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Sidney, James Bay more vulnerable to extreme heat, CRD study shows



[Roxanne Egan-Elliott](#)

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1 / 2 James Bay resident Kirk Buhne says the city needs to keep large trees such as this European beech on Clarence Street to provide shade during heat waves. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST



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The demographics and buildings in Sidney and James Bay make them particularly vulnerable to extreme heat, according to an online Capital Regional District mapping portal.

Sidney and James Bay score high on both a demographic vulnerability index — which shows areas where residents have health problems such as heart disease or substance-use disorder, and sociodemographic characteristics such as being older, living alone or having a low income — and a building vulnerability index, which looks at the height and age of buildings and how much sunlight they receive.

Smaller pockets of Victoria and surrounding municipalities also score high in vulnerability for both factors.

Kirk Buhne, a longtime James Bay resident, said people can be lulled into a false sense of security when it comes to heat, because the capital region generally doesn't get that hot. "So people aren't ready. Usually you just open your windows at night, close them in the daytime, and you can manage."

When extreme heat rolls in, as it did during a 2021 heat dome across western Canada that's linked to 619 heat-related deaths, residents can be taken by surprise; air conditioning isn't common and there aren't enough trees to provide adequate shade, Buhne said.

While Buhne lives in a house with trees in the backyard, there are areas of James Bay he refers to as "baking zones," with parking lots, south-facing buildings and no trees.

"The old people in them who aren't prepared for the heat, they're like frogs in a pot of boiling water. They get hotter and hotter. They languish. They feel tired and then they don't leave. And that's the danger with people dying," he said.

The CRD received grant funding after the 2021 heat dome to create its mapping portal to help communities plan how to adapt to a changing climate, said Nikki Elliott, the CRD's manager of climate action programs.

She encourages residents to visit heat.prepareyourself.ca to learn more about readying themselves for extreme heat.

The Town of Sidney developed its heat-response plan after the heat dome hit western Canada in the last week of June 2021. Sidney's plan focuses on providing relief from the heat for those at greatest risk, a spokesperson said in a statement.

The town identified at-risk residential buildings and collected contact information for the buildings. During extreme heat events, the town will communicate with building representatives and occupants, providing guidance on staying safe.

The municipality has encouraged neighbours to get to know each other and support each other through a “meet your street” program.

Sidney has made agreements with air-conditioned locations, such as the SHOAL Centre, to act as cooling stations in extreme heat. The municipality plans to extend hours of the town’s water spray park during heat waves and has installed a new fountain and bottle-fill station near waterfront public washrooms.

It is continuing to create more shaded areas by planting trees, the spokesperson said.

Sidney has updated its noise bylaw to help residents who want to install heat pumps — which also provide cooling — and supports a municipal top-up for heat pumps.

The City of Victoria, meanwhile, said it sends extreme-weather-response staff to public cooling sites and misting stations during heat events to hand out kits with water, electrolytes and sunscreen.

During an extreme heat emergency, the province will issue an alert to mobile devices, TV and radio, which the city will amplify on its channels, a spokesperson said in a statement.

Victoria said it has also launched an outreach campaign to those who are most vulnerable based on demographic and building data.

regan-elliott@timescolonist.com

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