

Friday » May
12 » 2006

A blueprint for urban change

CONFERENCES | A warm-up event before the UN's World Urban Forum will study ways of keeping Greater Vancouver livable as it grows

Larry Pynn

Vancouver Sun

Saturday, May 06, 2006

The population of Greater Vancouver will double to four million in half a century. How can the region accommodate that sort of growth? How should housing, jobs, and transportation be planned? Will the region remain livable when it's all over?

Sharpen your pencils. You've got six hours to find the answers.

That's the novel challenge being posed to up to 300 architects, landscape architects, and planners gathering in Vancouver for Super Saturday on June 17, a brainstorming event preceding the United Nations' World Urban Forum in Vancouver.

"It'll be exciting to work together," says Chris DeMarco, development manager for the Greater Vancouver regional district. "It's a planners-without-borders brainstorming session, thinking about the region as a whole, forgetting about municipal boundaries."

Super Saturday will provide participants with a nine-by-13-metre aerial photo of the GVRD. Groups of three will each get a five-kilometre-square area of the region for which to offer planning solutions for projected population growth.

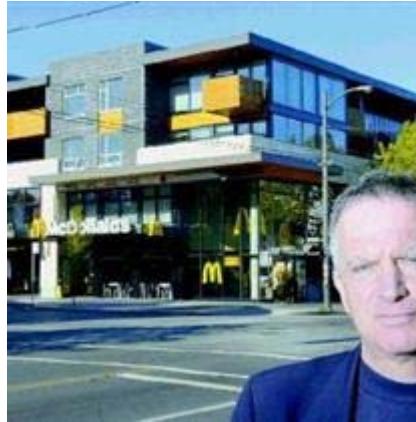
One of the key organizers of the event is Patrick Condon, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of B.C. who holds the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Livable Environments.

What can be accomplished in six hours? Plenty, he insists, given the expertise of the participants.

"We hope it will provide an interesting picture of the region. Put the squares together and stand back and see what the collective opinion of this group would look like."

Green energy-efficient buildings will form part of the equation, as will the repercussions of rising gas prices.

Condon figures it took perhaps 20 years to create a landscape almost entirely dependent on the automobile, and that it shouldn't take any longer to reverse the trend into something more sustainable.



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun

Patrick Condon of UBC cites buildings like the McDonald's redevelopment at Broadway and Blenheim, where the traditional restaurant has been replaced by a mixed-use building with the restaurant on the main floor and residential above, as an example of sustainable development.

The increase in population in Vancouver's downtown over the past decade or so to 80,000 from 40,000 shows that growth can be good, he said, citing a greater diversity of housing and people living closer to work.

"I'm an optimist. Why assume the region has to get worse? We think it could possibly get better. It defies conventional wisdom."

The concept of the Super Saturday exercise is that properly planned neighbourhoods make for a sustainable region.

"Inside each square, how would you add that population to make it a better place, a more diverse place, a place where jobs are closer to home, and you can use transit as an option to driving your car?" Condon asks.

The six-hour exercise has adopted the boundaries of the GVRD in hopes of providing not just entertainment, but real solutions for a region beset with challenges.

Participants will be guided by six sustainability planning principles: jobs situated within communities to reduce driving time; high-density commercial and residential corridors along transit routes; residents within walking distance of services and amenities; green space for recreation and nature; a range of housing types to accommodate a mix of incomes in the same area; integrating natural systems to reduce infrastructure costs and environmental impact.

Condon said an example of the last principle would be certain streets in the Silver Valley area of Maple Ridge being built without curbs, allowing rain water to infiltrate naturally into the ground. The idea is to reduce costs (compared with conventional curb and gutter systems) and reduce environmental impact.

Super Saturday is part of a larger Sustainability by Design project aimed at building a consensus-based vision for a sustainable Greater Vancouver, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood, community by community.

Of special interest to the project are commercial corridors, such as Hastings Street or Lougheed Highway; edges, such as the agricultural land reserve, green space, and developed urban areas; and nodes, key regional interchanges where transportation and natural systems merge, such as the Port Mann Bridge interchange next to the Coquitlam, Pitt, and Fraser rivers.

Deana Grinnell, assistant regional manager with the Fraser Basin Council, said ongoing project case studies involve the Kingsway corridor in Burnaby, the urban node in Langley township on 200th Street between 64th Ave. and the Highway 1 freeway, and the urban-agricultural edge interface in East Ladner in Delta.

As for Super Saturday, she is hopeful about tangible results.

"We're working with design professionals rather than lay people." Grinnell emphasizes.

"They'll be moving fairly quickly. It may need a little brushing up . . . but I'm quite confident they can do it. It will be a fantastic opportunity for this region to learn from others and to share our experience. What have we learned and what more can we achieve?"

Condon says a sustainable region is possible without creating one supercity in Greater Vancouver, although he believes the Portland model of electing regional representatives deserves study. Municipal councils currently appoint mayors and councillors to the GVRD board according to a system based on population.

Building support from citizens and stakeholders is a key component of the project as well.

The concept is to provide the results to the public to keep them engaged, in hopes of winning their support for new sustainable ideas. "Citizens given a positive future, one they can vote for and get behind for themselves and their kids, are more likely to support the needed changes," Condon said.

The project also seeks to incorporate economic development, environmental management, real estate, transportation, and public health into the regional planning exercise.

DeMarco said architects and landscape architects tend to be more site-focused, whereas planners deal in the bigger picture.

Super Saturday provides an opportunity for all three professions to work together on a common problem. Participation from professionals from other parts of the country and the world should add interesting new ideas to the mix.

Despite common guiding principles, DeMarco does not expect the planning proposals for each five-kilometre-square area to mesh perfectly. The final results of Super Saturday might not be enduring, but should provide ideas that can be further explored.

"I don't see something fabulous and permanent after six hours. It won't be cohesive, but at least we'll discuss where more cohesion is needed, which issues are the bigger ones."

For more information on Sustainability by Design, www.landfood.ubc.ca/sxd/overview.htm.

lpynn@png.canwest.com

May 13: How to get consumers to buy into sustainability; opportunities for revitalizing central cities with green projects as old urban spaces deteriorate.

© The Vancouver Sun 2006

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.