

ALTERNATIVE ROLES FOR THE VANCOUVER CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

End-of-Term Reflections December 2008

The basic question this paper seeks to answer is, “Would Council see fit to create a Vancouver City Planning Commission if none existed?” The answer to us is very far from clear. (In the distant past, the Vancouver Town Planning Commission was instrumental in actually planning the City through the employment of legendary planning consultant Harland Bartholomew in both the 1920’s and 1940’s, which led to the major land use, zoning and traffic and transportation policies that are extant to this day.)

To help Council ask and answer this question for itself we postulate a shortlist of possible options to ponder, as follows.

1. Status quo – As an arm’s-length and somewhat independent advisory body but one that is marginalized from Council decision-making. Free to undertake any number of activities but not a particularly strong voice in city matters.

2. Part of the review/approvals process – As a demand-responsive role. A forum for discussion of ideas originating with City departments or private developers; or, possibly a quasi-approval body; a policy-reviewing and recommending body similar to the Bicycle Advisory Committee and the Heritage Advisory Committee. Advice and recommendations are attached as a routine part of staff reports to the DP Board, Council, etc. This role requires staff support similar to the above-noted bodies.

3. Think Tank/Ahead of the curve (25-50 years plus) – forward thinking yet connected; promoters of change based on its own research efforts, in partnership with others. A think tank approach not unlike San Francisco’s SPUR or the idea of the Urbanarium, which is somewhat moribund at this time. This model requires substantial resource commitments of time, staff and funding

4. Similar to the Community Arts Council. The CAC was instrumental in the creation of the Vancouver Playhouse, the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, the Vancouver Museum and Planetarium, the UBC School of Music, the first Vancouver Film Festival, the Heritage Advisory Committee and many other cultural institutions and events we take for granted.

4. A booster organization. Promoters of the “idea” of Vancouver as a diverse, inclusive, beautiful, innovative, egalitarian, cosmopolitan place. This role is currently filled by Tourism Vancouver and other business-oriented organizations.

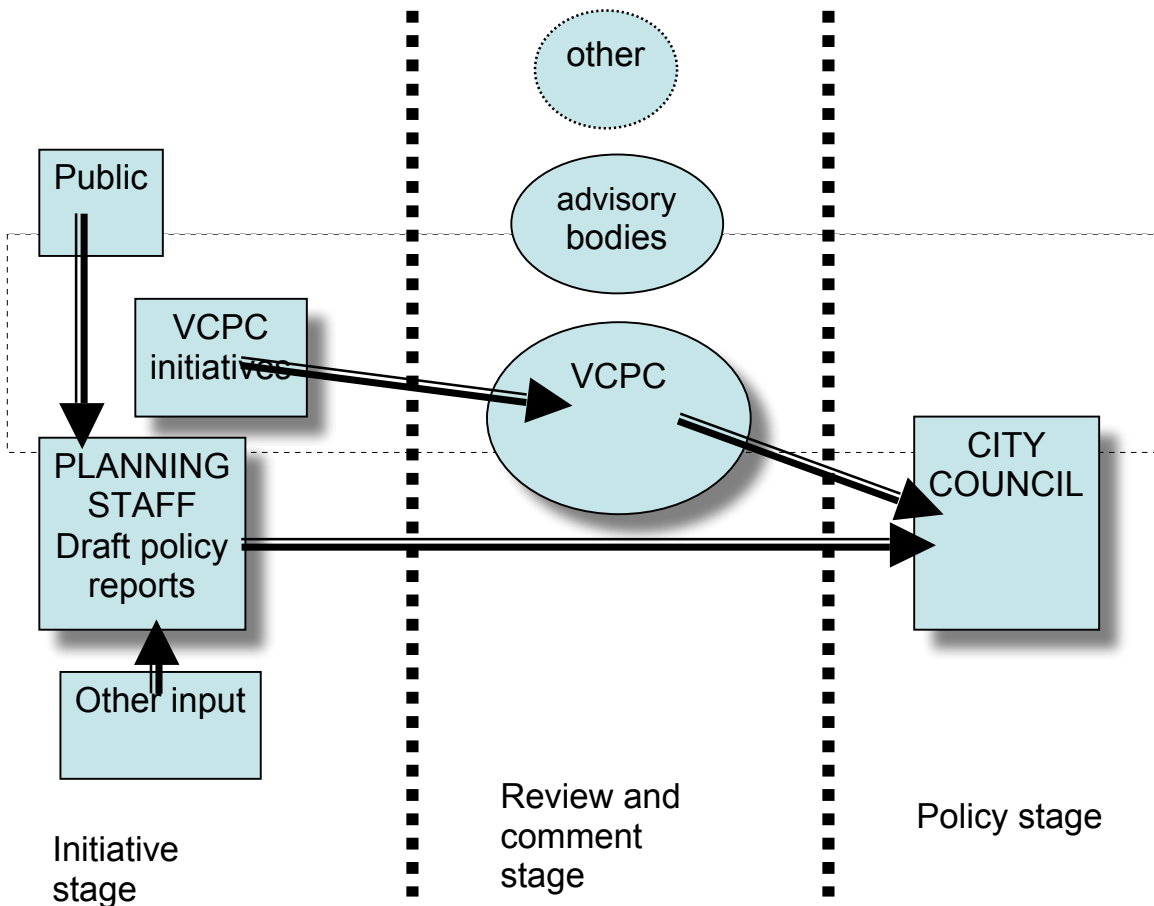
5. A sounding board for others. As a means of providing access “inside the walls” for neighbourhood groups and individuals.

6. A mix of all of the above

Of all of these possibilities, the current membership of the VCPC considers a blend of Options 1 and 2 to be most useful to Council, staff and the City of Vancouver as a whole, without requiring substantial funding or structural changes. Examples of the kinds of policy and major project initiatives that would qualify for early review and comment and ongoing monitoring by the VCPC under this format include:

- The EcoDensity Charter and its implementation program
- Neighbourhood Centres Delivery Program (e.g., Norquay Village)
- Density bonusing policies (e.g., for affordable housing)
- The Regional Context Statement
- Major zoning and area planning programs (e.g., Northeast False Creek, Community Visions)
- The Green Agenda

The Existing Model – in practice



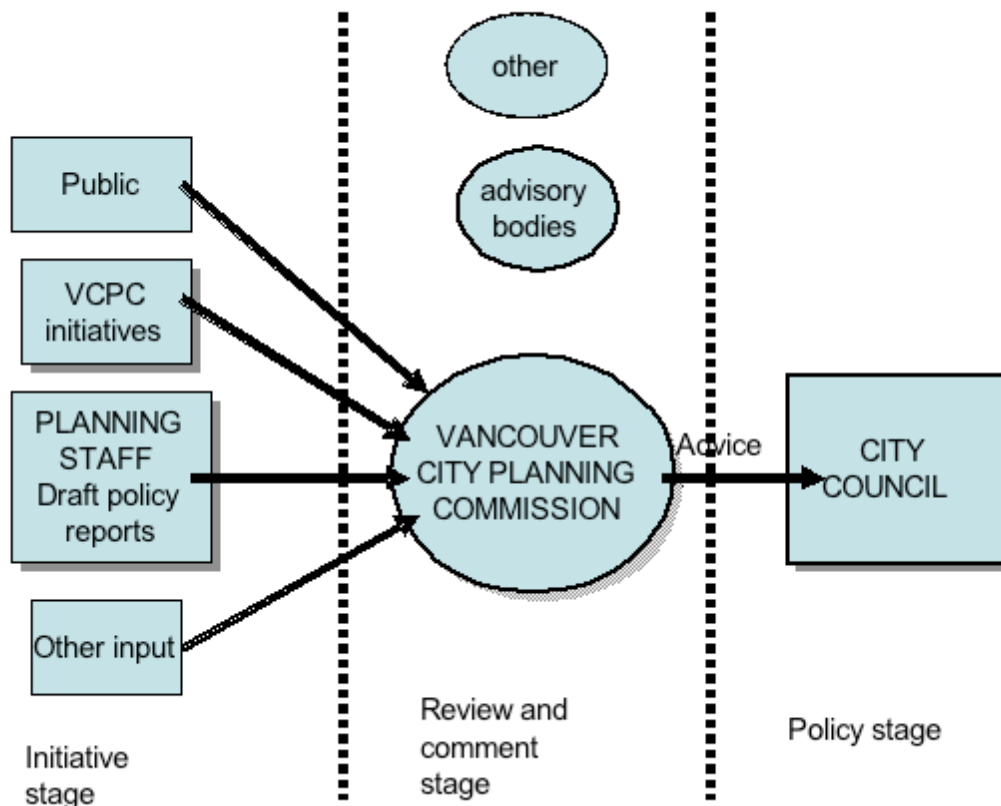
In practice, the VCPC has no formal role in providing such feedback or advice, unlike, say, the Bicycle Advisory Committee, the Heritage Advisory Committee or the Seniors

Advisory Committee. The Commission can help assist staff and Council in the public understanding of policy initiatives by sponsoring wider yet formal public involvement and knowledge transfer. The reality is that the VCPC actually has very little actual power in the overall planning processes of the City, as shown above, except perhaps for its own self-selected initiatives. It is, in essence, left out of the loop.

This deficiency can be remedied in a simple and direct way – by Council requiring that planning policy reports be vetted through the VCPC for a formal recommendation prior to proceeding to Council for adoption. In day-to-day practice, this change would require at least two things to happen: first that the Director of Planning act consistently upon the spirit as well as the letter of such review and, second, that the Manager’s Office also do so. This has been somewhat whimsical in practice over the years, when it serves the purposes of either the Director or the City Manager’s offices.

The following diagram shows a preferred organizational model for the VCPC

The Proposed Model



By its very nature, history and also Council mandate, the VCPC exists in order to provide informed commentary and advice to Council on major planning policy and innovative projects arising from a number of sources. The primary sources of relevant

policy initiatives are the Planning Department and the Commission's own undertakings. On occasion ideas also come forward from outside groups and the general public, as well as academic institutions. Preferably, the Commission can also provide early feedback to the process as well, while ideas are still in the draft stage.

Conclusion

The VCPC feels it is now the time to reinvigorate the role of the Commission and reinforce its fundamentally important role in the policy-making process. It can offer qualitative, diverse and timely advice to staff and Council, provide a forum for the wider public and also initiate thoughtful ideas across a wider spectrum of city-building. All of this can be achieved with a modest increase of staff resources, as is the case with other City advisory bodies.