

# Pete McMartin: Vancouver's future, the steady and unsteady state

## Intense nodes of residential development may be key to taking pressure off leafy neighbourhoods

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST    MARCH 14, 2014



An aerial view conceptual drawing of Oakridge mall redevelopment.

**Photograph by:** Ivanhoe Cambridge, Vancouver Sun

Is there any more inflammatory issue right now in Vancouver than the public's uneasiness with change?

Oakridge, Dunbar, Grandview-Woodland, Marpole, Kitsilano, Norquay, the Downtown Eastside — it encompasses every area of the city.

That uneasiness isn't restricted to Vancouver, either. It exists in Richmond, Delta, Surrey, Langley, White Rock, the Fraser Valley — anywhere a public is aghast not just at the change their communities are undergoing, but at the pace of change. The places they know seem to be hurtling toward some new entity entirely foreign to them.

The impulse, naturally enough, is to halt that change. One example: In an commentary in *The Sun* a month ago, Gordon Gibson proposed an Urban Land Reserve to protect Vancouver's quiet neighbourhoods. The city's leafy, low-density single-family areas would be preserved in amber because ... well, because the people who live there like it that way.

Wrote Gibson:

"Here are three contrarian statements, quite against the conventional wisdom, almost blasphemous to some but nonetheless true. And they must be said:

"Urban density is not destiny. It is a choice.

"Population growth in Vancouver is not inevitable. It can be controlled or even stopped.

"The world of the future clearly must be a steady state, a sustainable society, where growth comes in the quality of life, not in quantity." I like Gibson. I sympathize with his sentiments. I hate aspects of the change bulldozing through my community, too. But it's a mistake to confuse a steady state city or steady state economy with the preservation of neighbourhoods. If Vancouver, Metro Vancouver or, for that matter, Canada is to achieve a true steady state, we'll have to undergo more change, not less. And if we are to prosper in what is shaping up to be a perilous future, our cities will have to be radically different than they are now.

Consider population control Gibson mentions. That is a conversation to be had at the federal level because until province or cities are granted the right to control or limit their populations — which won't happen — there is no practical way to stop people from moving here. Even if Canada decreased the pace of immigration, it might slow the pace of change in our cities but it wouldn't stop it. The world is urbanizing. Vancouver would continue to grow.

Should we down-zone, or limit the housing stock by refusing to grant new building permits, as Gibson suggests?

Again, that isn't steady state. That's drawing up the ladder behind you. It does nothing to curb the level of consumption, make the urban landscape more environmentally efficient or stop cities from sprawling outward. Those are true steady state goals: Preserving a comfortable status quo for established neighbourhoods is not.

And while restricting housing stock might maintain low density for some, it causes house prices to climb, and, elsewhere in the city, causes higher densities and crowding in the form of secondary, and often illegal, suites. People have to find places to live. They won't necessarily follow the rules in doing so.

In the past, Vancouver has enacted rate-of-change bylaws that helped preserve the low-density characteristics of some neighbourhoods — most notably in Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy. But back then, Vancouver had empty brownfield sites where new housing could be built to take the pressure off of rising market demands.

"But we've run out of those brownfield sites," said Gord Price, an SFU urban affairs professor and former city councillor, "so now we're seeing the pressures on housing being played out across the city — Grandview-Woodland, Oakridge, Marpole — the neighbourhoods are different but the conflicts are the same."

The Oakridge town centre redevelopment is a prime example. City planners see it in terms of

maximizing the potential of the Canada Line's rapid transit and, by creating a large resident population within walking distance of all the amenities the redevelopment will offer, of creating a more environmentally efficient place.

As it is now, Oakridge is essentially a 24-acre parking lot. But by densifying, by building residential towers in the midst of what is now a sea of single-family homes, and by getting people out of their cars, it has the potential to become a truer neighbourhood than the neighbourhoods surrounding it.

Many people in those existing neighbourhoods don't see it that way, of course, and that is understandable. Who doesn't want to preserve the neighbourhoods they know and love?

But we are entering an age of compromise. If we are to create a true steady state economy and landscape — if only to adapt to the climate and peak oil crises heading our way — our cities and personal expectations will have to change. And nodes of intense development like Oakridge might actually help preserve the nature of those surrounding neighbourhoods by relieving the housing pressures those neighbourhoods inevitably will feel. Oakridge could be their saviour, not their destruction.

A final thought: Those neighbourhoods that Gibson and others want to preserve are themselves products of densification. They progressed from wilderness to farmland to suburb to city. From that perspective, it isn't change that has to be stopped, but time.

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