

Change is frightening to everyone

City planner says new Downtown Eastside community plan won't drive out the poor

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 28, 2013

My neighbourhood is changing. What used to be heavily treed streets of modest older homes - many of them small, one-storey cottages - are increasingly broken up by big two-and three-storey Craftsman-style houses.

The owners are upscale, often young couples with children, whose appetite for two-car garages, five bedrooms and four bathrooms dictates that they maximize the allowable footprint of their homes on their lots. Gardens disappear. Trees come down. The neighbourhood's forest canopy of big mature cedars and pines is eaten away. The new homes are handsome, tasteful and utterly out of character with what came before. But then, at one time, so was my house.

I mourn the change I see, but I have been doing this job long enough to know that there is only so much one can do to stop it, and that we are all part of the process of that change.

Cities grow, fill in and densify, and the difference between good city government and irresponsible city government is how that change is accommodated. Some of our municipal governments in Metro Vancouver do a good job of it: Some, the bad ones, are overly deferential to developers, and have, in essence, abdicated the responsibility of shaping their communities to private interests. You can tell those communities on sight. They're a dog's breakfast.

At the moment, the most publicized example of neighbourhood change is, of course, the Downtown Eastside. (But then, when is the Downtown Eastside not the most publicized of anything?)

We all know the chorus by now: Gentrifying yuppies are forcing out poorer residents. Developers are running roughshod over the wishes of the neighbourhood.

Enter city hall. The issue of gentrification, and the theatrics of the poverty activists who are fighting what they see as gentrification, comes at a delicate time for the city. At present, it is in the midst of developing a new official community plan for the neighbourhood. At the same time, it is developing OCPs for Marpole, the West End, and Grandview-Woodland - more community plans than it has ever done before. So the planning department has its hands full.

"The draft policy is coming forward in June," said Brian Jackson, general manager of planning and development for the city, "and we'll be taking it to council in December, with lots of public consultation in between."

If there was any doubt - and there shouldn't be, given the massive social welfare structure in the Downtown Eastside - it is not the goal of Jackson's staff to formulate policies that will utterly change the character of the neighbourhood.

"They don't want gentrification," Jackson said of the poverty activists who have made representations to him, "they want revitalization, and that certainly is the goal of the OCP. Gentrification is when it all switches over to high-or middle-income residences, and that definitely is not the goal of the city.

"The housing goal of the city in the Downtown Eastside is to make sure that it's home for a significant number of low-income people. But we can't do it on our own. We need input from other levels of government, but we also need private development."

The City of Vancouver has one of the most enlightened social housing policies in the country, but it's been hamstrung by the fact that the federal government, which once funded social housing, has largely downloaded the costs of that housing onto the city and the provincial government. (Jackson asked that special mention be made of the province's efforts in that regard, which he lauded.) Vancouver has also had to shoulder the greater burden of social housing in Metro Vancouver by itself, since the response of outlying suburbs to the need for social housing has been modest to pitiful.

So partnering with private developers is, out of need, the future. That means negotiation. If a developer wants to build in the Downtown Eastside, the city has at its disposal incentives to assure that those new developments include social housing or amenities for poorer residents. It can grant a developer greater densities or a tax break, for instance, but only if the developer incorporates an agreed-upon percentage of social housing in the design.

Establishing that percentage will be one of the planners' tasks for the new OCP. It will have to be such that it ensures a replenishing stock of low-income housing, but not so punishing to the private sector that it discourages any new development.

"The question is," Jackson said, "where is the line? We don't want to make the delivery of social housing too onerous for private developers."

At any rate, he said, no one will be forced out of the neighbourhood. "We do not see any dislocation of the existing population."

"Change is frightening for everyone," he said, "regardless of income."

"But I see the change here is going to be for the better. We're going to be replacing the single-room-occupancy hotels, we're going to be building more supportive housing ... and we're not proposing any big projects like the St. James apartment blocks in Toronto to accommodate lower-income residents. There's going to be a whole plethora of little projects to make that change, projects that will be in character with the neighbourhood."

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