

# Downtown Ambassadors: Subsidizing the Thug Class

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, December 20, 2007

<https://politicsrespun.org/2007/12/downtown-ambassadors-subsidizing-the-thug-class/>

## Public money for ambassadors?

Public money should be used to help fund the Downtown Ambassadors, proponents of the program say by a private security firm.

Days after a controversial decision to expand the Downtown Ambassadors program with some \$37,000 in city tax dollars, officials with the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association were on the chair yesterday.

"This is becoming an essential role in the overall community safety equation," said DVBIA executive vice president Dave James, a former senior Vancouver police officer.

For the past 13 years, the ambassadors, clothed in distinctive red uniforms, have patrolled the downtown area, acting as resources for tourists. But they've also taken on basic security duties, interacting with homeless people and drug addicts near business establishments.

"Police are very expensive and they're very professionally trained," James said. "Do you really want

them going out to ask somebody to not spit in front of somebody's store?"

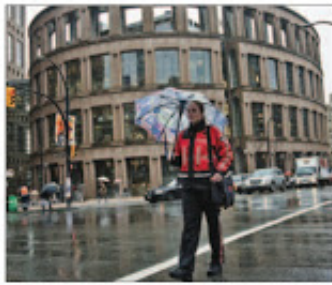
Up until now, the ambassadors program has been fully funded by the DVBIA and been covered by private firm Genesis Security.

But opposition Vision Vancouver city councillor Tim Stevenson said tax money should be used to fund the police, not private security firms. "It sets a very dangerous precedent," Stevenson said. "Public money should be going to public security — to the police."

And Aaron Jaeger, director of the West End Residents Association, says the money could be better spent at community policing courses, or for more outreach workers instead of getting homeless people off the street.

"It's window dressing," he said. "It doesn't address the more problems going on in the city."

With matching city funds, the ambassadors program is expected to double its 2007 staff to 44 and operate 24 hours a day beginning next year.



Karl Higginbottom, a Downtown Ambassador takes a walk across the intersection of West Georgia and Homer streets. Downtown business officials yesterday backed a decision to fund ambassadors with city tax money.

Well, it took a great deal of digging in the hopelessly inadequate free daily "newspapers" today, but it was eventually possible to get the full story on the city of Vancouver spending almost 3/4 of a million dollars to match the funding for the downtown's Business Improvement Association's private thug force.

The privatization-happy neoliberal Non-Partisan Association [sic]-dominated Vancouver city council finds it easier to use our money to fund a private security force than to just privatize the police. Vision City Councillor Tim Stevenson said public money should go to a public police force; the flip side is that public money should not be subsidizing a private security force accountable to the Business Improvement Association. Let them pay for their thugs to criminalize the poor.

But that makes us wonder if even that is such a good idea. In the article above, Irwin Loy "examines" the other side of the story by including Stevenson's comment and another idea that the money should be spent helping the needy.

The real other side of the story, though, is that the Downtown Ambassadors are the thug class that Naomi Wolf is writing about in *The End of America*: a group of private enforcers for the business class to do more than just help tourists find the nearest Starbucks and ask the homeless to not spit in front of Roots on Robson Street.



The Downtown Ambassadors used to look like innocuous doormen from an almost swanky hotel in 1976, with garish red costumes and big hats. Today, as the picture above shows, they look like the rent-a-cops that they are, complete with red stripes down their pants. Their mandate includes tasks like "[report crime and 'quality of life' concerns to appropriate agencies and assist in mitigating these from taking root.](#)" Quality of life concerns have in the past been moving the homeless out of public lanes and alleys because that is too close to a business. Assisting in mitigating these from taking root is far more than reporting them to the real police. The Downtown Ambassadors [have been roundly hated](#) by the poor and their advocates for some time now.

And lackey Dave Jones explains that the real police are so professionally trained that they shouldn't be bothered with asking those homeless to stop spitting. The flip side of that is that the Downtown Ambassadors are not so very professionally trained. And they are far from sufficiently trained to deal with the levels of mental illness among our street people. And why should they be...they aren't being tasked with fixing that problem, just with sending them back to the Main and Hastings ghetto and off Robson and Granville.

But the rest of the story is to be found in the city's other terrible free "newspaper" where David Eby from the Pivot Legal Society is announcing the plan to give blankets to the homeless. On those blankets are listed their rights as citizens of the country, though as the poor, their rights are being squashed by neoliberals like Lorne Mayencourt, Geoff Plant and Sam Sullivan in their plans to sanitize and criminalize the poor.

## City covered in Rights Blankets

Group attempts to bring attention to homeless issue

By JEFF HODDSON  
Metro Vancouver

The First Legal Society is blanketing Vancouver in pea green to draw attention to the city's homeless problem.

The non-profit organization, which advocates for the poor and homeless, gave out 200 "Rights Blankets" at a Christmas lunch in the Downtown Eastside.

The pea-green nylon tarps are waterproof and are printed with a list of their rights.

But, said First lawyer David Eby, the blankets aim to do more than keep the homeless dry and informed - they aspire to raise political awareness about homelessness.

"Our goal is not to become ... a blanket provision company," said Eby. "Our goal is to eliminate homelessness and the need for these blankets in British Columbia."



First lawyer David Eby shows off a Rights Blanket at a press conference yesterday.

The Rights Blanket is inspired by a similar campaign in Paris.

In 2006, activists erected a large number of bright red tents along the River Seine to

draw attention to Paris' homeless problem.

There are 2,900 homeless people in Vancouver and only 800 shelter beds, Eby said.

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If you look carefully in the photograph you can actually read one of the rights of the homeless in our society. In distinguishing between private and public property, security guards are allowed to move people from private space, but they have no power to move people from sidewalks and alleys.

And that is the point of the whole mess. Pivot actually cares about the rights of the rapidly disenfranchised poor. The Downtown Ambassador thug class is all about tracking them to better shunt them out of the business realms.

But you had to actually read both rag "newspapers" to get the whole picture. Oh, the humanity.