

‘Green’ city must walk the talk

Oh, the curse of good intentions, competing interests and unintended consequences. On the one hand, there is the idealistic problem of the ecological footprint for a city that wants to be the greenest of the green. That vision includes re-imagining Metro Vancouver as a world leader in green buildings, green transportation, green access to nature, green climate leadership and so on. All commendable objectives. On the other hand, there is the pragmatic utilitarian problem of curbing sprawl in the face of population growth and increasing vertical density to maximize efficiencies in housing, transportation, and energy use. All realistic objectives, too.

And thus we come to the conflicted 21st century dilemma of the sanctimonious city and the serious citizen.

First, the citizen: Bryan Ward sets out to walk the walk as well as talking the talk. He plans to make his sound studio in Mount Pleasant the greenest in the country. He installs solar panels at a cost of \$35,000. He eschews clients from “dirty” businesses like the oil industry. He attracts green clientele like the David Suzuki Foundation, Mountain Equipment Co-op, and Greenpeace.

Second, the city: No sooner has the citizen installed solar panels when the city prepares to cast this green energy initiative into darkness. It considers authorizing a developer to renovate a site across the street by tripling the height of the building there, despite the fact that to do so will require a zoning variance permitting the new structure to exceed the neighbourhood’s maximum height restriction by 50 per cent. The new structure will cast a giant shadow on the solar panels.

A city report apparently says “Meh,” the shadow from six storeys is only marginally worse than the shadow from three or four storeys. The owner of the panels says “Arrgh!” Because of the nature of his solar array, he says, when the sun is low on the horizon in mid-winter, even a few additional feet of shadow threaten to seriously degrade the output.

So, what to do in the face of this quandary? Perhaps it offers a learning moment. It seems evident that city council needs to revisit its mission statement and consider whether it actually says what it means and means what it says. Proselytizing for green initiatives by the city while changing the rules to empower the thwarting of citizens who have bought in to the professed goal seems likely to foment cynicism rather than enthusiasm and disbelief rather than trust.

There’s a larger issue, too. If, as some experts argue, we are now truly on the cusp of a major transition from fossil to clean energy, then planners need to realign their thinking to accommodate those who have already committed to the change. This doesn’t preclude increasing vertical density; it does require a new sensitivity to things like shadowscapes as much as view lines. Perhaps developers who propose structures which diminish access to solar energy for those who plan to utilize it should make provisions to compensate in cash or kind. For example, would it be reasonable to require a development which cast a large shadow to incorporate its own solar array and make available the energy that its positioning denies somebody else? We regulate water flows, why not solar exposures, too?

Yes, these are new problems for a new age. Yes, they seem esoteric. But as the dilemma in Mount Pleasant makes clear, they are genuine and they require thinking through in new and innovative ways that are fair and reasonable to all concerned.