



September 15, 2026

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RE: Safety in Downtown St. John's

Dear Premier Wakeham, Minister Conway-Ottenheimer and Members of Parliament Thompson and Osborne:

On behalf of the Downtown St. John's Business Commission (Downtown St. John's), we are writing to echo many of the public safety concerns Mayor Breen outlined in his letter from August 4, 2026. Many of the issues Mayor Breen referenced are felt most acutely in the Downtown region.

Founded in 1989, Downtown St. John's represents the interests of over 500 businesses within the defined Business Improvement Area (BIA). Our membership includes storefronts, commercial property owners, and their tenants – representing a broad constituency of individuals who work, play, and live downtown.

Unfortunately, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a steep increase in crime, vandalism, aggressive panhandling, hazardous waste, and mental health issues in our Downtown. The changes that we have observed over the course of just a few short years have been significant, disheartening, and consequential.

By consequential we mean that our members and their employees no longer feel safe in our Downtown. Businesses are closing and potential commercial tenants are avoiding the area – no longer considering it an appealing place to do business. One walk down Water, Duckworth and New Gower streets is enough to dissuade any business from investing in the area. Broken windows, used needles, human feces, and alarming human behaviours are now to be expected. Those businesses that do remain are exasperated, having to constantly deal with damage to their assets, theft from their stores, and interactions that are violent, unsanitary, and traumatizing.

Perhaps worst of all, businesses Downtown feel helpless in the face of rampant crime and mischief that goes unchecked. Businesses believe that there are no consequences for those that engage in these activities as the fraction of perpetrators that do get caught are quickly released back onto the street. The issues Mayor Breen presented in his letter are most prevalent and visible in the Downtown where important social supports are located adjacent. This creates a concentration of activity within a very small geography. What has historically been the commercial and cultural heart of the City has quickly become an area that residents avoid and where citizens do not feel safe in broad daylight.

In 2022 we created a partnership with the George Street Association and formed the Downtown Safety Coalition in an attempt to try to address these issues. Through this partnership we were able to add private security officers to patrol the Downtown during peak tourist season. We are thankful for the provincial Government's previous and current investments into this initiative. Unfortunately, however, the year-to-year investment has only been enough to cover minimal security at certain times during the day during a short period of the Summer season. Through this program, over three years we have acquired detailed statistics regarding the interventions that the security officers are involved in. The results are shocking and paint a picture of what the norm has become in the Downtown. What the data does demonstrably show is that the extra security downtown is helping. Comparing incident data from July 2024 to the same time frame in July 2025 shows a dramatic decrease in incidents. The uniformed security and safety patrol is working. Data from the June to September 2026 program is currently being analyzed.

In partnership with the coalition, Downtown St. John's also worked with its members and the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) in a "See It, Report It" public awareness campaign throughout 2024. We recognized that the allocation of limited police resources is based on data and trends, and so we encouraged businesses in the region to report any and all crime so that data would adequately reflect the truth of the situation in the Downtown. Unfortunately, over time, our members lost faith in the value of reporting each and every incident because the situation has gotten worse over time – not better.

Safety and security have become the primary focus of our organization over the past four years. While we take pride in the fact that Downtown St. John's stepped up to meet a need and fill a void, our members have become wary of paying for one of the most basic services that should be provided to them as municipal, provincial, and federal taxpayers: safety. Business owners simply cannot and should not be responsible for leading public safety and security initiatives. While safety and security concerns have demanded our full attention, in the meantime our Downtown has fallen into a state of disrepair. We must be able to divert the focus of our efforts on its revitalization.

The situation has come to a head. On behalf of business owners and operators Downtown we are desperately seeking help. Downtown St. John's is requesting a coordinated response from municipal, provincial, and federal governments that **must include increased police and security year-round for the area**. We are open to how this achieved, whether it be through the establishment of an auxiliary police force as suggested by the City, the creation of a municipal police force (as is normal in many other cities in Canada), or investment into a year-round permanent private sector security officer service.

There are other incremental actions that can be taken (i.e., installation of more CCTV security cameras in the area). Each level of government has tools that can be deployed to address the issues at hand. We encourage a fulsome discussion on what all stakeholders can contribute. Yet the fact of the matter is that without additional uniformed officers in the area to discourage, prevent, and address unwanted activities – these efforts will be ineffective by themselves and in vain.

We should be clear that we understand and appreciate that addiction, homelessness, and mental illness are contributing factors and complex issues that are not easy to solve. This is why, since 2024 we have partnered with Thrive and invested in an initiative that has allowed for dedicated professional staff to engage vulnerable individuals with compassion, respect, and dignity. These efforts have proven to be helpful in their own right, however the reality is that the challenges in Downtown extend far beyond these factors. A healthy community will not materialize in an unsafe and insecure environment; the first step must be to increase the presence of uniformed officers.

Downtown businesses and property owners are exhausted. Downtown St. John's urgently requests a meeting with representatives from all governments and partners in the community to come to terms with the situation in the Downtown and begin taking action to address it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon Loder". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jonathan Loder
Downtown St. John's Business Commission

CC:
Mayor Danny Breen
Destination St. John's
George Steet Association
St. John's Board of Trade
Hospitality NL