

Opinion: Let's plan for people, not profit

Misleading: Figures city uses to justify increased residential zoning don't stand up to scrutiny

BY ELIZABETH MURPHY, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 1, 2015



Vancouver can do better than build a concrete jungle of towers and monster homes.

The City of Vancouver's justification for a plan to increase market residential zoning capacity is that a million more people are coming by 2041, so we have to prepare. But these numbers are misleading and do not tell the whole story. This estimated million more people is for the whole region, with only a small fraction headed to the City of Vancouver.

Also, Vancouver has a huge amount of zoned capacity that has yet to be built out. Some of this is in long-standing plans established decades ago, and some of it has been planned and zoned more recently. The city has refused to provide in any transparent fashion the actual total numbers of zoned capacity city-wide.

The push for major tower rezoning is motivated by those who will benefit financially, but there is no urgent lack of supply for new market housing capacity in the city. The public has ample time, years in fact, to choose among many different forms about how the city is to grow.

To understand what is really happening, one needs to look at the actual numbers rather than just the public relations sound-bite.

Based on the Regional Growth Strategy (RGS) approved in July 2011, Metro Vancouver has established growth projections. The projection of a million more people is for the whole region from 2006 to 2041. Only a portion of this growth is expected to happen in the City of Vancouver. Part of this growth has already happened since 2006.

The RGS used the 2006 census numbers for population and number of housing units, and estimated how much both would increase over 35 years to 2041. For the City of Vancouver this was an increase of about 140,000 people and 75,000 units.

In July 2013, the City of Vancouver raised the estimate to 164,000 people and 97,500 units. As a footnote under a high growth scenario, this was further increased to over 180,000 people and 108,500 units.

But there has never been any publicly transparent analysis to show how this increased estimate was

determined.

Looking at the census, the actual population growth from 2006 to the most recent census in 2011 was about 25,000 people and 13,000 units.

Those figures should be subtracted from the 35-year projection to estimate future needs. The adjusted estimate of increased population between the most recent 2011 census and 2041 should be only 115,000 more people and 62,000 more units. The city seems to have added 24,000 instead of subtracting 25,000 people.

Further, the true number of overall housing units that should be rezoned for as of 2015 would be reduced by the huge amount of zoning capacity that has been approved to date but not yet built.

This includes major projects that were rezoned (e.g. Cambie Corridor, Marine and Cambie, Oakridge, Telus Gardens, Arbutus Mall, False Creek North and South, Shannon Mews, the Rize, etc.) on top of the development capacity under current outright zoning and recently approved community plans in Marpole, the West End, Chinatown, Hastings Corridor and the Downtown Eastside.

The city is actually overbuilding by approximately 2,000 units in each five-year census period. This has increased the unoccupied units to a total of 22,000 as of 2011.

The question is not how we force people to rent out units when they don't want to, but why are we overbuilding expensive units which are serving to promote Vancouver as an investment commodity rather than a planned community?

We are creating a heat island with energy inefficient concrete and glass towers, while removing the urban forest canopy. Vancouver's greenwashing dogma is aggravating climate change. We need accurate growth projections so that we can plan for growth in a way that will minimize negative impacts.

What most people don't understand is that all this growth doesn't make the city any money. On the contrary, the city has to subsidize all this growth.

The development fees collected by the city only cover a small fraction, about 10 per cent, of the actual costs of servicing the infrastructure for development and the population growth it brings. The massive development that has been completed over that last few decades has served to increase property taxes and the city's debt; it is a popular (deception) misconception that it helps to decrease them.

Of course some growth is inevitable over time. We have accommodated for this in spades. But where are the discussions about how much growth we can afford and what the growth limits are to achieve livability, affordability and environmental sustainability?

There are many options as to how growth is implemented. There are choices to be made. A concrete jungle of energy-hog glass towers with ugly and expensive monster houses is not inevitable. We can do better.

We can grow in a way that protects the things we value, like heritage, views, green space, open space, parks, streetscapes, older more affordable character buildings, existing rentals, community centres, public heritage schools, theatres, cultural/arts space and the many things that make Vancouver special. It's called planning.

Unfortunately, Vancouver's current reputation for good planning is actually taking credit for what was done decades ago; a legacy that is now being dismantled at a record pace.

Elizabeth Murphy is a private-sector project manager and was formerly a property development officer with the City of Vancouver's Housing and Properties Department and for BC Housing.

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