

Horizon Ottawa signs onto open letter against police centre in ByWard Market

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COUNCILLOR PLANTE SAYS POLICING IS NOT A HOMELESSNESS ISSUE

25 community organizations, unions, local advocacy groups, and Horizon Ottawa have signed onto an [open letter](#) urging the Ottawa Police Services Board (OPSB) to oppose the approval of a new "Neighborhood Operations Centre" in the ByWard Market.

The nearly 3,000 square-foot station was approved to be placed in the CF Rideau Centre across from the Rideau LRT station, for a five-year period [starting Feb. 15, 2024](#).

The centre, and ByWard Market as a whole, are located in Rideau-Vanier ward, a seat currently held by councilor Stéphanie Plante. When asked how the homeless population in the community would be impacted by the new station, Plante said "policing is not a homelessness issue."

Plante also highlighted that the city has had a policy of red-lining services in one area for quite some time, so no other ward has to take on the suspected burden of dealing with vulnerable residents.

"Unfortunately, this also means that some very terrible people are also circling around our shelters and injection sites, trying to take advantage [of people who] are desperate and may have setbacks they want to exploit," said Plante. "These are the people I want the police to focus on because they are making our downtown unsafe, not just for the residents in and around the market, but for some very vulnerable clients of those services."

When asked about the ways students and youth in the community might be affected by the new station, Plante said the impact would be "very little."

"I think if there is a meeting space in there or someone is looking to report something, like a bike being stolen, then the Operations Centre would be the place for them to go," said Plante.

Some of the key criticisms for the new centre were outlined by Sam Hersh from Horizon Ottawa, who is also one of the individuals [suing the Ottawa Police Services Board](#) for allegedly violating their rights to freedom of expression guaranteed under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

"One of the big selling points, for councillors at least, was that [the centre] would include other community services in it and that's not the case. Which is a pretty egregious sort of oversight," said Hersh. "There won't be other community services there for the next couple of years or more, it'll only serve as a police station."

Hersh also illustrated the lack of transparency in regards to what the operating costs of the new centre will be.

"We don't actually know the real cost of what this project will be. We say \$250,000 for the lease, but there's no details in the report of what it will cost to refurbish the space. How many staff will be there? How much will it cost to have equipment there? It's a very haphazard plan. This is \$250,000 that could have gone towards housing or could have gone towards support for drug users," he argued.

Hersh additionally critiqued the effect that the centre could have on over-policing in the community, mentioning: "ByWard Market is already one of, if not the most, overpoliced neighborhoods in the city because of what cops view as dangerous or what business owners view as dangerous."

"There's a large concentration of unhoused folks here because there's at least three shelters that are concentrated in the area. This is just going to attract more police in the neighborhood, more than there already are," said Hersh.

Hersh also pointed to the police headquarters located less than two kilometers away from ByWard Market on Elgin Street as a reason why the new centre is unnecessary. "What we really should have gotten here is more community services," he said.

According to Hersh, signing onto the open letter has not made an impact on the response from the Ottawa Police Services Board who have "made it clear that they're not interested in dialogue."

In terms of its impact on students, University of Ottawa Students' Union director for social sciences James Adair spoke about how the relationship between police and students was [seen on full display during Panda](#).

"A lot of students saw how the police handled the convoy with kiddie gloves, and then when dealing with actual kids in many cases, looked for a fight. Over-policing and visibility are not how police should be trying to handle their relationship with the student population of Ottawa," he said.

Adair also said placing a new station in ByWard Market "won't address the core concerns students have with safety in the market and will only increase the insecurity and fear some students justifiably feel when they encounter police."