

- 30 Jan 2015
- The Vancouver Sun
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## **Metro's population: Too many? Too few? Just right?**

Depending on the year, that's between 35,000 and 50,000 more people living here every year. We'll have to build over 600,000 new dwellings to accommodate them.

"From a density perspective," wrote Andrew Ramlo, of the non-profit Urban Futures institute, "if we take the size of the land base in each of the GVRD and FVRD (16,218 square kilometres), and the resident population today, this would imply a current population density of 168 people per square kilometre.

"By 2043, assuming no land is annexed in either of the two regions, density would increase by almost 50 per cent as there would be 248 people per square kilometre."

In strict environmental terms, this is long past untenable. Bill Rees, UBC professor emeritus, ecological economist and the man who coined the term "ecological footprint," figured that the optimal self-sustaining population for Metro Vancouver was about 30,000. We passed that number in 1901.

"Our region is now almost entirely dependent on imports of food grown elsewhere," Rees said. "If you assume the world is a stable place, and the next 50 years will look as stable as the last 50 years, then if you have more people here or less people here all depends on personal preference.

"But I don't think the world will look like that in the next 50 years. I think because of climate change, we'll be facing dramatic and, more likely, catastrophic changes." Our choices? We either stop immigration to Canada completely, which won't happen (though Rees thinks Canada is "vastly overpopulated" as it is), or we densify so we can protect what agricultural and rural land we have left. The worst thing we can do? Sprawl, and eat up our land base.

Some communities, notably in the U.S., have instituted nogrowth policies, though those communities tend to be smaller and upscale.

The City of Vancouver experimented with a kind of selective no-growth policy in the 1980s, constraining development and demolition in certain neighbourhoods like the West End and Kerrisdale. But that was in a time when Vancouver had empty land elsewhere in the city that could absorb the growth pressures.

Gordon Price was a Vancouver city councillor during that period. Now director of The City Program at Simon Fraser University, Price, like Rees, has an historical perspective on the issue. His, however, is rooted in nostalgia, and the fear of change from a comfortable past.

“People’s ideals (of the city) are rooted in the mid-20th century. It’s increasingly looking like a unique moment in human history, particularly for North Americans and in particular for us in the West, that had the right circumstances at the right time. Wealth and land, location and political stability, education, and governance of law.”

Thus, the impulse to limit population has less to do with quality of life but with culture.

“That’s what people are really talking about, the anxiety that they may be losing their cultural roots and what they believe has created a quality way of life. ... Population is really a surrogate for all the anxieties people feel about the people that have recently arrived.”

And therein lies a paradox, Price said. Ours is a culture of immigration. But if we limit immigration to save the culture, then we’ve changed the culture. We destroy what made us the city we’ve become.

“It really isn’t a question of whether (we) can accommodate the people. We’re rich, and we’re pretty good at it. We have a good infrastructure and a civilized culture. But it gets back to this question of ‘For whom and for what?’”

And therein lies another paradox. When you look at the list of most livable cities in the world, most are like Vancouver — temperate climate, lots of amenities and, importantly, populations in the two to three million range. Melbourne, Vienna, Helsinki, Copenhagen, us.

“And I think that is a nice size,” Price said, “because you have a nice size for the economy and amenities but not so big that your problems become intractable.”

One thing, though: These cities are victims of their own success. They’re growing fast, and becoming increasingly more expensive in which to live.

I told Price that I sometimes wondered, given Vancouver’s sleepy and parochial past and the prospect of its more uncertain future, if this was the city’s apex of livability.

Price, chuckling at his own admission, said: “I’ve always thought that; that the years between Expo and the Olympics will be seen as our best years, but I’ll leave that for history to judge.”

## **5 Comment(s)**

[Rancher](#)

30 January 2015

06:15

No one ever asked us if we wanted to be colonized, but that's what has happened. Far too many of the latest crop are loud and obnoxious and making absolutely no attempt to learn English.

[Willy P Johnson](#)

30 January 2015

06:25

Colonization goes all the way back to Adam and Eve.

Eve was the first carpenter.

She made Adams banana stand.

[G.A.](#)

30 January 2015

07:03

They reached that point in the 60s, so I headed back to the interior, and many of my friends stayed and are still there.

[Stratos](#)

30 January 2015

16:46

Make the developers of all the new density pay for the new transit and roads. Everything was fine 15 years ago before all the mayors got on their density bandwagon. And now they want me to pay a new tax to pay for the infrastructure needed because of that density? Give your heads a shake, mayors. If you want to invite more people to our cities, then make them pay for the congestion that THEY will create. Don't expect me to cover the cost of fixing the mess YOU created by not thinking ahead as you approved all those condos around us.

[Rancher](#)

30 January 2015

21:25

Mayors nothing. It was their civil servant "advisors" looking ahead to funding their raises and pensions.