

Late Agenda Item

**Special Council Agenda
November 18, 2025**

Recommendation:

That Council amend the agenda to add the following item, received after publication of the agenda:

4.1. Re-Purposing of the Existing Cowichan District Hospital Site

**Pages
2 - 4**

Recommendation:

That Council endorse the letter from the Municipality of North Cowichan requesting the Province and Island Health repurpose the existing Cowichan District Hospital site for addictions treatment and psychiatric care following the opening of the new regional hospital in 2027.

November 12, 2025

Honourable Josie Osborne, MLA

Minister of Health

PO Box 9050 Stn Prov Govt

Victoria BC, V8W 9E2

Via email: HLTH.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Minister Osborne:

Re: Re-purposing of the existing Cowichan District Hospital site

We are writing to request that the Province and Island Health explore repurposing the existing Cowichan District Hospital site as a centre for addictions treatment and recovery, and as a psychiatric facility for individuals with severe mental health and substance use challenges, once the new regional hospital opens in 2027.

Cities and towns across Canada, including the Cowichan region, are facing increasing challenges related to homelessness, street disorder, and the opioid crisis. Over the past decade, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness has risen significantly, particularly along the Trans-Canada Highway Corridor, which includes the area from the Silver Bridge to the Cowichan Commons. The most recent point-in-time homeless count, conducted in fall 2024, identified 180 individuals experiencing homelessness in the Cowichan region, up from 150 just a few years earlier. These trends are consistent with those seen in other communities across British Columbia.

Several factors contribute to the rise in homelessness, including escalating housing costs, persistently low vacancy rates, a long-term decline in government investment in social housing, the widespread availability of low-cost and highly addictive substances such as fentanyl and methamphetamine, and the closure of psychiatric institutions like Riverview Hospital in Coquitlam.

While many unhoused individuals primarily need access to affordable housing, others face more complex challenges involving addiction and mental health disorders. Our 2024 homeless count revealed that 59 percent of respondents were struggling with addictions, and 55 percent were experiencing mental health issues.

Vancouver Island is home to several treatment facilities, including Cedars Recovery in Cobble Hill, Edgewood Treatment Centre in Nanaimo, and Homewood Ravensview in North Saanich. However, the cost of residential rehabilitation often ranges from \$10,000 to \$25,000 per month, making it inaccessible to most people unless they receive financial support from an employer, union, or family.

To ensure equitable access to treatment, public investment in subsidized treatment beds is essential. Your government has made progress by adding 682 publicly funded substance-use treatment beds across BC, and Budget 2025 allocates \$500 million over three years to expand addiction treatment and recovery services. Locally, the non-profit organization Together We Can has opened a new treatment centre on Norcross Road in North Cowichan, offering ten beds. They are seeking your government's support to expand to 20 beds, with a goal of having at least half publicly funded.

Despite these efforts, the demand for subsidized treatment beds continues to exceed supply, particularly in the Cowichan region. In addition, recovery programs are not designed to treat mental illnesses, and so individuals with both an addiction and mental health challenges are left with few or no options for treatment that addresses both. The existing Cowichan District Hospital site, with its 12.7-acre footprint, presents a promising opportunity for repurposing or redevelopment to support expanded mental health and addiction services.

Historically, individuals with severe mental illness in BC received care at Riverview Hospital, a psychiatric facility that operated from 1913 until its closure in 2012. At its peak in the 1950s, Riverview housed over 4,300 patients across multiple buildings. Its closure, part of a broader movement toward deinstitutionalization, led to the release of many long-term patients into communities without adequate support systems. This contributed to increased homelessness, substance use, and incarceration, as documented in studies evaluating the consequences of deinstitutionalization.

Repurposing the Cowichan District Hospital site could help fulfill the original vision of community-based psychiatric care, offering services to both housed and unhoused individuals with complex needs. While we recognize the Province is navigating a period of fiscal restraint, there remains strong and growing public interest in expanding care for individuals with severe mental illness and addictions. We note that Premier David Eby recently announced the creation of two new facilities, each with 100 beds, in Surrey and Prince George, during the Union of British Columbia Municipalities convention in Victoria.

The Cowichan District Hospital site presents a timely and strategic opportunity to expand essential health services in our region. With thoughtful repurposing, it could support a more integrated system of care for individuals facing addiction and severe mental health challenges. By investing in accessible, publicly funded treatment options, the Province and Island Health can help reduce pressure on emergency services, improve health outcomes, and foster greater community stability.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and Island Health representatives to discuss how the Cowichan District Hospital site could be incorporated into the Province's expanding continuum of mental health and addictions care.

Sincerely,

Rob Douglas, Mayor
Municipality of North Cowichan

cc: Kathy MacNeil, President and CEO, Island Health

DRAFT