

# Community planning must include input from younger people

## Other generations should have their say

BY BOB RANSFORD, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 21, 2014



In this file photo, a team of planners and architects came up with a development scheme for the Southlands that integrates urban agriculture as an essential component.

**Photograph by:** Delta Optimist, file photo

I've been attending public meetings about community planning and development for more than 35 years. I've sat through more than 300 public hearings about rezonings, community plans and development projects in municipalities throughout the Lower Mainland.

I have attended probably double that number of open houses, planning committee meetings, design panels, neighbourhood planning workshops and charettes.

No, I'm not looking for expressions of sympathy. I've been there willingly. Often, I've participated as a concerned citizen and almost as often, I've been there because it's part of what I've been making my living at for the past 25 years.

I've learned a lot observing or participating in the process that shapes our neighbourhoods, towns and cities. I've witnessed what works and what doesn't work in planning and designing the housing that we live in. I've learned that planning and building a town or city is not easy. **It's all about balancing a wide range of interests and making a series of trade-offs.** I've learned that most people don't initially engage in the tough issues about community building to seek compromise. Compromise comes after a lot of discussion.

I've learned that you shouldn't assume that everyone comes into the room with the same level of understanding and knowledge. **I've learned that it takes a long time to move people from focusing on their self interests to focusing on the community's interest.** I've also learned that when you spend the time trying to do this and you are successful, often people will realize that their own interests can best be accommodated on that common ground that they've discovered.

**But the most profound thing I've learned is that too often, the wrong people are in the room.** That has led to long and non-productive processes. **It's led to unreasonable expectations and plans that fall far short of what's really possible.**

I can't count the number of times I've scanned a room full of people who are voicing their concerns about a long-term community plan and have seen nothing but people like me — those of us with a lot of grey hair.

I've sat through too many public hearings on new housing developments where speaker after speaker objecting to a developer's plan were people much older than the demographic cohort that the project was designed to accommodate. Far too often, those participating in planning and influencing the important decisions are not the people who will be most impacted by those decisions over the long term.

There are 2.3 million people living in Metro Vancouver today. By 2041, less than 30 years from now, there will be another million people living in the region. Most of the housing we are building today will be no more than halfway through its lifespan 30 years from now. A lot of that housing will be occupied then by people who are less than 30 years old today.

That demographic cohort — young people 10 to 29 years of age — represents about 26 per cent of our current regional population. You don't see many of them at public hearings and planning workshops. They aren't tweeting about housing developments and most of them aren't reading community newspapers every week to find out what's happening in their backyard. Most simply aren't engaged in civic issues.

Another demographic cohort that isn't deeply engaged today are the people who will be occupying the homes we are building today as retirees and in the golden years of their lives. Those who are 30 to 54 years of age today — representing 38 per cent of today's population — are simply too busy to be involved in civic issues today.

They are raising families and working hard, trying to earn a living. In our connected and fast-paced modern world, their lives are busier than they ever expected when they were young. They can't find the time and energy to attend public meetings.

So who is in the room? Who is packing the public hearings and lining up at the speaker's podium to try to convince municipal councils to slow the pace of change? The majority are usually people 55 years of age or older. Today, this group represents just over a quarter of the current population. In 27 years, when the housing we are approving today is just short of halfway through its life span, the youngest of this demographic cohort will be 82 years old.

I am not saying the voices of these people shouldn't be heard. But their voices need to be among a whole chorus of collaboration that includes the people whom the change we are planning today is meant to accommodate.

We need to find new ways of reaching out to the people who are going to be living 25 and 30 years from now in the housing, neighbourhoods and towns we are planning and building today.

We need to engage them in the discussion, trade-offs and decisions that are the key ingredients of good long-term plans. They are the ones who are going to live with what we plan today.

*Bob Ransford is a public affairs consultant with Counterpoint Communications Inc. He is a former real estate developer who specializes in urban land-use issues. Email: [ransford@counterpoint.ca](mailto:ransford@counterpoint.ca) or Twitter: @BobRansford*

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun