

POLICY REPORT
Urban Structure

Date: February 20, 1997

TO: Vancouver City Council
FROM: Director of Central Area Planning
SUBJECT: Downtown Vancouver Skyline Study - Recommended Option

RECOMMENDATION

- A. *THAT the recommended skyline and general policy for higher buildings, as detailed in Appendix C of this report, be approved as the basis for adjustments to the maximum permitted heights in the Downtown Official Development Plan (ODP), noting that in the area covered by this ODP:*
- *buildings up to but not exceeding 600' high will only be considered in the current 450' height area of the Central Business District, north of Robson Street;*
 - *buildings up to 400' high will be considered in the north westerly current 300' height area of the Central Business District, generally south east of Bute and Pender Streets;*
 - *in no case will building heights be considered that intrude into adopted view corridors (except the Queen Elizabeth Park view corridor); and*
 - *elsewhere, buildings significantly exceeding current height specifications will generally not be considered.*
- B. *THAT staff report back with text amendments for the Downtown Official Development Plan and design guideline amendments regarding the proposed changes to the permitted building heights and a process for considering higher buildings.*
- C. *THAT buildings exceeding the current 450' height limit will not be considered until guidelines, zoning text amendments, review criteria and a process to enable the consideration of buildings at this scale are completed.*
- D. *THAT the Skyline Study Advisory Committee be thanked for their time and effort and, further, that they be consulted during the implementation and follow-up work that is outlined in this report.*
- E. *THAT the preparation of the text amendments and design guidelines for the implementation of the revised height limits be undertaken as soon as staff resources become available to do this work, expected to be in 1998; and further that a budget in the amount of \$6,000 be approved in the 1998 budget (subject to the availability of funds and priorities) for public meetings and computer resources to do this work.*

CONSIDERATION

As an alternative to recommendation E:

- F. *THAT \$18,000, as an addition to the 1997 Operating Budget, be approved for consultants, public meeting costs and computer resources to proceed with preparation*

of zoning text amendments, design guidelines and the appropriate review process for immediate implementation of revised height limits in the Downtown District.

GENERAL MANAGER'S COMMENTS

The General Manager of Community Services notes that these recommendations are adding further complexity to the regulatory environment. As the desirability of any skyline form is very much a matter of community aesthetic taste as experienced through the community's elected representatives and as there is no correct technical alternative, the General Manager of Community Services submits A through F for CONSIDERATION.

COUNCIL POLICY

- *The View Protection Guidelines were approved on December 12, 1989 and amended on December 11, 1990, establishing a number of view corridors in the downtown with height limits to protect views of the north shore mountains from a variety of locations south of the downtown peninsula (see Appendix 'D').*
- *The Downtown District Official Development Plan (ODP), the False Creek North ODP, the Coal Harbour ODP and the C-5, C-6, RM-5, RM-5A, RM-5B, RM-5C and RM-6 District Schedules regulate building heights in the downtown peninsula. Generally, heights in the Downtown District range from 450 ft., 300 ft., 150 ft., 90 ft., and 70 ft. Elsewhere in the downtown peninsula, heights are 350 ft. (106 m) or less on the remainder of the north shore of False Creek, 210 ft. (64 m) or less in the West End and 75 ft. (22.39 m) in Yaletown (See Appendix C for further details) The height limits in the Central Business District and Downtown South were originally set in the 1960's and confirmed in 1975. Elsewhere, height limits have been established as part of area-specific planning initiatives.*

SUMMARY

Various people have commented that Vancouver's skyline lacks visual interest and there is a need for some taller buildings that reflect Vancouver's contemporary image. Others are worried about proposals for much higher buildings. Many are concerned that the natural setting and, in particular, the north shore mountains may be compromised as tall buildings proliferate. In response to these concerns and the desire to have a clear City policy for considering buildings that exceed current height limits, Council directed staff to undertake a Skyline Study.

The Skyline Study prepared the following 5 prototypical skylines and illustrated them from eight vantage points:

- 'build out' skyline (retain existing height limits);
- landmark - 600' skyline (2 landmark buildings at 600 feet);
- landmark - 750' skyline (2 landmark buildings at 750 feet);
- gap tooth skyline (8 buildings between 450 and 550 feet);
- dome skyline (12 buildings between 450 and 550 feet).

During a public review of the prototypical skylines there was not a clear majority in support of any particular one. There is a split opinion about building height - with many suggesting taller buildings and others lamenting any further taller buildings. Most felt that the skyline is important and symbolic. The landmark - 750' was preferred by one-third of respondents attending the open houses and meetings. The dome skyline was chosen by about one-fifth of respondents. The 'build out' or status quo skyline was favoured by approximately one-seventh of those commenting. The remaining comments indicated preferences either for other options

or a hybrid of the prototypes or did not choose any of the prototypes. Many were concerned that the North Shore Mountains should remain the predominant element in the skyline.

Staff are presenting for Council adoption (i) a recommended skyline that melds preferred features of the different prototypes but with an upper building height limit of 600 feet and (ii) a general policy for higher buildings (see Appendix 'C'). It is proposed that all buildings exceeding current height limits must be in the Central Business District, generally north of Robson Street. Detailed guidelines and special requirements are also suggested for buildings exceeding current height limits. Prior to approving such buildings, further work is required to prepare guidelines that address the massing, design and impacts of tall buildings and finalizing boundaries for where they will be permitted. This work will also outline a review process which includes Council approval of the buildings and review by a special panel.

PURPOSE

This report recommends a policy for downtown building heights to achieve a preferred profile for the Downtown Vancouver skyline. A work programme and resources for further work are also put forward for consideration.

BACKGROUND

Current downtown height limits allow for typical office, hotel and residential towers at maximum density allowances. The height limit also serves to generally protect public views of the north shore mountain backdrop from medium range vantage points in the city (i.e. south of Broadway). Close in views of the mountains are protected by selected view corridors (see Appendix 'D').

In recent years, various people have questioned the current height limits. Their concerns are that:

- it appears that the skyline is becoming flat and does not have a peak;
- permitting higher buildings would add interest to the skyline;
- views of the North Shore Mountains are being lost and we should not be entertaining additional building height.

With improved computer technology, the skyline that we will probably obtain if all development sites are built within current height allowances can be viewed. Options for adjusting height limits can also be observed.

On May 16, 1996, Council initiated a Downtown Vancouver Skyline Study to identify potential prototypical skylines for the future and recommend a preferred skyline. A consultant was hired in July and work began in August. A public review of work in progress was completed in October and a second public review was completed in mid-February to examine the prototypes. The final conclusions of the study are based on the urban design analysis by staff and the consultants, input of a specially appointed Advisory Committee and comments received from the public. The consultant's full report, completed by the Spaxman Consulting Group and Jankovic Consultants is on file with the City Clerk.

Council's adoption of a general building heights policy for the skyline will conclude this study. However, there is essential follow-up work to implement such a policy, prior to which extraordinary building heights should not be considered.

DISCUSSION

The Skyline Prototypes

The study was done on the assumption that existing density limits and view corridors (except the Queen Elizabeth Park corridor) would be respected. While this limited options, it reflects widely held public concerns that were reconfirmed in the public process.

After reviewing many possibilities, five prototypical skyline options were prepared for public discussion (see Appendix 'A'):

- a 'build out' skyline (resulting from no change in current height regulations);
- a landmark skyline - 600' (tallest buildings at 600 feet);
- a landmark skyline - 750' (tallest buildings at 750 feet);
- a gap toothed skyline;
- a dome shaped skyline.

These prototypical skylines are created by hypothetically locating taller new buildings on a selected number of the 76 potential development sites in the downtown peninsula (while recognizing that the actual building locations could take a variety of specific patterns). The study examines the skylines from 8 vantage points that were selected through the public discussion. The tallest buildings in the prototypes (with the exception of the build out skyline) exceed the existing height regulations. The following general observations were drawn:

- the 'build out' skyline is not flat from most vantage points;
- higher buildings in the southern part of the downtown peninsula will appear much more dominant and block more northerly views in comparison to buildings in the northern part, because of the visual effects of foreshortening;
- while many people responded positively to higher buildings or more variety in building heights, most people strongly supported the predominance of the north shore mountain backdrop (especially the 'Lions') and want this carefully preserved;
- landmark towers in the central business district core must be significantly taller (550 to 750 feet) to be noticeable in the skyline;
- the skylines are not dramatically different from each other due to the limited number of development sites, particularly in the core, and the height restrictions of the view corridors; and
- achieving a preferred form of skyline is problematic because depending on how and which sites are developed, a landmark skyline could evolve into a gap toothed skyline or ultimately to overall higher building heights.

The Selection of a Preferred Form of Skyline

As summarized below, staff evaluated the 5 prototypical skylines with consideration of the following factors:

- relationship to the natural setting (mountains and water);
- the location of the Central Business District is easily identified;
- providing visual interest;
- impact on sensitive areas such as residential neighbourhoods and parks;
- impact on the economic and business functions of the downtown;
- practicality of creating the skyline through height regulations and the straightforwardness of administration;
- level of public support for the skyline.

Conclusions regarding each prototypical skyline are identified below. Since no one prototype best balanced urban design objectives and public preferences, a hybrid is recommended based upon what was learned from each one. A detailed list of pros and cons for each prototype is in Appendix 'B'.

'Build Out' Skyline (Retain existing height regulations)

- The mountains remain the most significant element in the skyline.
- South of 12th Avenue, the tallest buildings are below the ridge line of the mountains.
- Apart from the mountain backdrop, the skyline does not have strong visual interest.
- There are minimal impacts on sensitive areas.
- There are no opportunities for landmark buildings (i.e., taller than existing buildings) in the core.
- There is no problem creating this skyline through height regulations.
- Public support for this option at the open houses and meetings was 13.6% (30 responses) [Also noted by the public as build-out-dome: 0.5% for a total of 14.1%].

This option would represent an acceptable future. However, it does not provide an opportunity to bring more visual interest to the skyline (beyond the mountain backdrop) and does not emphasize the location of the core with landmarks.

Landmark - 600' Skyline (two towers at 600 feet)

- The mountains remain the most significant element of the skyline.
- The buildings are below the ridge line of the mountains from most areas south of 12th Avenue.
- Some visual interest created by 600 foot landmark towers.
- There are minimal impacts on sensitive areas.
- There are limited opportunities for landmark buildings in the core.
- Limiting the number of landmark towers to two will result in a relative monopoly situation and other owners will want to be dealt with equitably and have similar opportunities provided. This will result in difficulties administering the regulations.
- Public support at open houses and meetings was 6.3% (14 responses).

This option is not recommended because it creates so few opportunities for taller buildings that would emphasize the core and it would be very difficult to administer equitably.

Landmark - 750' Skyline (two towers at 750 feet)

- The mountains do not remain the most significant element of the skyline and the view of 'the Lions' is compromised from certain vantage points south of False Creek.
- Landmark buildings at 750 feet are not below the ridge line at 12th Avenue.
- Visual interest is created by 750 foot landmark towers.
- There are minimal impacts on sensitive areas.
- Limiting the number of landmark towers to two will result in a relative monopoly situation and other owners will want to be dealt with equitably and have similar opportunities provided. This will result in difficulties administering the regulations.
- At the open houses and meetings, 32.1% of those filling out a comment sheet chose this skyline (71 responses). (Also noted by public as: gap tooth-landmark 750': 4.1%, landmark 750'-dome: 1.8% for total of 38%).

Although this is a popular option, it is not recommended because buildings of 750 feet would intrude significantly into the mountain backdrop and profile, challenging the predominance of the mountains. It would also block views of the 'Lions' from many locations south of False

Creek. Moreover, it creates very few opportunities for taller buildings thus creating a difficult situation for equitably administering the regulations.

Gap Tooth Skyline (8 towers between 450 and 550 feet)

- It makes the prevailing height of the overall skyline appear taller because buildings are located throughout the core, Triangle West and Downtown South.
- It begins to challenge the mountains as the most significant element of the skyline.
- The tallest buildings are below the ridge line at 12th Avenue.
- There is some visual interest created by having a series of towers that are higher than other towers.
- There are impacts on sensitive areas because some towers are in or adjacent to residential areas.
- There are some new opportunities for landmark office buildings in the core.
- This option would be less complex to administer through revised height regulations.
- At the open houses and meetings, public support for this option was 12.2% (27 responses). (Also noted by public as: gap tooth-landmark-750': 4.1%; gap-tooth-dome: 1.4% for a total of 17.7%).

This option is not recommended because it would generally have the affect of raising the sense of overall heights over the downtown peninsula without providing the benefits of shaping the skyline. It unduly diminishes the contrast between the building skyline and the mountain backdrop. It would have to include tall buildings (450 feet) in sensitive residential areas such as Downtown South and Triangle West. Taller buildings in Downtown South will appear even taller and intrusive from vantage points south of False Creek due to the effects of foreshortening.

Dome Skyline (12 towers between 450 and 550 feet)

- The mountains remain the most significant element of skyline.
- The tallest buildings are below the ridge line at 12th Avenue.
- Some visual interest is created by having a dome shape.
- There are some impacts on sensitive areas because some towers are in or adjacent to residential areas.
- There are some new opportunities for landmark buildings in the core at early stages of new development.
- There are significant problems administering complicated height regulations because permitted heights for each building site would have to be individually calibrated to ensure that a clear dome effect was being achieved.
- The public support for this option at open houses and meetings was 17.6% of those responding to a comment sheet (39 responses). (Also noted by the public as: landmark 600'-dome: 2.7%; landmark 750'-dome: 1.8%; gap tooth-dome: 1.4% for a total of 23.5%)

This option would represent an acceptable future but it is very difficult to achieve a highly premeditated dome shape due to the height limits of the view cones. It would be complicated to administer the regulations with varying heights in the core and in shoulder areas in order to achieve the desired dome profile.

Recommended Skyline and General Policy for higher Buildings

Based on the analysis above and comments from the public and the Advisory Committee, staff and the consultants recommend a skyline which combines attractive features of several of the prototypes and incorporates the following principles:

- the mountain backdrop remains a predominant element in the skyline;

- the buildings do not block 'the Lions' from most vantage points south of False Creek;
- buildings significantly exceeding current height limits are limited to the Central Business District, generally north of Robson Street, to minimize blockage of the mountains from locations south of False Creek;
- building heights should step down as they approach the water;
- there are enough sites for taller buildings to ensure that one or two owners will not have a monopoly on the opportunity to develop a tall building exceeding current height limits.

The recommended skyline involves allowing buildings in the current 450-foot high zone to go up to 600 feet. Buildings exceeding the current height limits would all be in the Central Business District, generally north of Robson Street (see map on the following page, more details in Appendix 'C'). A review of existing development sites and view corridor limitations indicates that there are probably 5 practical opportunities for buildings to exceed 450 feet. In two locations, there is the opportunity to go up to 600 feet. In other locations, heights would range from 475 feet to 550 feet due to view cone restrictions. The increases of height above 450 feet would have to meet criteria discussed below and be the subject of a special review process.

In one small area, west of Thurlow and east of Bute where the current height limit is 300 feet (see map on the following page), buildings could go up to 400 feet. The boundaries of this area may be slightly adjusted after further study.

In no case, is it proposed that there will be buildings significantly exceeding current height limits in locations south of Robson Street nor along the Coal Harbour shoreline. One of the intents of this policy is to clarify that significant increases above the current height limits will generally not be approved for locations outside the core.

This option is recommended because:

- it addresses the desire, as expressed by some people, for more visual interest and shaping of the skyline;
- the 600-foot high landmark buildings will generally keep buildings below the ridge of the mountains and not block 'the Lions' from most vantage points south of 12th Avenue;
- it provides clear direction on the locations where the current height limits may be relaxed significantly and designates the Central Business District as the only location where this may
- occur;
- it clearly identifies the Central Business District as the centre of the downtown;
- it has minimal impacts on sensitive areas (eg. residential neighbourhoods) of the city;
- it would have minimum impact regarding view blockage or the sense of encroaching tall buildings from vantage points south of False Creek.

One caution about this proposal is that the area between Bute and Thurlow Street (where the relaxation of the 300-foot height limit is proposed) is adjacent to Triangle West, a mixed use area that includes a significant amount of housing. Detailed analysis of shadowing, view and wind impacts would need to be undertaken to ensure that this area is not negatively impacted. On the other hand, Triangle West may have one or more other sites for low-impact taller buildings. Follow-up work is necessary to finally settle on boundaries for height increases in the northwest corner of the core.

The preferred skyline will evolve over many years. Once one or two taller buildings are built, the skyline will have the quality of the landmark prototypes we tested; after more buildings are constructed it will take on a more 'dome like' quality, although not a perfectly shaped dome. In any event, it will provide enough development opportunities while minimizing negative view impacts south of False Creek or environmental impacts on sensitive areas such as residential neighbourhoods.

General Policy for Higher Buildings

Within the boundaries outlined above, a special process and policies are proposed when considering building proposals which exceed the current height limits established by the Downtown District ODP. While this must be fully fleshed out during implementation, the following aspects are essential:

- the highest buildings (i.e. 575-600 feet) should be on one of downtown Vancouver's three primary streets - West Georgia, Granville and Burrard;
- the building should exhibit the highest order of architectural excellence;
- the building should achieve other community benefits such as being a recipient site for density transfers or density bonusing relating to heritage retention or the provision of significant cultural or social facilities or low cost housing;
- it should not involve the demolition of a Class A heritage building;
- where possible, the building should include activities and uses of community significance such as a public observation deck or other public amenity;
- the development should provide on-site open space that represents a significant addition to downtown green and plaza spaces;
- the building should not contribute to adverse microclimate effects;
- signage on buildings should not be located at a height which exceeds the current height limits (i.e., 300 or 450 feet);
- the building should be the subject of a special review process which includes, in addition to the current review requirements (which includes review by staff and the Urban Design Panel and approval by the Development Permit Board), a review assessing architectural excellence with input from a special panel of respected community leaders and notable design experts, and approval by Council.

Public Comment

Staff organized a series of open houses and a public meeting in October to assist in identifying key vantage points for examining the skyline and directions for preparing skyline prototypes. Public Comments from this are summarized in Appendix 'E'. In January and February a second series of public open houses in a variety of locations and a public meeting offered the opportunity to review the prototypical skylines and identify a preferred skyline. Public Comments from this are summarized in Appendix 'F'.

The following were the key themes expressed by the public during the October and the January and February events:

1. The skyline should complement, not compete with the natural setting. The north shore mountains should clearly be predominant, especially 'the Lions'.
2. The skyline should work with the topography and water features.
3. The skyline is an important symbol of the city.
4. Landmark buildings should achieve a variety of community objectives.
5. Landmark buildings should achieve a high degree of architectural excellence.

Staff estimate that several thousand citizens have become aware of this study with approximately 1000 individuals having reviewed the presentation boards between January 25th and February 5th. There were 221 comment sheets submitted by participants. The open houses were held in Pacific Centre Mall, Library Square and community centres in False Creek, Kitsilano, Mount Pleasant and Britannia. This survey is not statistically representative of all the public. It reflects the views of those individuals who visited the public open houses or attended the meeting and took the time to fill out the comment sheet.

The results are as follows:

Is the shape of the Vancouver Skyline important?

Very important	139	63%
Important	57	26%
No response	10	5%
Little importance	4	4%
Not important	6	3%
Don't know	1	0%
Total responses	221	

%

Of the five prototypical skylines illustrated, which do you feel is most appropriate for Vancouver?

Landmark - 750'	71	32%
Dome	39	18%
Build-out	30	14%
Gap-tooth	27	12%
No response	17	8%
Landmark - 600'	14	6%
Gap-tooth / Landmark - 750'	9	4%
Landmark - 600' / Dome	5	3%
Landmark - 750' / Dome	4	2%
Gap-tooth / Dome	2	1%
Build-out / Landmark - 600'	1	0.5%
Build-out / Dome	1	0.5%
Total responses	219	

The results to the question on the preferred skyline varied by the location of the open house or meeting. Generally, the landmark 750' skyline was more favoured by those attending the events in the downtown at Pacific Centre Mall and Library Square. About 75% of those submitting comment sheets attended these events. At open houses in Kitsilano, False Creek, Mount Pleasant and Britannia, there were a smaller number of respondents. Generally, the 'build-out' and dome skylines were preferred more than the other options at these events.

Advice from the Skyline Study Advisory Committee

A majority of the members of the Council-appointed Advisory Committee expressed support for the recommended skyline, as illustrated in this report.

The preference for the retention of the existing height limits (i.e., the 'build-out' skyline) was also brought forward. The importance of retaining mountain views was emphasized by those suggesting the retention of existing height limits. They noted that further analysis, including the provision of more viewpoints for examining a skyline should be required prior to final approval of it.

The committee was unanimous regarding the need to look carefully at the implications and impacts of increased building heights and the necessity of developing guidelines for tall buildings prior to permitting buildings that exceed the current 450 foot limit. The committee also noted the importance of carefully defining the areas within which taller buildings would be considered, so that the boundaries of those areas make sense to the public, City staff and the development community. The Advisory Committee is willing to reconvene to work with the staff on follow-up work.

Next Steps - Urban Design Analysis, Zoning and Guideline Amendments

Once Council has approved a general building heights policy based upon a preferred form for the skyline, follow-up work will be required to:

- review the impacts of the highest buildings (i.e., exceeding 450 feet) on views, shadowing and wind and prepare guidelines for mitigating these impacts;
- prepare guidelines for building massing, roof treatments and signage on the highest buildings;
- finalize the exact boundaries within the Central Business District where buildings exceeding existing height limits will be considered;
- identifying specific criteria and a process for reviewing proposals for the highest buildings that involves Council, the public, the Development Permit Board and staff;
- draft text amendments for the Downtown Official Development Plan and ancillary regulations to permit buildings above the current height limit of 450 feet in a limited area of the downtown;
- consultation with the Advisory Committee on this work.

It is recommended that this work be deferred to 1998 when existing staff resources become available to do this work. It is unlikely that there will be a rush to take advantage of new height opportunities. To date, owners of only one site (Bentall V) have expressed interest in a taller building. Staff are currently committed to other Council priorities for the remainder of this year.

Funding of \$6,000 will be required for public meeting expenses and software and hardware upgrades of two of the city's computers to facilitate use of the computer model of downtown buildings for height impact analysis. Staff are recommending that Council approve this funding for the 1998 budget subject to the availability of funds and priorities. The computer model of the downtown peninsula is being sold to the public and staff expect that it will generate revenues that defray the costs of computer software and hardware expenses in the long run.

Alternatively, so that this work can proceed immediately, Council could approve funding for a consultant at a cost of \$12,000 plus \$6,000 for public process and computer related costs.

CONCLUSION

The skyline is an expression of the community, its image and the way it works. Based on the Skyline Study, staff are recommending that a limited number of buildings be permitted that exceed the current height limit of 450 feet. Prior to considering buildings of this height, further work is needed to define boundaries where tall buildings will be considered, draft guidelines, text amendments, review criteria and a process to enable the consideration of buildings at this scale.

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