

Communities shut out of planning

Grandview residents upset: They feel city is paying lip service to their input on changes

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The most recent neighbourhood plan in Vancouver is for Grandview, an area centred around the Commercial Drive area. Contrary to past practice, in order to participate in their community's plan, residents must apply to the city and be chosen by lottery.

The city now also focuses participation in most of its consultation processes based on profiling. The city claims this is more diverse and representative; in fact it is prejudiced, stereotyped and designed to avoid genuine grassroots involvement.

To appreciate how seriously this new process conflicts with the City of Vancouver's international reputation as a leader in public engagement, we must review the context through which it has evolved.

The new community planning process for Grandview is called a Citizens' Assembly. This is entirely new for Vancouver and has only once been used in British Columbia for an issue-based initiative called the Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform. The process was never intended for community planning and is inappropriate for this use.

Interested Grandview community residents will have to apply to the city to be on the committee. Based on their personal data (such as age, gender, renter or owner) they are allegedly categorized into profiles by a computer, then randomly chosen through a lottery process selecting 48 people to represent the community. Each winner of the lottery will have to attend a "planning school" for nine sessions over eight months to learn the city's spin.

The community voiced huge opposition last year when the city came to them with a plan to which the community had



The community is voicing opposition to plans for Grandview.

no input. That plan included a large number of towers of up to 35 storeys and included other up-zoning around the area, such as the 15-storey tower at Commercial Drive and Venables Street.

The grassroots community in Grandview feel the city continues to avoid their involvement so they now are organizing their own process, which they are calling Our Community Our Plan.

The city's process for Grandview is looking similar to the one recently used in the West End. The West End Mayor's Advisory Committee (WEMAC) was selected from residents who had to apply by disclosing their profile data.

The mayor's office also made use of the contact information in the West End Neighbours' petition calling for "No rezoning without a comprehensive plan" from 11,500 individuals before the mayor's own messaging before the last election in 2011.

WEMAC was closely controlled by the mayor's office and council without any broader community meetings. Then the city produced a self-serving and biased survey interpreted to confirm predetermined directions. Independent community-

organized meetings of more than 200 people and numerous letters overwhelmingly critical of the plan were ignored. The plan was approved by council. Tower heights were increased up to 70 storeys in the Robson Street area and up to 20 storeys along lower Davie towards Denman with tower separations drastically reduced from 400 feet to 75 feet.

Compare these current practices under the Vision-dominated council with previous planning practices upon which Vancouver earned its honoured reputation.

In the 1970s, Vancouver was ahead of the times with citizen-led movements that stopped urban renewal in Strathcona and stopped a freeway that would have demolished the heritage neighbourhoods of Strathcona, Chinatown and Gastown. The city then undertook local area planning that was unprecedented for its citizen involvement.

These plans, including for Grandview, were designed to retain heritage and livability while still allowing for growth. Detailed design guidelines were created along with the local area plans in each neighbourhood. It was comprehensive

Grandview citizens' assembly is a sham

JAK KING



The image accompanying the July 3 op-ed, "Creating a better community plan," about the Grandview Community Plan was of Main Street rather than Commercial Drive. Clearly, the writer, Rachel Magnusson, cannot be found at fault for this mistaken imagery, but the use of a picture of another neighbourhood did help underline the fallacies in her argument for the city's version of a Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly.

What Ms. Magnusson calls "an important exercise in local democracy" is, in fact, merely the latest in Vision Vancouver's series of "faux" consultations where style and public imagery take centre stage, generally to disguise the unhappy substance beneath. The assembly as envisaged by Ms. Magnusson and the folks

and community supported.

From 1995 to 2010, CityPlan addressed the single-family neighbourhoods covering most of the city with a similarly open process. Anyone from the community could be on a citizens' watchdog committee for each neighbourhood under which planning directions were created in a neighbourhood-wide choices survey.

These revolutionary, community-supported processes received international recognition and commendation for our city. This is no longer city practice even though CityPlan remains official city policy under its Official Development Plan.

Local area plans such as the West End, Strathcona, Kitsilano, Fairview, Mount Pleasant,

at Vancouver City Planning is designed to look good from the outside but will, in fact, lead to the delivery of a preconceived planning-centric result that may well not be supported by the majority of the residents in our neighbourhood.

The terms of reference for this assembly were imposed upon the community without genuine consultation. Every meeting, every gathering, every letter to the planners noted the residents' preference to have a self-selected open assembly with a broad scope of action and involvement. Instead, we have a limited size of assembly with limited abilities to manage the process.

Sure, they talked to a few of us once in a while; but did they listen? The evidence can be seen in the exact description of what the assembly will do and how it will do it, which was the same as the plan disseminated by planners last year. In other words, none of our meetings and media coverage and letters and arguments for six months about what was wrong with their

assembly have changed their minds by a single comma.

Surely the job of the assembly and how it proceeds should have been determined by a vigorously debated terms of reference, for that is key to the entire transparency and integrity of the project. The definition of the job of the assembly and the way it proceeds needed to flow from the agreed terms of reference, not to precede those terms, which is what we seem to have here.

Perhaps the planners have already decided what the assembly's result will be. If that is the case, then, what is the point of continuing a travesty of engagement? Trust me, the people can live without the cabaret this charade produces. Why not just come out and say this is the way it is going to be? We can all save time. No doubt the taxpayers can save some money. And we would all be saved the mountains of BS that will go into the debate otherwise.

Jak King is the head of the Grandview-Woodland Residents Association.

stock is being decimated. Kitsilano and Fairview are to be replanned next year pending the outcome of the election.

Welcome to the brave new world of double speak, disengagement, loss of democracy and the end of genuine community involvement in planning. Such is the state of Vancouver under Vision and Mayor Gregor Robertson, most of which is the implementation of EcoDensity originally initiated in 2007 by the NPA under then mayor Sam Sullivan.

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