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The Fraser Institute



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The Fraser Institute: 'Liveable Region' Remains a Myth as GVRD Planning Results in High Housing Prices and Traffic Gridlock

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA--(Marketwire - Oct. 2, 2007) - Greater Vancouver's regional leaders' obsession with changing people's behaviour through land use planning has left the region with the least affordable housing and some of the worst traffic congestion in Canada, according to a new study released today by independent research organization The Fraser Institute.

"Planners with the Greater Vancouver Regional District (now Metro Vancouver) narrowly focus on two goals: avoiding urban sprawl and minimizing automobile driving," said Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute specializing in urban issues and public lands and author of *Unliveable Strategies: The Greater Vancouver Regional District and the Liveable Region Strategic Plan*.

"But the tools they use to achieve these goals are essentially a form of social engineering to change what people want - convenient transportation and a single family home. Instead, the regional planners hope people will drive less if roads are congested and that everyone will happily live in high-density towers if single family homes are unaffordable."

O'Toole's study, available at www.fraserinstitute.org, traces the GVRD's history of planning from 1966 with the creation of the Official Regional Plan through to the Liveable Region Strategic Plan in 1996. Along the way, he examines the key decisions (and those that weren't made) that helped

shape the Lower Mainland.

"The GVRD likes to use the term "liveable" in all its planning documents, as though repeated use of this mantra will lead people to overlook the fact that regional planners have made the region less liveable by increasing housing prices, imposing densities and increasing traffic congestion," O'Toole said.

O'Toole points out that surveys show more than 70 per cent of Canadians want to live in a single-family home. But the GVRD's planners consider such homes undesirable because they tend to be too low in density to support high levels of walking, cycling, and transit riding.

In 1961, 58 per cent of all new dwellings built in the Vancouver region were single-family homes. By 2005, planners successfully reduced this to 26 per cent.

"Regional planers and politicians have embraced a policy that promotes multi-family housing at the expense of single-family homes, effectively denying up to 32 per cent of the region's families from achieving their aspirations."

O'Toole finds little evidence that district planners made any effort to identify and evaluate alternatives or assess the tradeoffs inherent in their plans. He suggests the GVRD's leaders could have focused on reducing the impacts of growth through technical solutions, such as controlling auto emissions, and through user fees and incentives that ensure people pay the full costs of their housing, transportation, and other choices.

He concludes that the problems with the GVRD's Livable Region Strategic Plan are not the result of bad planning; they are the result of planning, that is, centralized, top-down, government planning.

"A region as large and complex as Greater Vancouver is simply too complicated to plan," he said. "Rather than seriously evaluate the trade-offs between, say, open space preservation and housing prices, they simply and mindlessly try to preserve a maximum amount of open space and ruthlessly punish anyone who wishes to drive by forcing them to suffer from congestion."

He concludes that the solution to the problems created by the GVRD can not be found in the planning process or trying to devise a different plan. Instead he recommends:

- The province and region should find technical solutions to the negative effects of sprawl and driving such as improving auto emission controls, rather than trying to curb sprawl and driving themselves;
- The region and cities in the region should allow people to make their own choices about housing and modes of transportation, but ensure people pay the full costs of their choices;
- The province should break up the Greater Vancouver Regional District into a set of agencies, each of which focuses on a specific mission, such as water, sewage, or parks. As far as possible, these agencies should be funded out of user fees linking producers to consumers. None of these agencies should attempt to do comprehensive planning for the region. Most of these agencies, including those focusing on water, sewer, and parks, should be further broken up into smaller geographic units, each serving a portion of the region.
- Transit should be managed by one or more agencies that have incentives to find the most cost-effective forms of transit for each sub-region or corridor. This could mean a heavier emphasis on bus service and no new rail construction. Transit subsidies should be given to transit users in the form

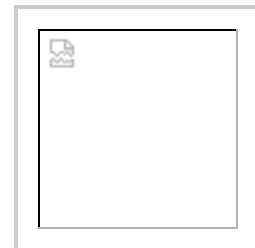
of vouchers rather than to transit bureaucracies.

"The GVRD's current problems were predictable and predetermined by the decision to treat the region's problems through a central planning process," O'Toole said. "The region has focused on urban design, sprawl, and driving rather than on real measures of livability such as congestion, pollution, affordability, and easy access to urban open space. Unfortunately, an urban region like Vancouver is simply too complicated to plan, and any effort to do so will necessarily produce the serious problems this plan is now causing."

The Fraser Institute is an independent research and educational organization based in Canada. Its mission is to measure, study, and communicate the impact of competitive markets and government intervention on the welfare of individuals. To protect the Institute's independence, it does not accept grants from governments or contracts for research. Visit www.fraserinstitute.org.

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