



The Myth of Dense Vancouver

Stats show city isn't countering flight to suburbs.

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Published: June 21, 2006

TheTyee.ca

The city of Vancouver is just one of 21 municipalities that make up Greater Vancouver, and accounts for less than 600,000 people out of a total metropolitan population of over 2.2 million. Our urban region is facing many of the same problems of unsustainable sprawl that other North American cities are grappling with. Our suburbs are not better than their suburbs. We just can't see ours much from Vancouver. And we try not to talk about them in polite circles.

But Vancouver can't afford to ignore the suburbs: they are our problem too. Re-engineering the suburbs is the next real challenge we face.

There is a general assumption that Vancouver is leading the way regionally and that we have substantially slowed the flight to the suburbs that so many other city centres are struggling with.

But have we really?

Yes, we have densified the downtown core, and that is a real achievement. But when you zoom out and look at the bigger picture, this rosy picture turns a quite different shade.

Not shouldering our load

Consider some recent statistics:

According to B.C. Stats, we have added about 25,000 residents to downtown Vancouver in the past decade. In the same period the city of Vancouver overall added about 47,000 people. This means that across the entire rest of the city, excluding the downtown peninsula, we added a grand total of maybe 22,000 people over ten years, or 2,200 per year. Not a very impressive record. During the same 10-year time frame, the Greater Vancouver Regional

District added about 250,000 people to its population, growing to about 2.25 million. So, what this means is this:

The GVRD grew by about 13 per cent over the past decade, while the city of Vancouver grew by about 8 per cent, which means that Vancouver is actually losing its share of growth within the region. Or put another way, the surrounding suburban municipalities are growing faster than Vancouver is.

Furthermore, more than half of the City's growth was in the downtown peninsula, which means that the growth rate for the rest of the City's land base was at an anaemic five per cent, compared to almost three times that level of growth for the rest of the region. The fact is that the substantial majority of people in greater Vancouver don't live within the city of Vancouver's municipal boundaries, and the gap is widening.

Vancouver's inner 'burbs

One of the main reasons for this is that much of Vancouver's land base is zoned for single family housing, and there is strong neighbourhood resistance to densification. So we have concentrated our recent growth efforts where there were very few pre-existing neighbours to complain: the downtown peninsula's former industrial lands and rail yards. Here we have been spectacularly successful. But what this really means is that Vancouver, rather than being a beacon of progressive growth for the rest of the region, is actually a part of the problem and is in effect exporting a portion of its rightful share of growth to the outlying suburbs, where the impacts are much more severe.

So we need to acknowledge this troubling trend, and Vancouver cannot be too judgemental about the low-density forms of development that predominate out there in the suburbs when we have created a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around most of Vancouver.

We still need to come to grips with intensifying the city's low density, single-family housing neighbourhoods. City hall has certainly tried, but it is slow work. We have begun to see isolated successes, such as Collingwood Village, the Arbutus Lands, and more recently the area around Kingsway and Knight Street. These are promising signs. But we still need to address residents' legitimate fears, while painting a compelling picture of why densification is in all of our long-term interests. But this will take political leadership, which, until very recently, I did not see present in our region. Then last week, the mayor of Vancouver announced his EcoDensity initiative. Here, for the first time in Vancouver's history, was an elected leader publicly championing the cause of densification, and making explicit the link between densification and more sustainable, less wasteful urban settlement.

It was a watershed moment, since our leaders have yet to make the case that residential intensification is not only the right thing to do for our future and our children's futures, but that it can be done in ways that preserve many of the qualities that make our neighbourhoods so precious to people. And that

densification is part of the answer to ever-increasing house prices in Vancouver.

Beyond the slim hi-rise

There are many ways we can begin to do this, without radically transforming the characteristics of Vancouver's residential neighbourhoods. For example, we should explore alternative forms of housing than just the traditional detached single-family house or the hi-rise condominium tower. We need to explore those other forms of housing that Europe has mastered over the centuries, such as the central courtyard block housing of Barcelona, Paris or Berlin, the mansion block and adaptable row housing of London, the semi-detached narrow lot duplex housing and brownstone housing forms of North America's east coast cities, the side courtyard housing of southern California, the galleria housing forms of South America. And smaller secondary houses inserted into the rear of larger single family lots.

We also have an opportunity to optimize the physical infrastructure we already have, such as using Vancouver's extensive lane system much more intensively for some of these alternative housing forms. Why can't we have housing that faces onto the lane, above (or instead of) the parking garage? And we need to consider radical changes to Vancouver's parking bylaws to reduce the required amount of parking, which currently helps perpetuate many of the problems we are trying to address.

Re-zoning has been particularly successful in densifying Vancouver's major arterial streets, with new housing above shops that are supported by public transit. This is an important part of the strategy for a more sustainable city, and adding housing density along these arterials, which closely follow the original streetcar lines of early Vancouver, makes a lot of sense. Which makes it all the more ironic that recent restrictive amendments to the C-2 Zoning Bylaw made it just that much harder for developers to do these kinds of projects.

This doesn't make sense, given that the development pressures on our limited land base will only get stronger. We will continue to see a steep rise in the cost of land, and housing prices in Vancouver will keep going up, unless we substantially increase the housing supply to match the ongoing demand.

Get coordinated!

I predict that, unless we change our ways as a metropolitan region, we will continue to see more wasteful suburban sprawl for the foreseeable future, and I do not yet see the coordinated regional leadership here to do this. But this is clearly the challenge of our future as a sustainable region. And if we are to succeed, the City of Vancouver will need to assert its position as a leader in this regard.

As a first step, then, Vancouver needs to stop believing that we have already devised the sustainable region solution, and recognize that so far this city is still a part of the wider problem.

This is drawn from an address given by Lance Berelowitz to the World Planners Congress held in Vancouver preceding this week's United Nations World Urban Forum conference. Berelowitz is author of [Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination](#), winner of the [Vancouver Book Award](#). He is an urban planner who chaired Vancouver's planning commission and wrote the Vancouver Olympic bid book.

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