

**SEVA PROJECT**

**ENABLING ACCESSIBILITY AND AGE-FRIENDLY FACILITIES**

Sikh Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara (Temple)  
1910 Topaz Street  
Victoria BC



The Opening of the **Topaz** Sikh Gurdwara in 1912

## **I. Community Pride - The Gurdwara Connects Community:**

Regardless of what continent they call home, the Sikhs firmly believe that building and maintaining a Gurdwara or House of the Guru/Teacher is the most important seva or service that they can provide to their community. A Gurdwara connects the entire community in which it is built including all religions, all cultures, all colours and all nationalities—all are welcomed and participate in services and lunches at a Gurdwara.

*The Topaz Street Gurdwara Connects the Entire Greater Victoria and Vancouver Island  
Communities Regardless of Race, Religion or Place of Origin*



The Khalsa Diwan Society (KDS) Sikh Gurdwara (often called a temple) opened in 1912 at 1910 Topaz Street in Victoria and it along with Abbotsford is one of the two oldest operating Gurdwaras in North America (they both opened in 1912). The KDS Gurdwara is open to all people in the Greater Victoria region and any other region of the province regardless of religion, race or country of origin—all community members are welcome to participate in Gurdwara functions. In 2012 the Topaz Temple celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a Gurdwara.

The Gurdwara provides a place to gather in community celebrations, marriage & death ceremonies (often involving thousands of people from all parts of BC), birthdays and religious ceremonies. For example a wedding celebration will involve a week of prayers and the actual wedding ceremony is often attended by more than a thousand people.

The Temple is also an important learning and gathering place for children and youth where they can learn important life lessons from Indian Elders. By learning about traditional ways of living and healthy, disciplined and respectful life from Elders children and youth can learn how to cope and overcome problems faced by Indian children and youth including racism, bullying, alcohol and drug use. Seniors are always present at the temple to provide these teachings as part of the seva concept.

## **II. Langar:**

Every year the KDS provides prayer services and serves vegetarian lunches to tens of thousands of people from every walk of life. The services and lunches are prepared by dozens of volunteers usually male and female seniors and they are open to all community members. The lunches are called langar and the concept of all people regardless of place of origin or culture sitting together to share a meal regardless of station in life—in a langar kings and emperors often sat beside beggars—symbolizes the central tenant of equality for all in Sikhism.

As an example of true Langar, at the Topaz temple every weekend clients of Our Place and people who are homeless or in-need are welcome to come to the temple and have a healthy meal and if they need can take food with them to nourish them. The Gurdwara congregation will often cook more than 600 meals and truck them over to Our Place in downtown Victoria and then help serve the meals to Our Place residents and others. Once the facilities are upgraded it will be possible to do more.

## **III. The Gurdwara is Central to the Indian Community; Particularly Seniors and Those with Disabilities: It needs to be Age-Friendly and Accessible**

In particular the Gurdwara gives the Indian fast-growing population of seniors, many of whom are facing social isolation, intense loneliness, depression, dementia, mobility and disability challenges and other issues related to aging, a place to go. Indian seniors often dress differently, speak a different language and eat different food than mainstream communities. This often means that they are marginalized and feel restricted joining the kinds of activities that mainstream seniors participate in.

***It is traditional in the Indian culture to keep the parents at home as long as possible even if they have disabilities. If it was not for the Topaz Gurdwara most Indian seniors would not get an opportunity to engage in the social interaction that is so crucial for keeping seniors happy and physically and mentally active. The Gurdwara gives Indian seniors something to look forward to, dress up for and engage with other seniors and the community.***

At the Sikh Temple they can gather there any time in the week to overcome social isolation and gain a sense of belonging and of feeling valued by providing seva (service to the community). They also gather there to attend prayers, health and wellness seminars delivered by community services including diabetes classes, healthy living classes, Western cooking classes, etc.

*The Topaz Gurdwara is one of the Centre Points of my Life*

*Without it I would not have a place to go, socialize and feel good about my Life*

*But, as I age it is becoming more difficult to move around the temple safely and perform seva to the best of ability and this hurts.*

*Indo-Canadian Senior Avtar S. Bains*

This kind of participation that is crucial for the well-being and quality of life that every senior including Indian seniors deserve is becoming more and more limited because of the barriers faced by inaccessible parts of the Temple. The Temple critically needs to be updated to be more accessible and age-friendly for all participants who use its public services.

As the Indian population continues to age the inaccessibility of the Temple is become a great concern for the community. **The City of Victoria has one more than one occasion warned the Temple Executive that there are risks on the Temple property that should be addressed to lower risk and bring building structures up to the standard required for public buildings.**

For example, the Indo-Canadian Seniors Group, more than 300 seniors, was formed to combat social isolation, loneliness, depression, mental and physical disabilities and other challenges for aging populations. More than 50% of this group have either mobility, mental challenges or disability issues.

The seniors group uses the Temple facilities on a regular basis for healthy living seminars, computer training, Chai time, kitchen to prepare seniors lunches, showing movies in the Langar hall etc. One of the objectives of the Seva project is to enable groups like the Seniors Group to make greater use of the KDS facilities; the KDS's mandate is to serve all community members and **currently the inaccessibility of the Temple means groups like seniors groups cannot access certain areas of the Temple to the extent they wish.** This marginalizes them, severely limits their individuality, confidence and quality of life. The Seva project will ensure more seniors from other groups can participate in using the KDS facilities and access its programs and services to enhance their quality of life.

Disability is not restricted to the elderly—every community also has members who face mobility, mental and life challenges. Children, youth and men and women who use canes, walkers, wheelchairs and other assistance devices to enable them to participate in the community come to the Sikh temple on a regular basis.

For example every year the temple hold one or more youth camps for Sikhs (other faith groups are also welcomed) to teach them about the concepts of Sikhism including respect for one another, nature, spirituality and embracing Seva the philosophy of selfless service to other without any expectation of payment or reward. It is often difficult for children and youth who

have forms of disability to participate to the full extent of their desire because the temple facilities need to be modernized and made accessible.

As the Indian population ages, similar to the BC population, accessibility challenges are increasing for all ages. For example the washrooms in the Sikh temple were not accessible to wheelchairs and walkers and in 2017 they were finally updated, thanks to a Federal Accessibility grant. The washrooms are now fully accessible but other areas of the Temple are not.

#### **IV. Updating to become Accessible:**

##### **i. Kitchen Area**

The entire kitchen area of the Temple needs updating. This area is very busy and it is a constant struggle to accommodate the seniors and other who volunteer to cook meals, clean and wash dishes. ***Some of the issues faced include:***

- It is impossible for a person in a wheelchair or using a walker/cane or with mobility issues to access parts of the kitchen (cramped and stairs connecting smaller kitchen to larger kitchen).
- Some of the cooking pots used to cook meals often weigh more than 200 pounds) with food) and to move these pots creates a severe risk that has resulted in severe burns and other issues.
- The counters used are all unequal heights and they need to be modernized to be age and accessibility friendly, spills make the floors slippery and dangerous.
- The dishwashing area is inadequate and unsafe for seniors and other volunteers and there is inadequate storage for the thousands of dishes and utensils need to serve the community.

**The upgrades to make the kitchen area accessible and age-friendly and safe include the following:**

- Demolish existing two kitchens and create one level accessible kitchen (requires rock blasting) and install non-slip floors and age-friendly counters.

- The exterior of the kitchen often leaks and needs to be upgraded with concrete and wood-framed walls with stucco on rainscreen externally, with insulation vapour barrier and drywall internally.
- The window/doors will need to be updated to conserve energy and keep moisture out.
- Mechanical and Electrical upgrading is seriously needed.

s.21

#### **Total Cost of Kitchen Upgrading**

### **ii. Upgrades to Existing Common Spaces: Langar (Dining area) Hall & Prayer Hall and Social Gathering Hubs**

#### **The challenges in the area include the following:**

- The serving areas are cramped, dangerous when handling hot food and are inadequate to accommodate the sheer number of community members.
- Floors are slippery and ceiling warped and broken
- Carpet is old, stained, fraying and not hygienically safe
- The social areas where seniors sit is inaccessible for walkers, wheelchairs and poses a risk for cane and other mobility enhancing devices.
- The areas for religious ceremonies ie. Melni (meeting of families during weddings) is too small to meet existing and future needs.

#### **Upgrades Needed Include:**

- New ceilings, painting, non-slip floors, accessible handles.
- Remove walls to expand social and mingling ,
- Upgrade fire alarm system, lighting, install security system and air conditioning
- Plumbing upgrades to meet existing and future need.
- New carpet in the Sangat (congregation) prayer Hall.
- Structural changes to allow better and safer serving of Langar.

s.21

#### **Total cost for Accessibility, Risk Reduction and Upgrading Common Areas**

### **iii. Alterations to Exterior Decks to bring to Code, make Accessible, Lower Risk and Eliminate Moisture Issues:**

The decks on the South and East side of the Gurdwara are not up to code, have been degraded by moisture damage (not safe), railing is not up to code, stucco walls need to be moisture proofed, deck flooring is slippery.

**Solutions to challenges include the following:**

- Remove existing guard rails and replace to safety standards
- Replace defective flooring, deck framing and existing fascia damaged by moisture.
- Sheet vinyl membrane to new deck and seal
- Replace entry door to deck and re-frame to seal for moisture

s.21

**Total Cost for South and East Deck Upgrades**

**iv. Upgrade the Existing Main Entrances and Stairs to Make Age-Friendly, Make Accessible and Reduce Risk for Seniors and Community Members with Disabilities**

**Issues include:**

- Guardrails and Stairs (42 stairs) Leading to Main Entrance to Sangat Prayer Hall are not up to code for Public Buildings
- Stairs are slippery and dangerous particularly for seniors with unsteady balance and using mobility devices, when wet (no canopy).
- Area where community removes shoes and covers their heads with scarfs is not accessible and dangerous to people using wheelchairs (use elevator to reach that level), or using walkers and canes—this area is also compromised by moisture problems causing mold, slippery floors and extreme discomfort particularly for seniors and community members with challenges.

**Upgrades will:**

- Remove existing deck extension at the front of the building and extend by 8 feet, moisture seal to create a safe, roomy space to remove shoes, tie scarves on head and create enough space for wheelchairs, walkers, cane users and other mobility assistance devices. Also make enough space for marriage parties as they prepare to enter the prayer hall together (currently they cannot)
- Replace all guardrails including up the stairs with up-to-code for safety and convenience with age-friendly specifications.



- Replace fascia as needed matching it existing surrounding fascia and install dressing membrane as needed.
- Correct defects in all sheathing and flooring and install non-slip surfaces
- New steel columns for structure stability and install moisture proof external walls
- Upgrade lighting for safe evening and night functions
- Enclose stairs for safety, accessibility with aluminum curtain wall and glazed roofing.
- Repair exiting area beneath stairs and replace domes as main entrance gate.

**Total for Main Entrances and Front Entry Stairs** s.21

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Summary of budget s.21

Kitchen Demolition and Upgrades

Removal of Damaged Areas and Upgrades to Common Areas

South and East Deck Damage Repairs and Upgrades

Make Main Entrance and Front Entry Stairs Safe for Disabled

**Total**

GST 5%

**Grant Total**

### **Outcomes and Benefits of the Seva Project:**

The changes, by updating areas of the Gurdwara, result in the following:

Ensure that Indo-Canadian seniors and people with disabilities (PWD) and seniors and people with disabilities from the mainstream community and challenged individuals that currently face the barriers mentioned above who cannot attend functions and programs at the KDS can enjoy and participate at the Temple in comfort, safety and privacy.

- Result in more PWD, particularly isolated seniors who are unable to attend KDS marriage functions, ceremonial functions, grieving and funeral functions, cultural functions, seminars and workshops that are meant to include PWD and which in some cases (health workshops & seminars, exercise programs for people with mobility challenges, etc.) are aimed specifically at seniors who are facing barriers, to participate more fully in these programs and services.
- Be endorsed by a disability specialist who will be retained by the project.

- Reduce depression, marginalism, and other mental health issues in the Indo Canadian population resulting from people (particularly traditional seniors) not being able to come and socialize at the temple due to issues of accessibility.
- Satisfy the City building codes to reduce risk (falls due to slippery surfaces, lack of proper lighting, cramped quarters that do not accommodate wheelchairs and accessibility aids) for Indo Canadian and other seniors and anyone attending the Gurdwara.
- Allow more children with disabilities to enjoy the Temples and learn from Indo Canadian seniors (the Temple runs a school to teach children how to do prayers and other aspects of the Sikh religion) by making the Temple more accessible.