



City's focus on being green is already reshaping residents' views

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Shortly after he was elected in 2008, Mayor Gregor Robertson set out to dramatically reshape the city's economy, infrastructure, energy and transportation systems through a deep green lens.

Even before Robertson came on the scene, Vancouver was thought of as Canada's green city on the edge of a rainforest. In recent years it had taken steps to be even more environmentally friendly. The redevelopment of False Creek and Coal Harbour had put more homes within walking distance of the central business district. The city had already been tracking efforts to increase walking and biking, which showed that by 2004 it had already dramatically exceeded targets set for 2021.

But to a committed environmentalist like Robertson, that was not enough. Months after the election, he tapped 20 experts for what he called a Greenest City Action Team, saying he wanted Vancouver to stand out as an example to the rest of the world.

David Boyd, co-chair of the team, remembers one argument with Robertson in the earliest days.

"Being the greenest city in the world, I thought, was a bit overreaching," Boyd said. "How were we going to compete with the Copenhagens and Stockholms, which already had a real jump. I thought we should start by trying to be the greenest city in North America. He would not hear of it."

The policies the team drafted into the city's Greenest City Action Plan seemed implausible: Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 33 per cent from 2007 levels by 2020.

Double the number of "green jobs" from 2010 levels.

Require as of 2020 that all new buildings be carbon neutral, and cut energy by 20 per cent from 2007.

Cut per capita water consumption by 33 per cent from 2006 levels.

Reduce waste going to landfills or incinerators by half from 2008 levels.

The ideas were endless. The trick was how to convince residents to accept them and also not undermine the city's economy. Some elicited immediate buyin, such as more community gardens and food scraps composting. Others, like separated bike lanes, became flash points of anger.

Perhaps no colour infuriates drivers more than the broad patches of lime green that signal another bike lane. For others, allowing chicken coops in backyards and wheat fields on front lawns became sources of ridicule in a city that gave birth to the Greenpeace movement.

But five years after the team was established, there is tangible evidence everywhere of the city's handiwork reshaping citizens' views about the environment.

"You can't walk one block without seeing the impact of the Greenest City Action Plan, whether it is a new composting container, a Car2Go vehicle you wouldn't have seen before this, an LED street light that shines above your head, a new tree that's been planted or a new community garden," said Deputy Manager Sadhu Johnston, Vancouver's chief green city evangelist.

Non-Partisan Association Councillor George Affleck regards the GCAP as merely "a big PR exercise."

"The Greenest City Action Plan is just a different terminology for what we have been doing at the city

for a very long time," he said. "There is significant vagueness in a lot of their green initiatives."

Affleck says if the NPA were to regain power in November, it would get rid of many of the GCAP programs he believes waste money.

Some of the biggest change drivers are hidden. The city's new building code - considered to be among one of the most advanced in the world - affects many of the city's green initiatives behind the scenes, such as mandatory low flow water devices, and guidelines surrounding the use of construction materials and methods. **With buildings representing 55 per cent of the city's production of greenhouse gases, changing the way they are built will make a difference, even though it will take decades.**

In its report last year, the city said it is on track with many of its targets. Water consumption has declined by 20 per cent, more people are walking or biking and the number of hazardous air quality alerts has declined by 41 per cent.

Hundreds of garden plots have been created, and thousands of trees planted.

But on the thorny issue of greenhouse gas emissions, the levels have only declined by four per cent.

Perhaps the biggest roadblock is transportation itself. No better example stands out than the Broadway corridor, where the city desperately wants an underground subway to replace clogged buses and a traffic-choked street.

"We really need regional transportation investments, and the challenges in that regard are jeopardizing our ability to achieve our GCAP targets," Johnston said. "Not all parts of the plan are in our hands exclusively, and that is one we can't do alone."

Energy consultant Aldyen Donnelly, who works with companies in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, believes that as laudable as the GCAP is, the claimed four-per-cent reduction "is statistically zero."

"That is not going to get us there. **Four per cent in the first five years means they have to find 29 per cent in the next six years,**" she said. **"That just isn't going to happen."**

She wonders why, for example, the city doesn't institute a "no net new energy demand" for building construction. Developers would have to offer alternatives, such as doing energy retrofits on other buildings or paying for diesel bus conversions, in order to account for the new carbon footprints their buildings would create, she said.

Robertson said when Vancouver started its green plan, it was one of only a handful of cities contemplating such sweeping changes.

"The greenest city in the world goal was unprecedented and required lots of definition and community process to hammer out what that means and how we get there," he said.

"So taking the first few years to deliberately define and timeline our targets was really important. There has been really solid progress on several goals in the first five (years) but I expect our pace will quicken and as other cities innovate we can learn from them and the global progress in greening cities will accelerate dramatically."

Boyd on Friday said he'd like to see the city bring the action team back this year to "turbocharge" the plan with new ideas. But he believes Vancouver will get to its current target, even if it seems impossible.

"We are talking about a real transformation of the city's infrastructure, the buildings, transportation system, the energy infrastructure. That is a decade project, not a couple of years project," he said.

"Those things are the backbone of a city, the areas of greatest environmental impact. They are the things you cannot change overnight, but Vancouver has put in place plans, programs, building codes and things within its capacity that have set the stage for that transformation. "

jefflee@vancouver.sun.com [Twitter.com/sunciviclee](https://twitter.com/sunciviclee) Blog: www.vancouver.sun.com/jefflee