

“Greenest City” mostly greenwash

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- The City of Vancouver’s Greenest City policy update was presented to council in July. Although there are some successes in the plan, the majority of the city’s development policies are greenwash and are actually increasing the city’s environmental footprint rather than reducing it.

For example, the weekly food scraps pick-up has diverted some landfill to compost, which is a positive thing. However, demolitions of mostly older character buildings increased to over 1,000 last year, with about 100 tons per average 2,200-square-foot house going to the landfill. During the first six months of this year, the city approved an all-time record of \$1.12 billion in building permits. Most of those permits will require the demolition of an existing building, leading to another record year of demolitions.

In addition to building material waste, each demolition usually results in clear-cutting the lot of mature trees and landscaping with a further net loss to the urban forest canopy.

Key findings and analysis in a report by Preservation Green Lab of the National Trust for Historic Preservations included the statement: “Building reuse almost always yields fewer environmental impacts than new construction when comparing buildings of similar size and functionality.” In our climate type, it takes 50 years for a new, single-family home of similar size to overcome, through efficient operations, the negative climate impacts related to the construction process. And it takes 80 years to overcome urban village mixed use redevelopment.

Further, the city's environmental footprint is increased by the systemic bias toward new towers. Glass wall and concrete construction with elevators is the least energy efficient form of development. Vancouver is now ninth in the world for cities with the greatest number of skyscrapers, which is shocking given that Vancouver's population is listed at 616,537, making it the only one of the top 10 cities with fewer than 1.6 million.

What has not been given enough consideration is how the adaptive reuse of existing houses with secondary suites, lane houses and infill can accommodate growth. For example, the increased population from 1941 when the West End was mostly single-family houses to when it was substantially built out to apartments in the 1991 census was only 70%. This growth could easily have been achieved through adaptive reuse and shows what could be possible in other neighbourhoods.

Instead, Vision's Greenest City has incorporated and rebranded the NPA's EcoDensity, which favours tower forms of high density. Adriane Carr and the Green Party of Vancouver understand the limits to growth while Vision ignores this fact, as they ramp up unlimited growth to reward the support of partners in development.

Bike lanes are not Vision's initiative, though Vision has rebranded bike lanes as its own. In fact, bike lanes have been part of the city's transportation plan since 1995 under the NPA. Fred Bass, a former COPE councillor, was the early champion of bike lanes on the Burrard Bridge, well before Vision. Bike lanes are not a significant issue in this election; the pace, scale and form of development in the city and affordable housing are the big issues.

Governance through branding and spin is not a sustainable practice. The city has a global reputation as a leader in community planning. We should get back to the proven practices of honest community involvement in neighbourhood planning and incorporate real sustainability principles rather than greenwashing.

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