

MUNICIPAL ISSUES

Density debate pits ex-mayor against former chief planner

BETHANY LINDSAY

VANCOUVER SUN

Sam Sullivan considers himself a “casualty of density,” so he knows just how much outrage can be generated in Vancouver by something as innocuous as plans for a new townhouse development.

The former mayor believes his support for densification was a big factor behind his loss of the NPA nomination in 2008. That’s why he suggests civic leaders should be prudent and save up their political capital for big densification projects along major transit corridors and in the core of the city.

“It is unreasonable to ask municipal politicians to risk arousing anti-density activists everywhere,” Sullivan told a crowd of about 200 at the Museum of Vancouver on Wednesday night. In fact, he said, it would be “political suicide.”

The Liberal MLA was part of a two-person debate team arguing against the idea of opening up every neighbourhood in Vancouver to some densification. The debate, organized by the non-profit Urbanarium and the UBC School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, saw little disagreement over the necessity to increase density in key parts of the city to accommodate a swelling population.

The real debate was about what the pro-side team called “quiet density”: encouraging small-scale projects like duplexes, row houses and laneway homes in areas outside major population hubs. They suggested this kind of lower-profile development could help revitalize communities, make housing more affordable, and allow seniors to downsize without leaving their neighbourhoods.

In Sullivan’s view, that just isn’t worth the hassle.

“Although it may be desirable to densify all neighbourhoods, the effort could be so



Sam Sullivan warns that angering anti-density activists could be ‘political suicide’ for officials.

destabilizing. It could jeopardize the whole densification project,” he said.

But journalist David Beers, who moderated the debate, called him out on the logic of that stance: “That seems to be based in giving the squeakiest wheel what it wants.”

Former chief city planner Brent Toderian was on stage to argue against his former boss, and he suggested public opposition isn’t a good enough reason to shy away from density in some neighbourhoods.

“I’m sympathetic to the position — it is harder — but I believe it has to be part of our responsibility,” he said. “An awful lot of our existing built form is either low-density or suburban. If you’re saying that’s off-limits for change, that’s a pretty powerful statement.”

His debate partner, architect and urban designer Joyce Drohan, said she didn’t want to see towers in single-family neighbourhoods. Some areas, like the Olympic Village, might be more appropriate for mid-rise development, said.

And she argued that allowing the population to increase in the areas surrounding a major street could invigorate local businesses and build a stronger community.

She’s lived in Mount Pleasant for 20 years, and described Main Street as a desolate place when she first moved in.

“There wasn’t a café to be found, nor a decent bakery, but that’s changed and I think that’s largely to do with the fact that density isn’t just happening on Main Street — it’s happening within the neighbourhood. People are welcoming it, and it’s enriched the neighbourhood in a tremendous way,” she said.

The other half of the con team, UBC business professor emeritus Michael Goldberg, argued that planners should concentrate on under-developed areas along transit routes, near shopping centres and in neighbourhood hubs. He also argued that industrial land and areas with commercial zoning should be opened up to residential development.

Goldberg showed photos of spots along Broadway where the buildings are only one or two storeys high, and central areas in Dunbar and Kerrisdale that appeared devoid of people. These places, he said, should be home to condo towers and other high-density developments.

“For me, where to densify is BS: being selective and being smart,” Goldberg said.

The decidedly pro-densification audience, peppered with former Vancouver city planners and academics, was given the task of deciding the winner of the debate. A poll was taken before the discussion began and another after, and whoever changed the most minds was declared the champion.

Although the pro side was the clear favourite, winning the first vote by a resounding 145-39 margin and holding on in the second at 127-46, seven voters were swayed by the con team and so Sullivan and Goldberg were handed trophies to mark their victory. The losing team went home with a consolation prize of T-shirts.

blindsay@postmedia.com
twitter.com/bethanylindsay