase is not just a statistic. It is visible in our downtown core, in our parks, and in the way residents and businesses describe their experiences. Many no longer feel safe walking in areas they once enjoyed. For business owners, the challenges range from lower customer confidence to higher security costs, and for the community as a whole it raises questions about Red Deer’s reputation and ability to thrive.

The Chamber has emphasized that homelessness is not only a social issue but also an economic one. Left unaddressed, it undermines business confidence, reduces investment, and drives up costs for taxpayers. The simple reality is this: we are moving in the wrong direction, and unless we change course, the problem will only grow worse.

The Cost of Carrying On

When we look at homelessness in Red Deer, one thing becomes clear: the most expensive option is to keep doing what we are doing now.

Every person experiencing homelessness places heavy demands on emergency services. Police calls, ambulance trips, hospital visits, court appearances, and temporary shelters are some of the most resource-intensive services government provides. These costs repeat over and over, without addressing the root problem.

Businesses feel these costs in different ways. Staff safety, property damage, and reduced customer traffic all weigh heavily. Downtown, in particular, has become a place where instability is visible on every block — and that drives away the investment and vibrancy Red Deer needs to grow.

It was a shocking revelation to me that what we are doing now is actually the most expensive option. Shifting toward housing stability may require significant upfront costs, but those costs create assets that retain value and reduce public spending over time.

Lessons From Abroad

As I've studied this issue, I've looked at how other places around the world have responded. Two examples stand out: Japan and Finland. Both have dramatically lower rates of homelessness than Red Deer, though they have approached the issue in very different ways.

In Japan, a nation of 125 million people, there are around 2,600 homeless individuals. By comparison, Red Deer, with 112,000 residents, has around 800 people connected to homelessness supports. That means our rate is roughly 340 times higher than Japan's. Japan's success comes, in part, from strong expectations around public order and community responsibility, as well as a network of supports that prevent people from falling into visible homelessness. But it is not without criticism — many who live in institutions or temporary housing are not counted in the official figures.

In Finland, a country of 5.6 million people, there are about 3,600 homeless individuals. Red Deer's rate is about 11 times higher. Finland has nearly eliminated rough sleeping by ensuring people are housed first, and then layering supports on top. Their challenge has been the high upfront cost of housing and the need for ongoing services for addiction and mental health. Even so, their outcomes are widely respected: homelessness has fallen, costs are down in the long run, and people are living more stable lives.

What I take away from these examples is not that Red Deer can copy Japan or Finland outright — our culture, resources, and governance are different. But the lesson is clear: places that succeed stop repeating the same mistakes. They make the investments that create stability, and over time, those choices save both money and community trust.

The Realities in Red Deer

One of the challenges we face is that homelessness in Red Deer is not a single issue with a single cause. It shows up in many different ways, and each requires a different kind of response.

For some, the root cause is addiction. Substances take hold, relationships break down, and stability disappears. For others, it is mental health struggles that make it difficult to hold a job or keep housing. And for many, it is simply being a paycheck away from losing everything — people who are couch surfing, living in vehicles, or in conditions that none of us would find acceptable.

When we talk about homelessness, it is important to remember that these groups are not all the same. What helps one person may not help another. Yet there is a common thread I keep coming back to: without stable housing, it is almost impossible for anyone to get better. A safe place to live does not cure addiction or mental illness, but it gives people the stability they need to start treatment, hold onto work, or reconnect with family.

And beyond all of that, we need to remind ourselves of something simple but profound: every person we see on the street is someone's son or daughter, brother or sister. They have value. The goal must be to balance accountability with dignity — not excusing harmful behavior, but also not forgetting the humanity of the people involved.

Challenges

As I've listened and learned, I've also realized that there are real barriers to progress in Red Deer. If we are serious about change, we have to be honest about what stands in the way.

- Coordination: We have many agencies and groups working hard, but they are not always pulling in the same direction. Without better alignment, resources get stretched and efforts can work at cross purposes. - Complex Needs: Homelessness is not just about a lack of housing. Addiction and mental health play a major role, and supports in these areas are already under strain. - Funding: The city does not have the capacity to take on large-scale housing. Without the province at the table, we will remain limited to short-term fixes. - Public Trust: Many residents and businesses feel past approaches have failed. Confidence is low, and any new steps will have to demonstrate real results. - Design of Housing: We need to learn lessons from the past. Concentrating large numbers of vulnerable people in one place simply does not work. Housing must be smaller in scale, more integrated, and designed to encourage stability and success.

The Role of Province and City / Moving Forward

Homelessness is technically a provincial responsibility, but the reality is that municipalities like Red Deer feel the impact most directly. It shows up on our streets, in our parks, and in our downtown. That means we cannot afford to simply stand back and wait.

At the same time, Red Deer cannot carry this burden alone. The scale of housing required is beyond the city's capacity. This is where the province must come in — because housing is not just a social program, it is infrastructure. Like roads or hospitals, housing is an investment that creates long-term assets, not just expenses. These assets grow in value over time, even as they reduce the ongoing costs of policing, health care, and emergency response.

Another part of this discussion that we cannot ignore is fairness. Red Deer must focus on caring for people with genuine ties to our community. But we cannot do it alone, and we cannot become the destination for people from across Alberta simply because other municipalities are not doing their part.

This is where the province has an essential role. It must ensure that every community in Alberta takes responsibility for its own residents, with the right supports in place locally. In addition, the province should work with other provinces to create agreements on cross-border issues, so that people are supported closer to where they already have connections. Without this, Red Deer ends up carrying a disproportionate burden, which strains our services, weakens public confidence, and makes solutions harder to deliver.

Paths to Consider

None of the challenges we face are insurmountable, but they do require us to think differently. I don't claim to have the answers, but I have come across some ideas that are worth considering further:

- Stronger Coordination: Instead of dozens of agencies working separately, Red Deer could potentially benefit from a smaller number of lead (non-governmental) organizations taking on a stronger coordinating role. This would reduce duplication, ensure resources are better aligned, and still keep services rooted in the community rather than run by a single large bureaucracy. At the same time, coordination must always prioritize safety — ensuring that victims of abuse are never placed in the same location, program, or intake process as their abuser.

- Treat Housing as Infrastructure: Work with the province so housing is seen as a capital investment that creates assets, not just a yearly expense.

- Focus on Red Deer Residents: Supports should be directed toward people with genuine ties to our community. At the same time, the province needs to ensure other municipalities are caring for their own residents so that Red Deer does not become a magnet for people from

across Alberta.

- Preventing Homelessness Early: Support those who are couch surfing or on the brink of losing housing, before they fall further into crisis.
 - Better Housing Design: We know from past experience that concentrating large numbers of vulnerable people in one place simply does not work — it breaks down quickly and may very well create more problems than it solves. We should consider housing that is smaller in scale, more integrated, and designed to encourage stability and success.
 - Build Trust: Any approach must build trust and buy-in within our community. This cannot simply be a top-down plan. Red Deerians love their city and want to see it thrive, so solutions must be shaped with transparency and shared ownership.
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Final Thoughts

I would like to thank you for reading my thoughts on this. I aim to continue to learn and grow in knowledge on this front. I certainly do not claim to have the answers or the solutions, but I do believe this is an issue worth talking about. I want to learn more because I believe we all know that what we have now is not working.

The path ahead will not be easy, and it will require difficult conversations. But if we are willing to acknowledge what is not working, draw lessons from what has succeeded elsewhere, and hold ourselves accountable to results, then we can make progress.

My hope is that Red Deer can become a place where families once again feel safe walking downtown, where businesses can thrive, and where those who are struggling have a fair chance to rebuild their lives. That is not something council can do alone, or the city can do alone, but it is something we can move toward if we work together with the province, with service providers, and most importantly, with our community.

Sincerely, Calvin Goulet-Jones