

Vancouver proposes grassroots citizen's assembly to help plan Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood

Move follows backlash from residents over plans for high-density development

<http://gw-ac.org/category/community-plan/citizens-assembly/>

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 22, 2014



Jak King, president of the Grandview Woodland Area Council, said he isn't opposed to a citizens' assembly, but he wants to ensure that all residents will be able to have their say

Photograph by: Jason Payne, VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouver is taking steps toward launching a citizens' assembly for the Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood, which could ultimately serve as a template for public involvement and engagement on long-term planning across the city.

The proposed assembly, described as a grassroots "declarative democracy," follows extensive backlash from the community — one of Vision's strongest voter bases — over the city's lack of consultation on its plans for high-density development.

The city has since postponed any final decision on the local community plan until the new assembly — believed to be the first of its kind in Canada — comes back with recommendations.

No new plan is expected to be adopted until summer 2015.

"We need a much deeper way to engage people in the community and a way that involves them in a deliberative sense, not just the kind of episodic planning such as open houses and planning research," Coun. Andrea Reimer said.

"If we can find a framework that works, it could really bring a huge addition to the tool kit for community planning."

The assembly is intended to pull together a random representative sample of Grandview-Woodland

residents to determine what they want in terms of long-term growth and development.

City officials still have to figure out who should sit on the assembly, as well as the extent of their involvement and the key design questions to be consulted on. The first part of the selection process for the assembly will begin with a community workshop on Saturday.

"We need to mould this to be the right kind of assembly for Grandview-Woodland," said Matt Shillito, the city's assistant director of community planning.

Citizens' assemblies, touted as providing a deeper level of discussion than traditional consultation processes, have been used around the world, including the B.C. and Ontario citizens' assemblies on Electoral Reform, Citizens' Juries and Citizens' Reference Panels.

In most of those cases, residents were randomly selected using voters' lists, with some self-selection. In the B.C. Electoral Reform, for instance, no aboriginal participants had been randomly selected and had to be added later, said Mark Winston, director of Simon Fraser University's Centre of Dialogue. The Electoral Reform recommendations failed in a referendum.

Shillito said the city is looking at various assemblies and is consulting experts to determine an appropriate model for Grandview-Woodland.

"We're taking this one step at a time, we're learning how these things operate," he said.

Winston, who isn't involved in the city's proposed assembly for Grandview-Woodland, said it appears Vancouver is trying to broaden its consultation process after facing so much controversy in the community.

The area is ripe for development, he added, especially since it is close to transit hubs, which are a precursor for denser communities across Metro Vancouver.

"The neighbourhood is one that could use a fresh look," he said.

He noted while stakeholders with specific agendas are important and shouldn't be ignored, a citizens' assembly will also allow other voices to be heard. The idea is to give citizens significant information on the neighbourhood and development plans and ask them to deliberate on a range of options and come up with recommendations.

"It's a way of providing balance," Winston said. "The people who come forward have deep-vested interests. Many in the community have opinions but are overwhelmed. This is basically another lens in looking at what the community wants to do."

And while the assembly's recommendations are not binding, he added, "it would be in the city's interests to take the recommendations seriously."

The Grandview-Woodland community, it appears, is already shaping up for battle.

Jak King, president of the Grandview Woodland Area Council, said some planners would call the assembly "an act of desperation."

King said he isn't opposed to a citizens' assembly, but he wants to ensure that all residents will be able to have their say, with no limits on citizen numbers or specific quotas to match demographics.

"People should show up to those meetings and if they want to sign up, they should all be allowed to join. It shouldn't be a forced quota system," he said. "I'm kind of iffy about it. If it's set up properly and

recruited properly and has a broad mandate, I'm very much in favour of it."

Shillito said the recruitment process will be determined through the workshops, but noted it will likely involve a mass mail-out to area households looking for those who want to opt-in or volunteer.

The second phase of the process, he said, will probably involve some form of self-selection to ensure a wide mix of community views that may include different ethnicities and ages, and both renters and homeowners.

He maintains the larger the group the bigger the expense. B.C.'s Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, for instance, had 150 people but it also had a much larger budget.

Reimer said the city may not even go ahead with the plans for an assembly if the community doesn't want it. But she said it's worth a try.

Grandview-Woodland, which includes Commercial Drive and stretches from Broadway to Burrard Inlet and from Clark Drive to Nanaimo Street, is highly diverse, with the city's largest aboriginal population and a yawning gulf between poor, middle class and high-income residents.

"How do you get all of these people in the room and have a meaningful discussion where they are not only heard but can listen to their neighbours?" Reimer said. "You need to be able to try things knowing you might fail. This is definitely innovative.

"If anywhere you could develop a template that could provide a tool of so much more depth for engagement in the community, this is it."

Winston agrees that if the process is done well, it could "pave the way for other communities." The work, he said, is expected to run in tandem with the city's consultation process, which only intersects when the council makes a decision.

He noted citizens' assemblies are more suited to municipal governments, particularly if they involve complex neighbourhood issues.

"Municipal governments are so close to the people. Cities are constantly experimenting with how to consult," he said. "Opening up city council to hundreds of people is one way but it doesn't necessarily provide the thoughtfulness other consultations might."

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