

Asking the tough regional growth questions

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The population of Greater Vancouver will double to almost four million people by 2050. Creative thinking is needed to manage growth and keep our special corner of the globe livable.

Often I have talked in this column about how we can make our homes, neighbourhoods and cities more livable. I have tried to describe in understandable terms innovative new housing technologies and urban design principles that can help us manage the growth we will inevitably experience in decades to come.

Once in a while, I have taken shots at those who look at the challenges of urban growth only in terms of their narrow self-interests, sitting on the sidelines until they perceive a threat in their own backyard and then reacting vociferously.

The fact is the status quo of continuing urban sprawl with its growing traffic congestion won't do if we want to protect our envied quality of life. The emotionally-driven confrontational decision-making that flows from increasing civic disengagement and self-interested reactionary neighbourhood movements hold little promise of better urbanism.

Thoughtful choices and calculated trade-offs will need to be made to preserve our local quality of life.

A new public exercise that will examine in almost a microscopic way the building blocks of our neighbourhood and cities holds the prospect of capturing the imagination of those who can make the difference -- you -- ordinary citizens who care about your neighbourhoods and the role they play in the entire region.

The Sustainability by Design project (SxD), led by planners and landscape architects at UBC's Design Centre for Sustainability, promises to get beyond the rhetoric and fear about growth and get ordinary people thinking about choices and options. SxD will kick-off next Thursday with the first in a series of free public forums that will help to fill a void in the regional debate about the future of our livable communities. There has been much talk in the Greater Vancouver region about sustainability and little action.

Part of the problem is defining the goals and translating them into concepts ordinary people can understand. In order to assess sustainability options, people need to be able to visualize them in terms of their impact on housing choice, neighbourhood land use and transportation.

SxD is all about focusing in a visual way on neighbourhoods--new ones that need to be carefully designed and old ones that need to be retrofitted. SxD will be about asking questions. How will the region accommodate growth? How will housing, land use, jobs and transport be designed, delivered and distributed?

How do we ensure continued livability in the region?

The SxD process of community education and discussion, academic research and on-the-ground design is hoping to generate widespread public support for a neighbourhood by neighbourhood, district by district real-life picture of what a sustainable Greater Vancouver region might look like.

Taken together, these visual design scenarios can then be applied across the region to achieve smarter growth during the next 30 to 50 years.

Nothing like this has ever been tried before. It involves taking big concepts and testing them with the public and with experts on a local scale, then translating them to apply to an entire region. It is a daunting task, but one that will work if the public gets involved.

It may end up being the crucial ingredient for a more sustainable region.

The first SxD evening forum will be held on Thursday February 23 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Simon Fraser University's Surrey Campus at 13450 102nd Avenue in Surrey. The two other forums will be held on March 2 and March 6th same time and place.

For further information visit www.landfood.ubc.ca/sxd

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