



STAFF REPORT

DATE: March 13, 2026 **REPORT:** DEV 26-028
FROM: Deepa Chandran **FILE:** 6410-01
Manager of Planning & Climate Readiness
SUBJECT: Options for Regulating 'Rescue Mission' Use in Smithers

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Council receive staff Report DEV 26-028 *Options for Regulating 'Rescue Mission' Use in Smithers* for information.

BACKGROUND:

Shelter services provide a critical bridge between immediate survival and long-term stability for unhoused individuals. By offering protection from environmental risks and violence, these spaces serve as a foundation for accessing resources to transition into permanent housing. BC Housing acts as the primary provincial agency for addressing homelessness in British Columbia by funding and coordinating a "Housing First" approach, providing a range of shelter services in collaboration with community organizations and/or local governments. See **Attachment 1** for the various types of shelter services provided by BC Housing and their key features.

Currently, the provision of shelters operation in Smithers is permitted in the C-1A Downtown Commercial zone under 'rescue mission', and in the CD-1 Comprehensive Development Zone 1, under 'emergency shelter' use. The current regulations will enable service providers to operate shelters from any parcel in the C-1A zone, provided that the building complies with the applicable Building Code requirements and the operator obtains a Business License from the Town.

At present, the Bulkley Valley Harm Reduction Society (BVHRS) operates a Temporary Winter Shelter (TWS) in Smithers, providing a 24/7 safe space for unhoused individuals during winter months. Located in the former Fabrications building at 3892 - 3rd Avenue (see **Attachment 2**), the shelter started its operation in early November 2025 and will be open until March 31, 2026, with funding from BC Housing.

Agenda Date:	March 24, 2026
Meeting Type:	Regular Meeting of Council
Agenda Placement:	Staff "B"

Recognizing potential land use conflicts that may result from permitting unrestricted shelter operation from the C-1A zone, at the December 9th, 2025 Regular Meeting, Council made the following motion:

Wray/Buikema

THAT Council direct staff to report to Council options to remove 'Rescue Mission' from the list of permitted principal uses in the C-1A Downtown Commercial Zone, requiring Council approval process prior to establishing the use in the future.

CARRIED.

As directed by Council, this report intends to outline the potential options that Council may consider in regulating shelter uses in Smithers in the future, while also providing pros and cons of each approach. Based on the analysis of shelter regulations from communities across the province, staff recommend a site-specific Zoning approval process for establishing emergency shelters (long-term) while adopting a Temporary Use Permit (TUP) approach for establishing temporary winter shelters.

DISCUSSION:

While Official Community Plans (OCPs) outline high-level housing policies including those on temporary housing and shelters, the specific regulations governing their establishment and operation are governed by Zoning Bylaws. These regulations focus on integrating facilities into the community while mitigating potential impacts. Terminology used for shelter regulations in the Zoning Bylaws vary across the province, as municipalities often categorize shelters based on their specific community need, services available, and objectives. **Attachments 3 and 4** of this report provide a summary of the shelter regulations from various communities cross the province and the common trends / practices observed.

This section aims to analyze the Town's existing zoning regulations on shelter use and to outline options for their modification as necessary to minimize land use conflicts, support their effective integration into the community while supporting those in need.

A) History of Shelter Regulations in Smithers:

The Town of Smithers Zoning Bylaw uses the term 'Rescue Mission' as an equivalent of shelter services. Provided below is a timeline of how the Town regulated 'rescue mission' use in its Zoning bylaw:

- 1999 (C-1A Zone): The term "Rescue Mission" was introduced at the request of the Salvation Army to permit temporary housing and meal services.
- The 9-bed Broadway Shelter operated 24/7 year-round from 2009-2019 (until the opening of Goodacre Place)
- 2017 (CD-1 Zone): 'Rescue mission' was added as a principal use in the CD-1 zone created to facilitate Goodacre Supportive Housing.

- 2022 Zoning Bylaw Update: For the CD-1 zone, "Rescue Mission" was updated to "Emergency and Temporary Shelter" to align with the current planning standards. Nonetheless, 'rescue mission' unintentionally continued to be a permitted principal use in the C-1A zone.

The current approach permits shelter use on any parcels in the C-1A zone without any restriction, potentially creating land use conflicts. Any shelter operations proposed outside the C-1A zone will require the operator to complete a Zoning bylaw amendment or obtain a Temporary Use Permit (TUP) approval prior to its operation. The temporary winter shelter services that BC Housing has had operated in Smithers in the past -- including from the mobile trailer placed on a portion of the Veterans Peace Park, through a 5-month TUP -- are examples. Despite the institutional character of shelter operations, 'rescue mission' or 'emergency shelter' is not specifically listed as a permitted use in the public use zones.

B) Options for regulating Shelters:

The below planning tools provide flexibility for local governments to permit and regulate shelter uses -- both shelters intended to operate long-term and temporary winter / extreme weather shelters -- by considering factors such as duration of operation, community impact, and consistency with broader planning objectives.

- Site-specific (existing zone): This approach restricts shelters to specific parcels within an existing zone. It requires Council approval and a public hearing, allowing residents to provide feedback. While the process takes approximately 2.5 months, it is a popular method for addressing context-specific concerns.
- Site Specific (new zone) / Comprehensive Development Zone: CD zones offer custom regulations for unique developments that don't fit standard categories. While ideal for integrated, mixed-use projects (e.g., CD-1 zone for Goodacre Place and the proposed Alfred Avenue Supportive Housing & Shelter), this approach is generally not recommended for stand-alone emergency shelters.
- Zone-specific use: This permits shelters anywhere within a specific zone. While this assumes shelters are compatible with surrounding uses, it removes Council and public oversight from the decision-making process before a shelter opens. This is the Town's current approach to permitting shelter use in the C-1A zone.
- Temporary Use Permit (TUP): TUPs are used when a shelter is not permitted by existing zoning and there is no intent for permanent placement. While the time-limited nature makes this unsuitable for year-round facilities, it is an appropriate option for winter-only shelters, provided the application is initiated well in advance.
- Unspecified but approved as institutional use: The approach is followed by municipalities that don't identify shelters as a separate land use rather treat it as part of the broader "institutional uses". Even if the Town removes 'rescue mission' from the list of C-1A principal uses, technically, a shelter may still be permitted in the same zone under 'institutional use' owing to its largely institutional character. This approach will also permit unrestricted shelter operations in numerous other zones as well such as C-1, C-2, M-1, and M-2, potentially creating land use conflicts.

C) Removing 'Rescue Mission' – Next Steps:

To balance the need for essential services with community integration and Council oversight, the Town may consider the following regulatory updates:

- Standardize Language: Replace the out-dated term "rescue mission" with "emergency shelter"
- C-1A Zone Update: Remove 'rescue mission' from the list of permitted principal uses in the C-1A zone.
- Refine Definitions: Establish a clear definition for "emergency shelter" that distinguishes between year-round operations and temporary/extreme weather shelters.
- Clarify Institutional Use: Modify the "institutional use" definition to specifically exclude emergency or temporary shelters, ensuring tighter regulatory control.
- Apply Site-Specific Zoning: Use a site-specific amendment approach for stand-alone, long-term shelters to allow for context-specific review, including for permitting shelter operations from specific parcel(s) in C-1A or public zones.
- Utilize CD Zones: Use Comprehensive Development (CD) zoning when shelters are proposed as part of larger social housing projects. Depending on the complexity and nature of the project projects, the Town may create a new CD zone or rezone a subject parcel to CD-1 zone.
- Use Temporary Use Permits (TUPs): Apply the TUP process for temporary winter shelters to provide flexibility for short-term operations without requiring permanent rezoning.

RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS:

The proposed changes will trigger development approval requirements prior to establishing new shelters. The application processing fee will cover the costs required as part of the Public Hearing and Council approval process.

LEGISLATION / POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

Various sections of the Local Government Act permit local governments to establish regulations pertaining to land uses and developments to protect the broader community interests. The options outlined in this report for Council consideration are tools that are available at local governments' disposal to uphold the broader public interest.

ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS:

Not Applicable.

CONNECTION TO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

The proposal aligns with the following areas of the Strategic Priorities Plan 2023-26:

- **Community Livability** – Advocate for the provision of services and adequate shelter for vulnerable populations..
- **Organizational Excellence** - Create an effective, accountable and inclusive organization with strong governance structures.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Not applicable.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Any amendments to the Zoning Bylaw will trigger community engagement, for which notifications will be sent in accordance with the requirements established by the Community Charter, Development Procedures Bylaw, and the Public Notice Bylaw.

ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS:

Not Applicable.

ALTERNATIVES / OPTIONS:

1. Direct staff to proceed with a Zoning Bylaw amendment as per Council motion.
2. Direct staff to bring additional information to a future meeting.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. DEV 26-028 Attach. 1 BC Housing – Types of Shelters
2. DEV 26-028 Attach. 2 Location of Existing TWS
3. DEV 26-028 Attach. 3 Zoning Regulations on Shelter Use
4. DEV 26-028 Attach. 4 Trends / Patterns in Shelter Regulations in B.C. Zoning Bylaws

Respectfully submitted:

Deepa Chandran
Manager of Planning & Climate Readiness

Reviewed by:

Mark Allen
Director of Development Services

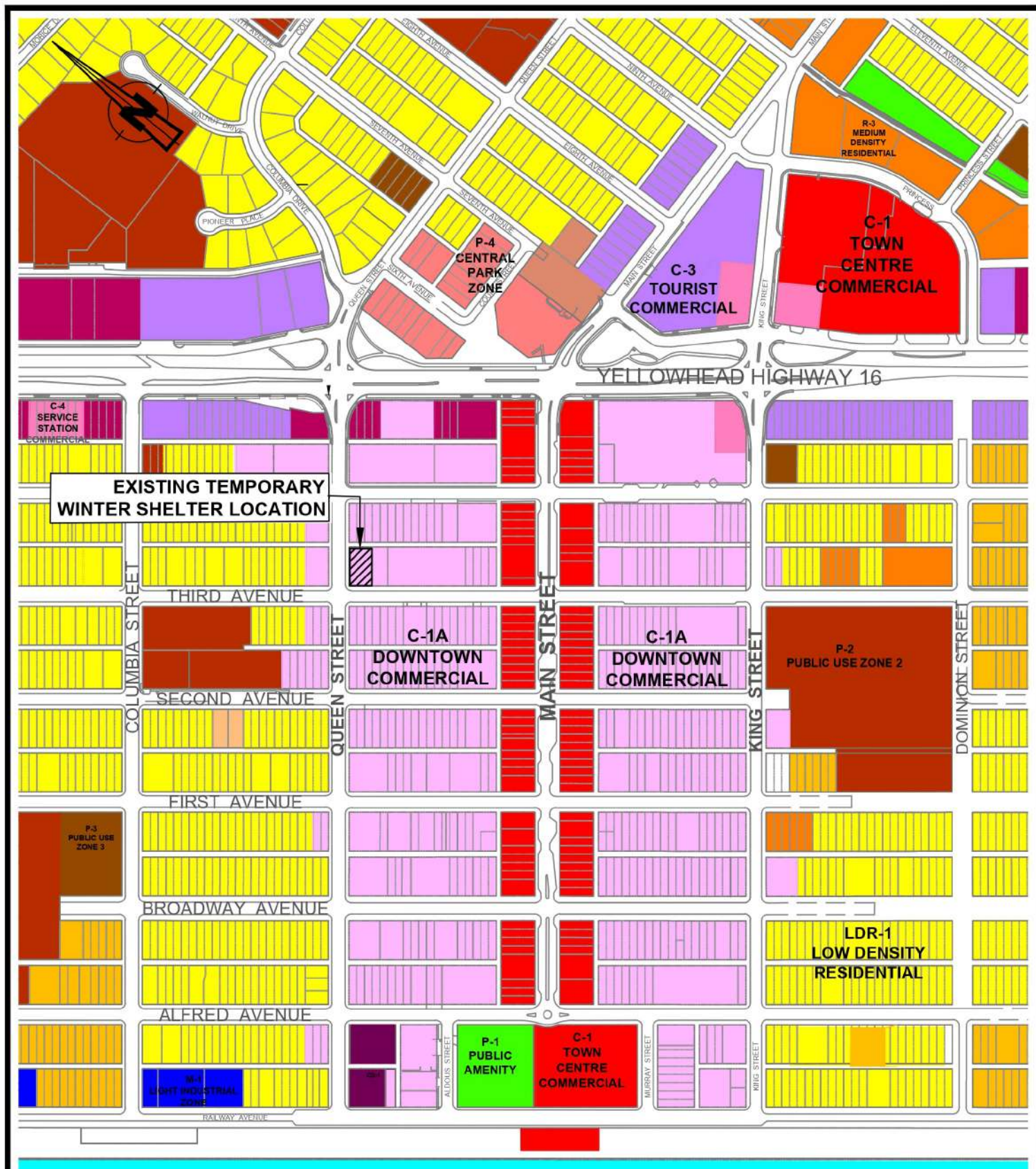
Approved for Submission:

Michael Dewar
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachment.1 BC Housing – Types of Shelters

	Year-Round Shelter	Temporary Winter Shelter (TWS)	Extreme Weather Response Shelter (EWR)
Availability	• Year-round • Open every night, 24/7	• Open every night (October 1 - April 30) • Many operate 24/7 • Can increase capacity during colder months	• Operational October 15 – April 15 • Only open during evenings of extreme weather alerts issued • Community-led
On-site Services	• Sleeping beds, including mattresses and/or pods • Hygiene services, meals, laundry access	• Sleeping mats, cots or beds • Hygiene services, meals, and may have laundry access	• Sleeping mats and/or cots when beds are unavailable • Food, snacks, warm drinks, washroom access • Other services dependent on staffing capacity and the space
Other Options	• Referrals to other services • Access to a case worker, health, social and housing services	• Referrals to other services • May not have access to social services available at year-round shelters	• Referrals to other services

Source: www.bchousing.org/



TITLE:

TEMPORARY WINTER SHELTER ZONING MAP

SCALE: 1:5000

DRAWN BY: AS

DATE: 2026/03/06

APPROVED BY: MFA

DATE: 2026/03/06

DRAWING PATH:

N:\6400-6999 PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT\6410
PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT -
GENERAL\6410-01 - GENERAL\2026\Rescue Mission

Attachment. 3 Zoning Regulations on Shelter Use

Municipality	Regulation/Definition	Defenitions/Conditions/Details
Smithers	Rescue Mission Institutional use	Means a building (or portion thereof) that is used or intended to be used to provide to homeless individuals temporary accommodations, shelter, meals, devotional activities or any combination thereof. Ancillary commercial retail uses may also be permitted provided they are run by a non-profit agency. For the purposes of this section, a 'homeless individual' includes an individual who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence. Permitted in C-1A without any site-specific or operation-related restrictions. Also permitted in CD-1 zone as part of supportive housing development. Land and buildings that provide for civic and other public functions and amenities, including but not limited to, schools, colleges, courts of law, community centres, hospitals, libraries, and museums. Technically, given the highly flexible and lenient definition of 'institutional use', a proponent may claim their right to operate shelters from any zone that currently permit 'institutional use'.
Burnaby	Emergency Shelters	A building providing temporary accommodation and protection from weather or danger, overnight or for a greater duration. Must be located entirely within a building, permitted in all public and institutional zones.
Squamish	Emergency Shelter	A use staffed and supervised by a public authority or non-profit agency for the purpose of providing temporary sleeping accommodation for people in need of emergency shelter on a short-term basis (to a maximum of 30 days). Emergency Shelter use includes drop-in and meal services as well as accessory administration and office space for use by program staff.

		Permitted in CD zones as part of larger social housing developments, with several conditions regarding operation.
Kamloops	Emergency Shelter	An establishment providing temporary communal accommodation for individuals who are temporarily or permanently homeless, lack adequate accommodation, or are in a crisis/emergency situation. Use permitted on two parcels, zoned multi-family residential and commercial.
Vernon	Temporary Shelter Services	The provision of communal, transient accommodation sponsored or supervised by a public authority or non-profit agency intended to provide basic lodgings for persons requiring immediate shelter and assistance for a short period of time. This use includes an ancillary Supportive Housing Use if most of the gross floor area is used for Temporary Shelter Services. Typical examples include hostels and over-night shelters. Several conditions on operation, amenities, and fencing for such facilities. Use permitted in community service zone.
Kelowna	Temporary Shelter Services	Provision of communal, transient accommodation sponsored or supervised by a public authority or non-profit agency for persons needing immediate shelter and assistance for a short period. Includes ancillary supportive housing if it's the majority use. Typical uses include hostels and overnight shelters. Use permitted in multiple commercial and public zones and on a designated site in rural residential zone.
Nanaimo	Emergency Shelter	Use of a building or portion of a building to provide temporary accommodation free of charge to meet immediate basic needs for shelter and may include emergency and support services. Use permitted in one downtown zone; permitted in all zones, when proposed for a temporary period in response to extreme weather alerts issued in accordance with the Assistance to Shelter Act.

Hope	Shelter	Immediate, short-stay housing for people at risk, up to a maximum of 15 beds. Permitted in a CD zone, as part of a larger supportive housing development.
Penticton	Emergency Shelter	A boarding home operated by non-profit society or government agency which provides temporary emergency accommodation, meals and support services for individuals who are in a housing crisis. Permitted on a site-specific basis from two commercial and 1 residential zones.
Surrey	Temporary Homeless Shelter Temporary Winter Shelter	A building used to provide temporary sleeping accommodation at no cost for persons in need. No permitted in any specific zone (indicating that a TUP approval is needed). A building used to provide temporary sleeping accommodation at no cost for persons in need during the months of October through April, where the building and/or operator are funded or regulated by provincial or federal agencies and operated by a provincial or federal agency or non-profit service provider. Permitted in all zones that allow community Service uses. May operate from any zone that allows community service uses provided that the building complies with the residential occupancy and Building Code standards.
Prince George	Temporary Shelter Services	The provision of temporary accommodation for individuals who are homeless, lack fixed, regular, or adequate accommodation, or may be in a crisis or emergency situation. Permitted in multiple commercial and one institutional zone, without restricting operations to specific parcels.
Port Coquitlam	Emergency Shelter	Any facility providing temporary sleeping accommodation for persons

	Shelter, temporary – extreme weather response	who are otherwise homeless or are in need of emergency or temporary sleeping accommodation. No permitted in any specific zone (indicating that a TUP approval is needed). A facility offering temporary overnight accommodation to a maximum of 20 people, during periods of extreme weather between the months of November and March. Use permitted on a specific site / CD zone as part of a larger social service development.
Langley	Temporary Homeless Shelter Care Facility	Means a building, or part thereof, used to provide temporary emergency or other sleeping accommodation at no cost for persons in need. Use permitted on a specific site / CD zone as part of a larger social service development.
Kitimat	Extreme Weather Refuge	A temporary housing facility which provides free or low-cost overnight accommodation during extreme weather conditions for a defined period (November 1 to March 31). Use permitted on a designated parcel in downtown.
Quesnel	Emergency Shelter	The use of a building for the purpose of a temporary residence providing emergency and support services. Permitted on specific parcels in downtown. Operates from designated location(s) in the downtown commercial zone.

Source: Zoning Bylaw documents available online

Attachment: 4 Trends / Patterns in Shelter Regulations in B.C Zoning Bylaws

- The words such as 'emergency shelter', 'temporary shelter', 'temporary emergency shelter', and "temporary homeless shelter" are commonly used to refer to facilities that provide temporary accommodation for individuals in need, serving a social function.
- The term "emergency shelter" implies a temporary nature, but where "temporary emergency shelter" is used, it may include specific operational conditions or durations. Some municipalities specifically use terminologies such as 'temporary winter shelter' or 'extreme weather response shelter' to denote the temporary provision of such services.
- "Rescue mission" is not a standard term used to denote shelter uses in B.C. Smithers is the only community that uses this terminology, indicating its origin from the zoning amendment request received from Salvation Army.
- Despite the differences in the specific terminology, definitions, and conditions, these regulations generally address the provision of temporary accommodation for individuals in need, often with an emphasis on non-profit operation and integration with social services.
- Several municipalities follow a site-specific approach to permitting shelter use, where shelter operations are permitted only on specific parcels within a zone. (e.g., City of Quesnel), while several other communities like the City of Courtney and Town of Smithers permit shelter use as part of larger social housing developments by establishing Comprehensive Development Zones.
- There is no single category of broader zoning designation that is recognized as the best fit for accommodating shelter uses. The rationale for permitting different types of shelter uses within broader zoning categories varies from one community to another depending on the planning policies and the nature of the shelter operations.
- Permitting emergency shelters in specific commercial zones, including downtown, is common in many communities (e.g., Town of Smithers, City of Quesnel, City of Prince George). Majority of these communities, if not all, designate specific sites for shelter operation, limiting their impacts on the community and adjacent land uses.
- As the function of an emergency shelter often aligns with the purpose of institutional zones, they are frequently permitted in zones that serve institutional, public, or community support functions (e.g., City of Langley and City of Prince George).
- Penticton and Kamloops are two of the few communities that permit site-specific shelter use from selected residential zones. In addition, both these communities permit site-specific shelter use from commercial zone(s) as well.
- A few Zoning Bylaws do not identify emergency shelters as separate land use, rather they consider such operations as part of the broad institutional use even if their specific zoning bylaws don't use the exact phrase. However, their Official Community Plans (OCP) include policy statements and goals that confirm the need and support for the

establishment of emergency shelter operations in various ways (e.g., City of Terrace, Cambell River).

- Mostly, small communities do not differentiate between the different levels of shelter operations and/or specify separate regulations for each category but regulate them under a single ' emergency shelter' or 'temporary shelter' category.
- Some communities differentiate shelter services depending on the actual function, establishing different conditions for each category. (e.g., City of Port Coquitlam; District of Kitimat).
- Communities like Nanaimo permit temporary extreme weather shelters in all zones when extreme weather alerts are issued in accordance with the Assistance to Shelter Act.