

WOMEN'S SAFETY AUDIT PILOT PROJECT, COWICHAN LAKE, 1996 REPORT SUMMARY

The purpose of the Women's Safety Audit Pilot Project is to address women's personal and public safety through examining community environments from the perspective of women and provide recommendations for improvements to physical environments and policies and procedures that guide development.

Violence against women is both a personal and public issue. Research has demonstrated that violence and fear of violence limits women's freedom and access to community life and that community design is an important element in overall strategies for prevention of violence. Approaches to build safer communities for women and children recognize the relationship between violence, fear and the built environment, and work toward solutions aimed at reducing opportunities for crime to improve women's sense of safety.

Safety audits are an important tool in community approaches to violence prevention. Through evaluating how safe a place feels, the process identifies ways to improve safety for women to increase freedom and access to community life. Safety audits are an effective tool to build women's participation and sense of ownership in community processes, and provide important information to planners and decision-makers.

This project evolved out of a collaborative process initiated by the Cowichan Valley Regional District who sought recommendations from a Select Committee on Violence Against Women, chaired by Director Lois Gage in spring of 1995, to address women's safety at the municipal level.

In December of 1995, the Cowichan Rape Assault Society brought forward a proposal to the C.V.R.D. to carry out a pilot project in Lake Cowichan. The proposal was accepted by the Regional Board of Directors who committed financial assistance of \$9,000. A Regional Task Force has been formed to provide input to the project and work toward providing standardized methods and consistency in planning for women's safety across electoral areas.

The procedures for the pilot project involved community consultation via a survey and audits of places conducted with community volunteers.

Women's Safety Concerns

126 surveys were returned which revealed a high percentage of women have concerns for their safety in public and semi-public places and many women limit their (and their children's) activities as a result of concerns. The types of areas cited most often, included parks and pathways, parking lots, and side roads; specific areas noted most often were the downtown area of Lake Cowichan and the Greendale trails area.

Women's safety concerns were associated with factors which include isolation, inadequate lighting, design and maintenance, and the presence of people.

Women also indicated that they felt their safety was affected by a range of social factors, including societal attitudes and beliefs about women, drugs and alcohol, age, income, cultural beliefs, occupation, marital status and health.

Violence against women in relationships was noted as a community issue, often by women who knew someone living in an abusive situation. Geographical isolation, social isolation and lack of resources (income, transportation, emergency services) and support were noted as barriers to women living with violence in the home.

Concerns about violence among youth and younger children also figured significantly. This was a difficult issue to define. For example, while many women indicated that youth present an intimidating presence in public areas, many people also pointed out that the majority of youth are not violent, and that perceptions of youth need to be addressed in this regard. However, a number of young women who responded to the survey did indicate that they felt violence to be an issue among youth. As well, women with school-aged children, and school personnel were among those who identified violence as an issue for youth and one which has been associated with children's avoidance of school and recreational areas.

Many women said that violence against women needs to be addressed through changing attitudes and beliefs which allow violence to occur. Community awareness and education, violence prevention and support programs and services and law enforcement were frequently noted among solutions to address violence and improve women's safety in communities.

The Audits

Four audits were carried out which included the Lake Cowichan downtown area, the "Duck Pond" footbridge and park, the Greendale trails area, Youbou and Honeymoon Bay. Overall, observations of the participants reflected concerns in the surveys: lighting and isolation of places figured prominently as an obstacle to safety, along with maintenance and design factors. Recommendations to improve safety focused on lighting along roads, around public buildings, in parks and near recreation trails; improving sightlines and reducing potential hiding spots and entrapment sites through trimming vegetation; installing public telephones near recreation areas and better signage to improve legibility of areas. Other solutions to improve safety in public places offered frequently involved police response and various security measures.

Recommendations

Recommendations brought forward in this report are intended to address needs and reflect solutions identified by women of the communities. They cover improvements to physical environments in local areas, and to community planning policies and procedures. Safety audits should not be approached as a "quick fix to a temporary problem." Building safer communities will require long term efforts aimed at improving both existing environments, and the way we approach new development. The C.V.R.D. planning department has already begun to incorporate safety considerations into procedures, through its enthusiastic participation in this process, and reviewing new development for safety concerns. This report recommends proceeding further to institute women's safety into processes through incorporating public safety policies into community plans, ensuring all by-laws respect public safety, seeking regular input from women and women's groups, and improving accessibility of information.

Through their acknowledgment of issues and actions, community institutions send an important message that violence against women and children is a public as well as personal issue, and that the responsibility for maintaining safe environments is a collective one. The Cowichan Valley Regional District has shown willingness and ability in this regard, and has provided an example of leadership for other areas.

This study has by no means covered all of the issues pertaining to women's personal and public safety. Many aspects can and should still be explored, such as concerns of women who are disabled, aboriginal women, immigrant women, seniors and youth.

This report recommends continued and further actions for community leadership, primarily, that the C.V.R.D. make personal safety a key consideration in all deliberations and decisions and promote equality to end violence against women and children in the district through ongoing consultation with and inclusion of women in community processes.

Implementation of recommendations will be essential for the success of this project, most importantly, to validate the input and involvement of the women who participated in this process. To the credit of electoral representatives and planning staff, some of the recommendations for improvements have already been addressed.

To assist in maintaining the momentum, we have recommended that the Regional Task Force be continued to advance and monitor the recommendations in this report, assist and support future safety audits and review development design. Finally, we have recommended that the Regional District assist and participate in a broad education and awareness campaign to promote women's safety and crime prevention.