

COMMENTARY – The GEORGIA STRAIGHT

Publish Date: 24-Nov-2005

Our next great city arrives

By Patrick M. Condon

Vancouverites are justifiably proud of their great city, as are the citizens of Burnaby, North Vancouver, and West Vancouver, all cities built in the same era. Although the current citizens and officials of these communities deserve kudos, more credit should go to those who came before them. The pattern of Vancouver and its sister cities was fixed by 1940. What has happened since then has been the gradual filling in and densification of its urban blocks, a significant and vital enterprise, to be sure.

But there is a second great city in the region, one that is only partly complete. This second city lies south of the Fraser River, with the City of Surrey at its heart. This second city has been largely built since 1950, and over the next 50 years, much of the region's population and job growth will concentrate here.

Today, this next great city is at a crossroads. Down one road it can continue its dramatic progress toward sustainability. Take the other road and it will become just another suburb, no different than hundreds of other traffic-choked suburbs throughout North America.

In many respects this South of Fraser city has done a better job laying a foundation for sustainability than did Vancouver. In Vancouver, scores of once-rich salmon streams were bulldozed.

Not so South of Fraser, where stream channels are protected and extend deep into neighbourhoods. In Vancouver, local farms were all destroyed to make way for houses, factories, and shops. Not so South of Fraser, where about half the land area is preserved for farming by its inclusion in the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Northwest Environmental Watch, a Seattle-based environmental think tank, uses our region as the poster child for reversing the negative effects of sprawl. In 2001, nearly two-thirds of Greater Vancouver residents lived in compact neighborhoods (more than 12 people per acre), almost twice as large a share as other U.S. Northwest cities like Seattle or Portland.

Often, the credit for our success is directed at our older cities, with their infilled neighbourhoods and dense downtown cores. Yet NEW's sprawl maps show even more significant change occurring in the younger cities South of Fraser. Surrey and its neighbours have dramatically increased their land-use efficiency, with more than half their citizens living now in communities dense enough to support transit, a dramatic increase in just 15 years. Bucking the North American trend, South of

An emerging metropolis south of the Fraser has preserved salmon streams and farmland, but there are big threats on the horizon.



Maurice Jassak photo.

Fraser communities have become more transit-friendly, not less. (See www.northwestwatch.org/scorecard/map1_Vancouver.asp.)

Unfortunately the future of this second city is uncertain. The regional consensus that produced these gains—a consensus embodied in the GVRD’s Livable Region Strategic Plan—is being eroded.

Local governments continue to approve large commercial and office developments that run counter to earlier advances and the regional plan that inspired them. Senior officials at all levels are pushing major new infrastructure projects—the proposed expansion of Highway 1 among them—on the premise that the Livable Region covenant is now obsolete. They insist that per-capita car use will inevitably increase and that car trips will get ever longer. They say realism in the face of these trends demands an expensive new commitment to the car, one that scraps the LRSP—a plan that envisions “complete communities” linked by transit.

So this second great city is in danger. The tragedy is that this South of Fraser city is close to completion, the path to sustainability within view. This next great city has nearly enough jobs now to support its workers close to home. It will have nearly enough college and university slots to educate its population. It has more park space per capita than Vancouver, and is bounded by edges of unmatched beauty in the form of the Fraser River, Boundary Bay, and many kilometres of pastoral vistas across farms protected from development in the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Building a great second city should matter to everyone in the region. A more sustainable region requires a confident and diverse city south of the Fraser. Our region will never be sustainable if our citizens have to travel great distances to find work, affordable housing, or schools for their kids. Our region will never be sustainable if growth is measured by roads built and parking lots filled rather than salmon streams protected and hikes taken.

Indeed, when many of our officials assume the inevitability of ever-increasing car dependence, the result can only mean more freeways, more eight-lane suburban arterials, higher taxes, more big-box commercial outlets, and vast parking lots. Eventually, that brutal landscape will spill over into ALR lands, just as oil prices make driving unaffordable and local agricultural land is even more precious.

At the Design Centre for Sustainability at UBC, we have a different and more hopeful view. For more than 10 years, our research centre has partnered with our region’s newer communities, assessing their growth and pursuing practical tools for managing that growth sustainably. More important, we greatly appreciate the dynamism of the South of Fraser urban economy and its community-building mission. We are confident that completing this next great city will mark the success of us all. We at UBC remain committed to this project. We only regret our location so very far to the west. If you need us, we will come to you. You are where the action is.

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