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City housing densification lacks plan 1

Nothing clears the head like a little Paris vacation; at least that's how it happened for Vancouver's chief city planner Brian Jackson, who recently surprised everyone, resigning his position after spending a bit of time in the City of Light

The 60-year old senior bureaucrat's sudden desire to retire may symbolize the uncertainty and discomfort surrounding Vancouver's aggressive growth and headlong rush to densify.

Jackson admits to being distracted by criticisms he and city council have received from "a group of former planners."

Specifically, the Yaletown resident — who previously had planning stints in Richmond, Toronto and California — has had to deal with mud pies thrown his way over a plan for high-density towers in the Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood, and separate designs for a new tower and waterfront office area.

Jackson, and many others, have observed that densification is an increasingly hard sell because the downtown area — where people are habituated to density — already is fully built. Thus, to accommodate continuing growth, Vancouver more recently has had to start densifying older, more traditional neighbourhoods. At the same time, many in the community are resisting the demolitions of older homes to make way for multi-family structures.

Density seems to be occurring in the absence of a clear master plan for the entire city which, even in 2015, remains primarily zoned for singlefamily dwellings.

Rezoning is taking place ad hoc, in response to developers' applications. It is clear transit infrastructure is lagging behind all the building, with no apparent means to finance a comprehensive plan from the mayors council to upgrade transportation and transit in the region.

Just as problematic is the continuing challenge of creating housing at affordable prices. Density has been pitched as a way of providing housing at an affordable cost for those wishing to reside in Vancouver. Yet, the million-dollar half-duplexes and townhouses that are sprouting are anything but affordable.

Meanwhile, many residents are confronting city hall and rejecting density increases.

Jackson has held the planning job since 2012, a shorter stretch than previous planners. He was instrumental in nailing down new development plans for the West End, the Downtown Eastside and Marpole and has had full support from the mayor and council.

It is regrettable to see Jackson go so soon. Continuity would be an benefit in the development of strategies to accommodate Vancouver's fast-paced growth.

But perhaps a change in command will give the city some breathing space, a chance to revisit how Vancouver citizens would like to see the city evolve, an opportunity to conjure a more comprehensive plan for development and an examination of why densification has failed to achieved its widely touted benefits.

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