### **Ref:**<u>http://regardingplace.com/?p=307</u>

### **The Flipside of EcoDensity: Introduction**

February 21, 2008



By Erick Villagomez, *re:place magazine* 

There has been much talk of Vancouver's EcoDensity initiative since its inception in 2006. Municipalities, academics and citizens alike have all played a part in discussing different aspects – both positive and negative - of the project. In spite of this, there seems to be few critical analyses of EcoDensity both as an argument as well as an action. It is for this reason I have put together a short series of articles taking a closer look at some of the inaccuracies, half-truths and misconceptions brought forth by the initiative.

Given that I'm discussing such a heavily charged issue, I feel a few introductory remarks are warranted. Firstly – and very importantly - I'm not an "anti-densite". Alongside the dwindling number of people with the means to do so, I am fortunate enough to live along one of Vancouver's main retail streets near the city's largest transit node. I walk to do my groceries and have all of my required amenities within 1km from my compact but adequate home. Although I do own a vehicle, my wife and I work from primarily from home and my neighbourhood allows my family to work and play using one car. This means that my fuel efficient 1994 Toyota actually spends most of its days sitting curbside. To top it all off, I practice and preach the benefits of density for a living.

That notwithstanding, I'm a dedicated believer that informed decisions can only be made through the availability and understanding of *all* the possible information relating to a subject – the good, the bad and the ugly. In reality, however, this is made extremely difficult due to all the biases, spin-doctoring and well-targeted rhetoric directed to the public. As we all know, governments, politicians, and bureaucrats are among the worst culprits – especially when dealing with the economics of development.

With regards to EcoDensity specifically, I'm not at all against the idea. In fact, I think that, conceptually, it has many valid points. However, having read a number of articles on this high-profile initiative and all of its documentation, it seems to me that many of the issues brought forth by the City of Vancouver are relatively superficial and fail to holistically engage the topic. No matter how good the intentions, I would argue that EcoDensity – through focusing solely on its academically mainstream positive aspects - offers a deceivingly simplistic view of density and its impacts on the city and region. Most importantly, it fails to address critical issues pertaining directly to sustainability and livability. In doing so, it not only does a disservice to its citizens, but also potentially sabotages future Vancouverites.

I often project myself to the early times - not long ago - of rapid suburban expansion. With all its advocates – academics, politicians, citizens - playing their parts in convincing the masses that this pattern was the best future for our cities. Automobiles. Highways. Malls. Freestanding Homes. Growth. Progress. Words spoken without an idea of the ultimate consequences of these seemingly harmless decisions. Words that simplified complex issues to the point where only one direction seemed logical, leaving no room for questioning.

It is one of my greatest fears that we – like our relatives just two generations ago – are following the same path under a different guise. Accepting simple solutions to complex problems and blindly following the myths and ethos of current times without question. And that heavily marketed initiatives - such as EcoDensity - are the primary vehicles through which this blindness and complacency is transmitted.

With this in mind, I think that as someone immersed in the culture of building, I have the responsibility to clarify objectives, to raise them for debate, reveal hidden costs, and to speak for the absent or voiceless. If I don't start the discussion, who will?

Also, a few words on format and sequence. The series looks at the broader arguments brought forth by the EcoDensity initiative. More specifically, density as it relates to the environment, affordability, and livability. They will follow in this order. I've refrained from delving to deeply into the specifics and details (such as the EcoDensity Actions, etc.) since these are to be manifestations of the bigger picture. So, my reasoning is that if the larger arguments are questionable, the details necessarily follow suit.

Lastly and most importantly, I am not trying to discourage densification as a very valuable way of increasing sustainability & livability. As I mentioned earlier, I spend much of my time teaching the benefits of densification. I am simply acknowledging the concerns and wrinkles that need to be ironed out in order for densification to be done responsibly. I do not have all the answers, but I am hoping that sparking discussion is the first step in gaining them....

## The Flipside of EcoDensity - Density & the Environment

February 22, 2008



By Erick Villagomez, re:place magazine

The EcoDensity initiative hangs its environmental hat on the idea that increased density ultimately leads to a more "sustainable" city. In the words of the <u>City of Vancouver</u> "*EcoDensity is an acknowledgement that high quality and strategically located density can make Vancouver more sustainable…and…the right kind of quality density in the right places can help lower our ecological footprint.*" More specifically, the idea is that density minimizes energy use through creating more compact buildings, and minimizes car use through making transit use economically viable in these locations as well as supporting local amenities that people can walk to.

Although there is truth to this belief, such statements are much too vague and vastly oversimplified. Yes, using land more effectively through creating denser settlements saves land, makes alternative transportation economically viable, and saves energy on an individual building basis. But this masks the greater complexity inherent to sustainability issues - which act at scales greater than buildings and individual cities. Furthermore, it simultaneously leaves key issues unresolved.

One of the most fundamental concerns is the failure to define and explain what the "right kind" of densities are. What is too much density? And what is too little? What does it look like? These are basic questions worthy of straightforward answers. This is a grave omission because it opens the gate for multiple interpretations – or misinterpretations – of the intentions, and works directly against the credibility of the City of Vancouver. How can citizens be expected to make an informed decision without any tangible information? Not to mention that there is a lot of research with hard numbers, figures, and precedents that can be used to ease the anxieties that naturally develop when dealing with change.

For example, densities similar to those surrounding our well-known commercial streets - West Broadway, Main Street, Commercial Drive, Kerrisdale – offer the range of densities within which local commerce and transit can thrive. To give this a quantitative value, <u>net residential densities</u> in these areas average between 12-20 dwelling units per net acre, and are often characterized by house types ranging from duplexes and homes with laneway cottages, to four storey walk-ups. Consequently, these also tend to be the most affordable house types to build since wood frame construction can still be used for their construction, rather than reinforced concrete which is much more costly.

As a member of the public, it would be comforting to know that there are a wide variety range of "EcoDense" neighbourhood options that can have viable community transit and economically sustainable local commerce. What these options are must be clearly defined, however.

The same vagueness holds true for the "strategically located" density called for within the EcoDensity documentation. As I've already argued in EcoDensity: Another Westside Swindle – and in accordance with 2006 Census data - density is already lopsided, with most of the density existing within Vancouver's Eastside. Given that the regulatory framework that supports development in this city is skewed toward the latter, EcoDensity will surely just add more density in locations that already lie within the "sustainable" range mentioned above. This will ultimately preserve low-density Westside neighbourhoods at the expense of the larger sustainability of the city.

The above two issues focus primarily on semantics. And although these are important to the clarity and the proper understanding of EcoDensity's intentions, a larger issue of density and growth as it relates to the <u>ecological footprint</u> remains wrongly unquestioned. Although increased density *can* decrease resource use per person, this may easily be offset by the increase of costs and resources (water, electricity, gas, etc.) demanded by the overall increase in population.

Using an extreme example to clarify my point, New York City is very efficient from the land-use perspective, but it comes at the cost of delivering 6.8 billion liters of water each day to its consumers from its reservoirs over 300 km away as well as constructing and maintaining the infrastructure to deliver it. This is accompanied by the environmental and economic costs of coordinating and disposing the 25,000 tons of garbage produced per day. In terms of electricity use, although the consumption per person is quite low relative to other North American cities (due to smaller living spaces and compact building types), the city as a whole consumes vast quantities. Additionally, nearby agricultural lands don't have the capacity to feed such a large population. In turn, increased distances (and greater carbon emissions) are required to attain basic sustenance. The ultimate result is that New York has a giant ecological footprint as a result of its high population densities.

In Metro Vancouver, the balance between the capacity of the local environment and the region's population was surpassed decades ago. Half of our one million tonnes of garbage is disposed over 300km away at Cache Creek. The food we eat comes from thousands of kilometers away from all over the globe. Our <u>recycling</u> is processed overseas. <u>BC Hydro</u> recently recorded a jump in electricity use of 1000 kwh per person - from 10,000 kwh to 11,000 kwh - within the past

three years. This has put more pressure on them to find other (potentially destructive) means of generating this valuable energy source. Will increased density, alone, truly help this situation?

Touting the concept of "<u>ecological footprint</u>" in favour of densification is a precarious undertaking since "our footprint" encompasses relationships beyond Vancouver to include other larger lifestyle issues such as the types of food we eat, where they come from, and resource consumption beyond land, itself. In such cases, dense human populations are often more of a detriment.



This particularly hit home a while back when I decided to do an online <u>ecological footprint quiz</u> and found my footprint to be 3.4 planets. For a person with a family who lives in a 1100 sq.ft half duplex, rarely drives, and is a pretty environmentally conscious in all respects, I have to admit that I was pretty surprised. Being self-professed map geek, this shock instigated the creation a <u>map</u> depicting the distances (as the crow flies) of a random sample of everyday products that lay within a 10ft radius of my computer...no further explanation is needed.

From this holistic perspective, then, increased densities can raise a city's overall ecological footprint. This comes as a result of continually increasing its population further from the carrying capacity (water, energy, food, etc.) of their local environment. This isn't to downplay the importance of lowering individual land consumption levels or densification as a small step *towards* reducing our footprint. These are extremely important, no doubt. But misusing a clearly defined term such as "ecological footprint" serves to give the public a false impression of the degree to which densification, alone, serves towards creating a more sustainable city. Other initiatives - such as encouraging urban agriculture within Vancouver and corresponding implementation strategies - are equally (if not more) important. Furthermore, it calls into question the definition of "right density".

With regards to density increasing transit use, minimizing car use and increasing walkability, many questions and concerns also arise. Although density can increase transit use and decrease car use, this by no means is the rule. Other factors such as transportation logistics and larger socio-economic settlement patterns carry equal, if not more, weight. For example, if the majority of jobs lie outside high density areas not efficiently fed by transit lines (as is the case in Metro Vancouver), the overall decrease in automobile use and traffic can be negligible. That 70% of downtown Vancouver's inhabitants work beyond 5km away – as reported by <u>Statistics Canada</u> – is a case in point.

But one might argue that increasing density combined with mixing uses – commercial and residential – would at least make people more likely to walk to obtain their daily needs. This can be true, but it is greatly dependent on what basic amenities are available locally (more on this in *The Flipside of EcoDensity: Density and Livability*). In order to follow through on their promises, the City *must* ensure these basic amenities are provided in anticipation of the desired densification. A convincing implementation plan, therefore, must be included as a part of their proposal in order to avoid people needing to drive to get their groceries or drop their children off at school. A failure to do so would have the opposite effect to those outlined in the EcoDensity documentation - simply creating more traffic congestion and pollution.

So, although there is some truth to the claims brought forth regarding the environmental benefits of packing people together, EcoDensity's information cherry-picking - the failure to acknowledge higher level dependencies as well as its lack of targets and definitions - ultimately paints a deceivingly simplistic and inaccurate picture of what the environmental benefits of densification truly are and to what degree density, alone, contributes to its larger sustainability goals.

We often fail to remember that, to-date, cities have an extremely low survival rate. Most of our best urban experiments have failed and collapsed at some points in their existence. This has often been due to a failure to strike the delicate balance between population densities and environmental capacity. In light of the how far our knowledge of human and ecological systems has progressed, one would hope an important initiative such as EcoDensity would follow suit and tell the story like it is.....warts and all.

# The Flipside of EcoDensity - Density & Affordability

February 23, 2008



By Erick Villagomez, re:place magazine

The EcoDensity initiative's primary economic argument is that increased density facilitates the creation of more affordable housing. It is worth quoting the <u>argument</u> here in its entirety:

"Density can contribute to affordability by adding more inherently affordable housing types and tenures (i.e., smaller units, rental units); if demand nonetheless outpaces supply, increasing supply helps to moderate the price increases. Density also has the potential to facilitate more affordable living arrangements (i.e., reduced car ownership, lower energy costs and mortgage helpers such as secondary suites, coach houses).

In addition, density can help provide deeper affordability through large scale re-zonings that can provide social housing. While increased supply is a necessary foundation to affordability, it cannot replace funding from the Federal and Provincial governments to achieve the most affordable units.

In a built-up city like Vancouver, affordability is an extremely complex issue, with many factors outside City control. EcoDensity goals suggest balancing the new supply of housing with the retention of existing affordable rentals. One example is the City's recent "rate-of-change" by-law, which protects rental housing in apartment-zoned areas throughout the city where there is a large stock of older, affordable rental housing."

Based on the aforementioned points, one can see that density and affordability have a very tenuous relationship. Although it is true that density *can* contribute to affordability by adding a variety of denser, more affordable housing types, the issue is interdependent with many other variables - lands costs, the housing market, construction costs, and house type, to name a few.

From the perspective of construction costs, densification in the form of low/mid-rise house types (such as duplexes, townhouses, three- and four-storey walk-ups) can be very affordable. This is due to the fact that such house types can be built using wood-frame construction and forgo the increased costs of going to reinforced concrete (almost double that of wood frame construction).

That said, in Vancouver, affordability (or lack thereof) is related more to land values than to building costs. As we all know, the densest "developed" cities in the world are also the most expensive places to live – New York, London, Tokyo. Vancouver is no exception. In my most recent property assessment, land costs were valued at approx. 65% of the overall worth of the property. Given that my home is fairly new relative to the surrounding houses, I imagine that this is within the average range - if not slightly lower.

Locally, Vancouver has been steadily densifying since the 1970's and this has given the citizens no relief in terms of housing affordability. More affordable housing still lies outside city limits in lower density neighbourhoods. An increase in land costs has been a large culprit of this trend as positive feedback loops regarding new construction and increased land values have created city of \$600, 000 half-duplexes and given us the distinguished title of the "least affordable city in Canada". In this sense, densification seems to have exacerbated the problem of affordable housing.

This is no small deal since the lack of truly affordable housing has had many negative side effects in other cities with similar problems. For example, in Japan, families with children have been effectively forced to flee to the suburbs of Tokyo due to high house prices within the city and a lack of new housing stock that targets this demographic. Sound familiar?

Locally, it was <u>recently released</u> that the elevated cost of living in Vancouver is driving police officers away from the city - with only 18% living in the city - and that keeping officers within the Vancouver Police Department is getting increasingly difficult. Not only is this is keeping important service people employed in Vancouver a problem in itself, but this also has detrimental environmental effects as more people must travel farther distances into the city for work. I won't even bother mentioning the increasing homelessness problems that have developed over the past decades.

Historically, <u>Federal and Provincial government funding</u> has been what governs affordability, with municipal densification and land-use playing subsidiary roles. Governments and nonprofit or co-operative societies build non-market dwelling units. Their operation and maintenance are necessarily assisted by government subsidies to ensure a continuing stock of affordable housing. Vancouver's "affordable housing" explosion occurred between 1947 and 1986 when potent government programs encouraged their creation. Funding has since diminished significantly and, consequently, so has the affordable housing.

Efforts by the City have had a negligible effect despite numerous attempts. For example, although the rate-of-change bylaw protects rental housing stock, it doesn't have the capability to prevent landlords from continually raising rents. This has led to a number of superficial upgrades and tenant evictions across the city. Recent issues along <u>Main Street</u> speak to this point.

The issue of laneway homes is frequently cited as affordable housing stock - important as mortgage helpers and accommodating extended families. And although their usefulness can't be argued, the defining these types of units as "affordable" is also troublesome because the costs of renting (or buying) such dwellings is still intrinsically tied to the land value of the lot on which it lies. So - similar to the situation described above - if land values continue to rise, so do the costs of rental.

As one continues down the passage, there is a diminishing sense of accountability, with the City finally conceding that affordability is ultimately "outside City control". The fact that there are no targets or definitions of "affordability" makes the argument all the more discrediting. Without targets, how can one judge if they have achieved their goals? With this in mind, having increased affordability as one of the main arguments for EcoDensity is truly a stretch and arguably one of the most troubling aspects of the initiative.

I don't think I would be doing the issue of affordability justice if I didn't address the conflict between the City's environmental and "high-quality" design agendas and the economics of lowering costs. I am the first to admit, that City's desire to implement stricter energy performance regulations on new buildings is very noble. Not to mention that 'green' designers like myself serve to greatly benefit by getting more work.

But the fact is that higher performance buildings cost more money to both design and build. More specialists are required. Better systems and "eco" products must be purchased - each at a premium. As the old saying goes, "you can't get something for nothing." Do homes perform better now than they did 50 years ago? Without question. But they are also exponentially more expensive.

When dealing with development, it is naive to believe that developers altruistically take an economic loss for implementing these great environmentally-friendly systems: the costs are passed directly to the those buying into their projects. This serves to directly increase construction costs - over and above land costs, development fees, etc. - and, ultimately, makes them even less affordable.

This is exacerbated by the fact that the regulations and codes that govern residential design and energy-performance as a whole focus exceedly on purchasing costly mechanical technologies instead of lower cost options - such as designing homes with windows sized and oriented to capture solar gain and maximize natural light.

This inherent conflict between "green", "high-quality" design and affordability must be carefully considered within the EcoDensity argument and clearly stated to the public. After all, what good is an "Eco-city" if nobody can live in it.

# The Flipside of EcoDensity - Density & Livability

February 24, 2008



By Erick Villagomez, re:place magazine

As described within the <u>EcoDensity website</u>: "Livability encompasses many aspects of life — neighbourly development; retention of neighbourhood character, heritage buildings, and a sense of place; safe and attractive parks and public places; needed community amenities and cultural facilities". Towards this end it states that "well-located", and "high quality" density can enhance Vancouver's livability. Yet, for all its listed benefits, important information is left unresolved.

I'm going to focus on one issue that is becoming increasingly important to the functioning of the city: crime. It goes without saying that many residents fear the relationship between crime and density. One could easily argue that this looms high on a city's livability and it is alluded to in the above passage.

To-date, the relationship between density and crime at the neighbourhood level has been inconclusive by many <u>studies</u>. Crime rate and socio-economics seem to have the strongest ties. Thus, high crime rates often exist in locations with high poverty and unemployment rates, low education attainment, and large household size regardless of the type of land-use or building pattern. This is clearly evident in the fact that several lower density suburban neighbourhoods have high crime rates relative to their lower population density.

That said, the inconclusive nature of these studies lose hold when looking beyond the neighbourhood-scale to cities as a whole. Given that cities are founded on - and interdependent with - socio-economic hierarchies, the fact is that city-wide densification results in higher overall crime rates. Although specific crimes fluctuate, an overall net increase is observed. Thus, stated bluntly: *densification increases crime*. How that crime is distributed across a particular city depends on the neighbourhood attributes described above and other variable factors (proximity to high-crime areas, policing, etc.).



These facts make Vancouver's local situation all the more interesting. This <u>stem-and-leaf bar graph</u> that I created as part of a bigger visual essay shows Vancouver's distribution of major crimes (right side - from top to bottom: assault, robbery, break & enter, auto theft, general theft, and mischief) per neighbourhood as it relates to income and <u>gross density</u> levels (left side - income is depicted by the lighter top bar, while density is shown on the darker bottom bar). The values are an amalgamation of <u>City of</u> <u>Vancouver neighbourhood Census data</u> as well as the Vancouver Police Department's 2007 <u>crime statistics</u>.

The graphic explicitly shows a strong relationship between higher density and higher crime. This makes sense locally since higher density areas often cater to a wider range of households. Clearly stated: *in Vancouver, neighbourhoods with higher densities have higher crime rates in every major category than those with lower densities.* In accordance with the <u>distribution of densities</u> across the city, this means that the bulk of higher crime areas are located within Vancouver's Eastside. One need not mention what would happen if status quo densification were to occur continue in the lopsided manner it has to-date.



In order to make the relationship more clear, here is the same <u>stem-and-leaf arranged in order from lowest to highest (gross) density</u>. There are some anomalies, however, that are worth mentioning. Firstly, the graphic shows certain Eastside neighbourhood densities as equivalent to those on the Westside - South Cambie and Killarney, for example. This discrepancy is due to the fact that gross density includes open spaces (roads, parks, etc.) and Eastside neighbourhood have greater areas and larger parks than those on the Westside. As anyone familiar with these two neighbourhoods knows, however, Killarney has a significantly higher residential net density (density excluding all streets, parks, etc.) than South Cambie. This is evident also by the spike in crime. Also worth mentioning is that, according to the VPD's report, downtown's spiking theft rate is a function of its proximity to the Downtown Eastside. Yet despite these anomalies, the relation between increased density and increased crime remains consistent.

This information is not meant to frighten people away from densification. Far from it. As stated several times throughout this series of articles, density holds many advantages. What I am arguing, however, is that the relationship between crime and density *must* be openly stated to the people that it is to affect. People need to *know* the information in order to plan accordingly. Secondly, any local initiatives looking to densify must necessarily have a strategy to combat the crimes that are related to this process.

Density and traffic is another contentious issue among citizens that is intimately related to livability. People simply don't want more cars going through their neighbourhoods. And although the EcoDensity website claims that "there are fewer vehicles entering the city than there were 10 years ago, and average distances being driven by Vancouver registered passenger vehicles were down almost 30% between 1993 and 2002", where that information was attained is unstated and, thus, the relationship between the latter and density is not clear.

For example, fewer vehicles entering the city could be attributed to the gradual transformation of employment-related space to residential or the growth of Surrey as an employment powerhouse. Furthermore, according to <u>Metro Vancouver's statistics</u>, the number of registered passenger vehicles has steadily increased within Vancouver, despite minor fluctuations. This is a phenomenon that is likely attributed to the fact that there are simply more people in the city and that at least one car is necessary for most people to effectively go about their daily lives. Furthermore, <u>Statistics Canada</u> reported that most downtown Vancouver dwellers worked outside of the core, with approx. 70% of inhabitants working beyond 5km away. Needless to say, the relationship between density and reduced car traffic are questionable because they are interdependent with several other factors.

If this is the case, densification may effectively increase the carbon emission, traffic congestion, and air pollution of our metropolis by the simple fact that there will be more people (and hence more cars) living within Vancouver. Having already been given a D grade for air quality and cardiovascular risk by the <u>Heart and Stroke Foundation</u>, pursuing this issue more closely seems paramount.

The provision of community amenities at a pace equivalent to residential densification is also questionable, as increasing land costs make the purchase of land by valuable community institutions increasing prohibitive. For example, with the increase of land values, Vancouver's downtown peninsula has suffered a horrible lack of schools - two elementary schools and one secondary school - relative to its 88,000-person population. Compare this to Grandview Woodlands, with its 5 elementary schools and 2 secondary schools for its 28 000 inhabitants, or even Kerrisdale's 3 elementary schools and 2 secondary schools for its diminutive 14 000-person population.

Other basic amenities are also lacking citywide. One of the most notorious is the staggeringly long wait-lists and low number of daycares. All too often, community amenities lag behind

residential occupancy. Several New Urbanist developments have fallen victim to this phenomenon. Based on this City's performance with their highly acclaimed downtown, this trend doesn't bode well for all the communities chosen to "benefit" from EcoDensity.

Another valid fear regarding EcoDensity, as it relates to the provision of amenities, holds that through mandating densification, the City will be discarding the leverage it has used so effectively in order to attain the high quality projects it is known for: density bonusing. Density bonuses allow developers to build more units than is normally allowed in a designated area in exchange for preserving and enhancing designated resources or providing other public amenities (parks, affordable housing, daycare, etc.). Vancouver's successful use of density bonuses to create our high-quality urban environment is renowned. Surely such concerns must be clearly and openly discussed.

These are just a few of the troubling issues that lurk behind the pleasant façade of EcoDensity's claims to improve "livability." In order to be effective and gain support for the initiative, these issues must be recognized and properly discussed with the public. Given how intimately these issues affect our well-being - our children, families, and friends - I can only describe the failure to do so as outright irresponsible.

*Other articles in the series:* The Flipside of EcoDensity - Introduction The Flipside of EcoDensity - Density & the Environment The Flipside of EcoDensity - Density & Affordability The Flipside of EcoDensity - Epilogue

Filed Under Features, Green, Politics

#### **Comments**

#### 5 Responses to "The Flipside of EcoDensity - Density & Livability"

1. TheVancouverManifesto TC: on March 11th, 2008 4:31 pm

That's a great bar graph. It shows a correlation but there are also some anomolies that we can delve into further. Some neighbourhoods in the West side and the East side have the same density but crime is higher on the East side with the same density. So we have to consider geographical location, not simply just density.

And DT and WestEnd are just clearly gathering places. Same as kits and grandview. So let's start talking about what these places have in common (i.e. nightlife, youth, etc) It's true that analyzing density alone isn't good enough. We need to look at quality of place/built environment, demographics and geography.



#### on March 25th, 2008 9:50 pm

The bar graph appears to show the number of crimes rather than the crime rate. It's not surprising that the number of crimes would go up as the population increases, but that doesn't necessarily result in a crime rate increase. Yet you specifically mentioned the rate in the article. I would be curious to see if you have the bar graph for crime rates rather than the simple number of crimes.

I also find it misleading to use downtown in that graph, since downtown is a destination, meaning people from North Vancouver hop on the bus, graffiti a building, get caught, and are counted for the higher crime rate there. But people from North Vancouver don't do the same in neighbourhoods such as Mount Pleasant and Kits, at least not in the same numbers, making those better gauges of what similar neighbourhoods would be like once increased density is realized.

And finally, the bar graph also shows an equally strong relationship between income, if not stronger, as is shown by the discrepencies listed above. Take Grandview/Woodlands, Mount Pleasant and Kitsilano neighbourhoods, where the number of most crimes runs counter to density, but in line with income. It doesn't seem to me that you've made a sufficient arguement that density is the cause of the increase rather than simply being correlated with higher crime rates, while other factors actually dictate the crime level. The idea that density is the cause is especially strange when you try to think of why people living closer together would lead to a higher level of criminal behaviour. That said, I would be curious to see the crime rate/density comparison and a response to the discrepencies pointed out to see if that arguement could be made more forcefully.



3. Erick and an March 27th, 2008 10:02 pm

Hi Tessa,

Great comments.....

Unfortunately, I couldn't find any information that gave the exact crime rate - solely the crime numbers, as you pointed out. And, I agree, perhaps using the term "crime rate" might have been stretching things. However, with higher numbers of crime, one can assume (wrongly perhaps) that the frequency of the crimes increases since they must there are more of them. That said, this need not be the case.

The downtown graph is a bit misleading, I agree. The police reports relate this to its proximity to the Downtown Eastside. I'm sure that is, at least partially true. So I think you are right in saying that looking at the other neighbourhoods are a better gauge of the relationship between crime and density.

I didn't actually touch upon the relationship between income and crime despite it being shown on the graph it would have taken the article in a different direction. In order to keep this comment short, I'll just say the this relationship is definitely important. I can elaborate later, if you insist.

I think more important is the question of why density would/could lead to increased crime, so I'd like to talk about that. At the risk of simplifying a complex issue, I'll focus firstly on how density can cause crime simply by the fact that there are more people.

Sheer numbers can play a large part in crime in at least two ways: first mathematically and secondly as a "magnetic draw" for other types of (deviant) behaviour.

I'll show the mathematic argument through an example. In accordance with recent scientific research, a conservative estimate is that 1 in every 1000 people are psychopaths. So the number of psychopaths (or likelihood, thereof) in a given area increases with the number of people. The same is statistically true of potential criminal behaviour.

In terms of "magnetic draw" areas of higher density often attract behaviour that takes advantage of the number of people - be it commerce or crime. In the mind of a criminal, one gets a better bang-for-the-buck where there are more people (and goods) and they can maximize the return on their investment....my apologies for the economic jargon.

Lastly, the ties between crime and income/education level are extremely strong, as I mention in the article. It so happens that higher density forms of housing are used to accommodate lower income people - and I use the term "lower" loosely. This is where income, density, and crime intersect directly. As I state in the affordability article, this is related to construction costs among other things. Thus, higher density areas often tend to house

"lower" income people which in turn increases the chance of criminal behaviour. This is also true in Vancouver....which explains the chart readings.

### The Flipside of EcoDensity: Epilogue

February 25, 2008



By Erick Villagomez, re:place magazine

Throughout this series of articles I have done my best to give a more complete understanding of the issues related to increasing density and the arguments of the EcoDensity initiative. I've drawn upon a broad knowledge base and supplemented it with the most recent statistical data, maps and figures. Admittedly, some of the arguments I've brought forth are stronger than others, but I think all are worthy of discussion.

I must reiterate that I am *not arguing against density, itself.* Density can be fantastic if done properly and intelligently. The many European tourist hot-spots and quaint North American Main Street towns that we know and love are a testament to this fact.

I am arguing, however, against density *as it is currently being discussed by the EcoDensity initiative*. In my experience, there are no simple answers to complex problems. The one-size-fitsall arguments put forth by the City of Vancouver are naive in many respects, and neglect to mention the conflicts and challenges inherent to the process of densification in the 21st century.

Although I won't bother speculating about why these conflicts and challenges are omitted, growing suspicions as to why the powerful economic incentives and interests that serve to benefit from densification have been excluded from the discussion are also serving to further discredit the EcoDensity initiative.

We must remember that the Vancouver area has been in the process of densifying for thousands of years. The act of permanently settling a virgin landscape adds more people than were initially present - no people. The City of Vancouver is just an extension of this natural process. The early settlers decided to build a landscape of single-family homes, but this was more "dense" than the ancient forest that was there before they arrived - aboriginal tribes notwithstanding.

With the creation of Champlain Heights in the 1980's, Vancouver had fully developed within its boundaries. Since then, it has continued the natural process of growth and densification by following the paths of least resistance - intensifying derelict (industrial) areas and locations with minimal political representation (locations with high immigrant populations). Now that industrial lands are at a minimum and a more politically astute citizenry has flourished, this tactic must necessarily change.

Simply put: densifying is what economically developing cities do, period....whether people like it or not. This fact sparked the explosion of secondary suites twenty years before the municipality recognized it as legitimate, and continues to work its magic today as single-family homes are illegally subdivided into three- and four-unit rental units.

So, if we take densification is natural precondition to the lifecycle of economically developing cities, the question of *how* to densify becomes paramount. And it is exactly this issue that EcoDensity leaves unresolved. For this requires a comprehensive understanding of *all* the factors affected by the densification and corresponding definitions, objectives, and targets. Unfortunately, these are not adequately presented within the EcoDensity documentation. Substituted instead by vague generalities and over-simplifications. The extent to which the content of the initiative has been diluted between the May 2007 and November 2007 Charter is well demonstrated in the analysis done by the <u>Vancouver Public Space Network</u>.

Basic issues must be addressed of anything fruitful is to be come from this initiative. Issues such as defining "right density" and "strategically located" (arterial may not make sense in all situations), discussing what other aspects need to be included as a means of legitimately lowering our ecological footprint (i.e. urban agriculture), communicating how *all* communities are going to their fair share of EcoDensification irrespective of economic status and a biased regulatory system, defining what "affordability" targets are to be the benchmark and how will these be achieved, and explaining what steps will be taken towards balancing the negative effects historically related to densification in Vancouver (i.e. crime, increased traffic, etc.).

Each must be communicated in a straighforward, easy-to-understand manner: high on clear visuals graphics and low on the obscure and verbose media used to-date. This will minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and create a more inclusionary process. Furthermore, it will serve to add legitimacy to the initiative.

Many EcoDensity advocates have touted the old NIMBY argument as holding back the greatness that is the EcoDensity initiative. Instead, I'd like to propose the MIMBI principle to explain the phenomenon: Minimal-Information-Makes-a-Bad-Incentive for anybody to happily jump on board the EcoDensity bandwagon.

Recently in a <u>Globe and Mail</u>, Trevor Boddy wrote that the EcoDensity initiative should be supported in spite of the way that it has been written and presented. And although I understand Boddy's argument, I am much more cynical. Because, to me, the way it is written and presented *is* the EcoDensity initiative: it outlines the argument, defines how it is interpreted, forms the basis of its future development and it ultimately what its success or failure will be judged

against. Accepting at face value and hoping for the best seems careless given how high the stakes are in every respect.

I think Vancouver's acclaimed status of being one of the best 20th century cities in the world is well warranted. For it was a century characterized by cheap energy, poor planning and development practices, the erosion of public space, and irresponsible political rhetoric. Within this context, rising to top didn't take much.

It's time we recognized that the new century is already very different than the one that just ended. This means we must play our part in thoroughly educating the public as to the complex situation in which we currently find ourselves and including them in the problem-solving process. Furthermore, we require strong leaders who have the courage to make tough decisions in the face of conflicting interests and information. This is not going to be an easy task.

EcoDensity can - and should be - the motivation that allows us to confidently open the door to the 21st century and bravely meet the stark challenges that lie before us. Let's get it right.