

# Ideas into Action

## Planning Successful, Sustainable Cities: Vancouver, Canada

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### Context

Vancouver is often cited as one of the world's most livable cities. As a result, we are asked about the processes we use to develop plans, our strategic directions, and how we implement plans. This paper, and the associated presentation, describes the "Vancouver Experience". Additional information is referenced on the City of Vancouver web site: [www.vancouver.ca](http://www.vancouver.ca)

As context, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) has a population of 2.2 million. The GVRD is governed as a partnership of 22 municipalities. Elected Mayors and Councillors, representing the municipalities, form the Regional Board.

The GVRD promotes broad regional planning directions. Municipalities are responsible for local land use planning and delivery of community services. Municipal land use plans are expected to advance broad regional directions in a way which meets local community needs. The GVRD is responsible for delivering regional services which benefit from economies of scale. Example services managed by the GVRD include regional water, waste, and transit.

The City of Vancouver has a resident population of 575,000 people. On a daily basis, the city serves over 1 million people as employees, shoppers, and tourists use the city's many jobs and services. Vancouver city is the region's "downtown". The Vancouver metropolitan core has 140,000 jobs and a resident population of 100,000 people.

The City of Vancouver is managed by a mayor and 10 councillors who are elected by city residents and property owners for a three year term. The Council is responsible for determining City policy and funding priorities. City staff implement Council's plans.

The legislation under which the City Council operates is the Vancouver Charter. Vancouver is one of the few cities in North America with its own Charter. The Charter gives the City authority to set standards, zone and regulate land uses, and collect taxes and fees to deliver City services. The advantage of the Vancouver Charter is that the City has the authority and flexibility to develop "made in Vancouver" legislation. Decisions of Vancouver City Council are final and cannot be appealed to senior governments.

The Vancouver Charter requires the City to balance its budget each year. This is difficult given the limited sources of revenue - property taxes, user fees, and development cost charges—available to the City. However, the Charter does give the

City authority to advance sustainability by charging user fees for potentially polluting elements such as waste removal. The Charter also permits the City to collect fees from new development to pay for additional services required as a result of growth. Funding limitations help to explain why City Council seeks advice from the public on land use and spending decisions.

## Planning Processes

Over the past 30 years the City of Vancouver has fundamentally restructured its planning processes. Prior to the 1970s, planning processes typically involved staff preparing draft plans which were adopted by City Council with minimal public input.

Today people who live and work in Vancouver demand a say in how the city develops and the services the City provides. All important Council decisions involve extensive public consultation. Council typically invites the public to advise on growth and service issues when funding limitations and redevelopment pressures result in difficult choices. For example, Council asks for advice about where growth should occur, what type of development, which services should the City provide, who benefits, and who pays?

Public processes start by clarifying the issues and roles for participants. The public advises City Council. Staff review the economic, social, and environmental consequences of choices and advise Council. City Council considers advice from staff and the public and makes decisions.

Planning processes typically involve the public in:

- Generating ideas for plans;
- Reviewing the ideas;
- Discussing issues and choices; and
- Advising on Plan adoption.

Some of the “tools” the City uses to engage the public include:

- Broad media coverage to advise the public about opportunities to participate in City initiatives;
- Distribution of factual information about existing policies, trends, issues, and choices;
- Translation of materials into several languages to engage new immigrants;
- A wide variety of events - workshops, surveys, displays - providing many opportunities to participate;
- School programs to engage tomorrow’s citizens;
- Surveys sent to homes and community centers; and
- Funding for plan implementation

As a result of public consultation:

- City Council hears from many perspectives helping to minimize unintended consequences of new policies.

- Citizens learn about the city and understand difficult funding and land use choices.

“Tell me, I forget.  
Show me, I remember.  
Involve me, I understand”

## Vancouver’s Regional and City Planning Policies

Vancouver’s land uses are directed through Regional, City, Area, and Site Plans.

**At the regional level** one of the big issues is sprawl. The GVRD is bounded by the ocean on the west, mountains to the north and east, and the American border on the south. As development sprawls up the Fraser Valley agricultural land is lost, transportation, sewer, and water services are more costly, and pollution increases. To overcome these problems the Livable Region Strategic Plan sets four key directions:

- Protect the Green (agricultural, watershed) Zone surrounding the built area;
- Develop a compact region encouraging new development to locate in existing communities;
- Build complete communities to minimize commuting between jobs and housing; and
- Increase transportation choices to reduce private automobile use.

The Livable Region Strategic Plan was first adopted in 1976. It has been revised several times over the years. Current work to update the Plan includes advancing sustainable initiatives and adding two new directions:

- Maintain a diverse economy to reduce the impact of economic cycles; and
- Increase housing choice and services to improve social equity.

As a result of these broad regional directions, the Greater Vancouver Regional District has evolved into a metropolitan area which has maintained local agricultural production, reduced commuting, and created regional town centers linked by rapid transit. Further information about the GVRD can be found at:

[www.gvrd.bc.ca/](http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/)

The City of Vancouver’s Regional Context Statement describes the relationship between the City and the Livable Region Plan:

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/Bylaws/odp/rcs.pdf](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/Bylaws/odp/rcs.pdf)

**At the City level** Vancouver has adopted broad strategic directions. Example directions include:

- Support a diverse economy;
- Facilitate accessibility through land use decisions (housing close to jobs);
- Support Social Inclusion;

- Require new growth to pay for services; and
- Create Sustainable Suburbs.

A full list of Vancouver CityPlan Strategic Directions can be found at:  
[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/cityplan/cityplan.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/cityplan/cityplan.htm)

Highlights of Vancouver’s land use, transportation, and financing growth policies follow.

**Vancouver economic policies** are designed to maintain a diverse economy. This ensures the vitality of the city is not unduly affected by fluctuations in the economy. Maintaining a diverse economy requires that the city attract “footloose” industry. Footloose industries are businesses which can locate anywhere in the world. Actions to create livable neighbourhoods with parks, clean air, school, and community services are designed to attract footloose industry to the area.

Within the city, jobs are strategically located to ensure high density office jobs are located near rapid transit stations and within walking distance of housing. Land for city serving is located close to the business core.

In addition to City economic policies, the City maintains an Economic Development Commission, comprised of business leaders, to “market” the City to prospective employers:  
[www.vancouvereconomic.com/](http://www.vancouvereconomic.com/)

**Business Improvement Programs (BIAs)** are non-profit associations of commercial property owners and business tenants who join together to promote and improve the economic vitality of their business district. The City assists by helping the merchants and landlords to form BIAs. Once a BIA is formed, it is managed by a volunteer board comprised of property owners and tenants. BIAs obtain funding through a special property tax collected by the City from all property/business owners in the area. These taxes pay for local business services to support local shopping and business centers.

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/cityplans/bia/biazone.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/cityplans/bia/biazone.htm)

**Vancouver housing policies** are designed to encourage a range of housing types and cost in each neighbourhood. This ensures that as people’s housing needs change they can find alternate housing in their familiar neighbourhood. A choice of housing costs ensures lower paid service workers, necessary to serve the downtown tourist and retail industry, can afford to live close to where they work.

Most housing is built by the private sector. The City’s role is to zone land and set safety standards. About 20 percent of the city’s housing stock is built and managed by non profit and cooperative groups using various government funded programs. Programs assist lower income families to find housing costing about 30 percent of their household income.

Further information on Vancouver housing programs can be found at:  
[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/index.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/index.htm)

**Vancouver transportation policies** rely on the location of land uses to increase accessibility and reduce the need for long distance commuting. Vancouver is one of the only large cities in North America with no freeways within the city. Rather, the policy of balancing jobs and housing in both the downtown and in suburban neighbourhoods minimizes travel.

Over the past decade Vancouver has redirected funds from supporting automobile travel to creating Greenways (walking and biking paths) and Bikeways to encourage environmentally friendly travel. Rapid transit and buses provide a network of service for longer distance travel.

To encourage transit use and to help cover the costs of transportation infrastructure, areas within 500 meters of transit stations are zoned for high density employment and housing development. These policies have, over the past decade, reduced automobile use in the inner city with fewer trips made by car and more trips by walking, biking, and transit.

The close links between land use policy and transportation services has resulted in restructuring the city bureaucracy to ensure major land use and transportation plans include both land use planners and transportation engineers working together to provide coordinated city actions.

Further information on Vancouver's transportation policies can be found at:  
[www.vancouver.ca/engsvcs/transport](http://www.vancouver.ca/engsvcs/transport)

**Vancouver's Financing Growth policies** ensure funds are available to pay the costs of community services, parks, and transit. New development pays for the capital costs of new facilities to ensure livable neighbourhoods. Increased property taxes, resulting from new denser development, pay for the operating costs of new facilities and support services such as police and fire.

Further information about Vancouver's Financing Growth policies can be found at:  
[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/cityplans/fg/index.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/cityplans/fg/index.htm)

## **Area Plans, Zoning, and Land Use Policies**

Vancouver's broad strategic directions are further detailed in area (community vision) plans, design guidelines, and site specific zoning schedules. Illustrations of these plans and policies can be found at:

Community Visions - Area Plans  
[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/cityplan/Visions/index.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/cityplan/Visions/index.htm)

Land Use Policies and Guidelines  
[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/pol&guide.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/pol&guide.htm)

District Zoning Schedules  
[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/BYLAWS/zoning/zon&dev.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/BYLAWS/zoning/zon&dev.htm)

## Implementing Vancouver's Plans: Vancouver's Central Area

How Vancouver's strategic directions, area plans, and development policies come together to create a livable city is best illustrated through a case study of Vancouver's Central Area.

Until the 1960s, Vancouver's downtown was the commercial core of the region, with many more jobs than housing opportunities. Most workers commuted from the suburbs to downtown commercial and industrial jobs. As commuting, and the resultant pollution and congestion, increased the City looked for ways to maintain a vibrant, livable city.

In the early 1970s Vancouver City Council decided to reduce commuting by building more housing close to jobs. This was done by redeveloping City-owned industrial land into a mixed income housing area. The resulting False Creek South "new town in town" demonstrated the market for inner city housing to the private sector. The results over the following 30 years are illustrated in Vancouver's changing downtown skyline:

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/fade/fadepanorama2.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/fade/fadepanorama2.htm)

From 1970 through the 1990s, Vancouver adopted a variety of plans, policies, and a development approval process to transform the Central Area into a vibrant mixed income and household community. Some example policies were:

### Developing housing for families with children:

Housing Families at High Density - First prepared 1978, updated 1992

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/H004.pdf](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/H004.pdf)

### False Creek policies to redevelop industrial "brown field" sites into new communities:

False Creek Design and Development Guidelines 1988

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/fc/index.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/fc/index.htm)

False Creek North Official Development Plan 1990

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/BYLAWS/odp/fcn.pdf](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/BYLAWS/odp/fcn.pdf)

Some example urban design guidelines include:

- Requiring public access to high amenity waterfronts;
- Integrating new development into the existing city;
- Requiring all sites and buildings to be accessible for wheelchair and people with other sight or mobility challenges; and
- Requiring retention of heritage assets.

The various policies and guidelines were brought together in 1991 into the City's Central Area Plan.

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/C011.pdf](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/guidelines/C011.pdf)

These policies resulted in a better balance between jobs and housing in the inner city. In turn this has reduced commuting. For those who do commute, concentrated employment nodes provide an efficient focus for rapid transit services.

The Central Area Plan, policy guidelines, and site specific zoning provide direction to private sector developers who build the new housing and offices. As noted under the section on financing growth, developers are required to provide a variety of services before they receive permission to build. On large sites, developers are required to provide a full range of on-site services:

- Infrastructure services (e.g. sewer, water);
- Community parks;
- Landscaping and walkways;
- Public art;
- Sites for schools and daycare;
- Community centers and services; and
- Mixed housing including 20% of units being affordable to low income households and 50% of affordable housing being designed for families.

On smaller sites, developers pay Development Cost Levies to the City. The City uses these funds to provide community services. As a result of these policies Vancouver's Central Area provides a thriving business core surrounded by livable neighbourhoods for a broad range of households by age and income mix.

### **Implementing Vancouver's Plans: Neighbourhoods Outside the Central Area**

Outside the Central Area a broad range of neighbourhood based policies provide guidance for land use development, transportation, and the provision of community services. Key policies for neighbourhood development include:

- Create or strengthen neighbourhood centers as places where people can find shops, jobs, and services close to home and where there are safe and inviting public places which strengthen neighbourhood identity and sense of community;
- Encourage jobs to cluster in neighbourhood centers where they will be close to residents and be well served by transit;
- Maintain and improve neighbourhood character, by retaining greenery and heritage, and by establishing a built character that identifies the neighbourhood;
- Increase housing variety in neighbourhoods that have little variety now, and focus the new housing mainly in neighbourhood centers, to meet the housing needs of residents as they age, and to work toward regional goals of reducing sprawl and auto use;
- Target community services to need by involving residents in planning and delivering services;
- Prevent crime and improve safety through community policing and enforcing safe building standards;
- Provide parks and increase the variety of public spaces using streets and contributions from new developments;
- Increase walking, biking, and transit in the neighbourhood and between neighbourhoods to reduce single-occupant car use;
- Help to improve air quality, improve and conserve water, and reduce waste;
- Find new ways to involve people in directions for their community; and
- Reallocate existing resources to achieve community plans.

Further information on community planning can be found at:  
[www.vancouver.ca/visions](http://www.vancouver.ca/visions)

Community Visions (Area Plans) provide the basis for directing City expenditures for amenities and services and for adopting new zones to encourage more housing choice in otherwise low density areas. Providing more density in suburban areas makes more efficient use of existing services. The three step process to develop:

- City-wide Directions to improve sustainability (CityPlan)
- Area Plans to determine where to add housing choice and priorities for local services (Community Visions); and
- Neighbourhood Centre Plans to improve local shopping centers and provide a mix of housing

has been widely supported by residents and local business. The Knight & Kingsway Neighbourhood Centre showed that with broad participation and appropriate new services communities will support higher densities.

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/neighcentres/](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/neighcentres/)

### **Addressing Social and Community Needs**

Not everyone who lives in Vancouver has the resources to find adequate housing, food, and services. Vancouver faces funding challenges to provide support and services to people with low incomes and health problems.

During the past decade the City has, in partnership with other governments and the non-profit and private sectors, developed programs to assist those most in need.

**In the Downtown East Side** programs provide affordable housing, drug treatment, and community capacity building to support the city's lowest income residents. These programs, collectively called the "Vancouver Agreement", provide a model for building partnerships to address social problems. Further information about the role cities can play in establishing partnerships to address social problems can be found at:

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/strategies.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/strategies.htm)

The City also plays a significant role in providing services to sectors of society least able to cope. The City's web site provides information about **social services and affordable housing for children and youth, elderly, and recent immigrants.**

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/index.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/index.htm)

[www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/index.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/index.htm)

**Neighborhood Integrated Service Teams (NIST)**, composed of City and other community agency employees work across organizational boundaries to help communities solve problems. From problem premises to a community cleanup, NISTs work in and with communities on a wide range of quality-of-life issues.

Teams take advantage of the extensive network of City facilities and services already existing in communities - libraries, recreation centers, community-based policing, fire halls, planning, inspections, and garbage collection. Team members include staff from City Departments and external community agencies such as the School Board and the Health Authority.

NIST teams facilitate integrated community-based service delivery by ensuring:

- Ready access to information about the City and its government; and
- Community involvement in creative problem-solving.

As a result of the Neighborhood Integrated Service Teams many problems are now being resolved in, and with, the community, not at City Hall.

[www.vancouver.ca/nist/nis\\_teams.htm](http://www.vancouver.ca/nist/nis_teams.htm)

## Concluding Comments

In summary, the key conditions and strategic directions which have contributed to making Vancouver one of the world's most livable cities include:

- Planning land use and transportation together to reduce commuting by locating housing near jobs and services;
- Limiting investment in new roads and redirecting transportation investments to rapid transit and improving walking and biking environments;
- Redeveloping "brownfield" industrial lands and increasing densities in existing neighbourhoods to minimize urban sprawl;
- Maintaining a stock of affordable housing by incorporating a range of housing types and prices as a requirement of new developments;
- Paying attention to the coordinated provision of physical infrastructure, social, and community services by requiring new services as a condition of development approvals;
- Involving the public in developing and implementing city and community plans; and
- Establishing partnerships with community groups, business, non-profit organizations, and other governments to develop and implement plans.

Implementing these policies over the past 30 years has resulted in restructuring how Vancouver manages services and growth. We have learned that building livable cities is part art and part science. There is no one answer. Cities can share "best practices" but must be creative in adapting practices to address local needs.

There are no quick fixes to building livable cities. Building livable cities is a lifetime commitment which requires strong visionary leadership from successive elected officials and commitment and involvement from those who live in the city.

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