

## THE NEWSPAPER'S VIEW

# Densification may be only option to support growth

**T**he B.C. budget last week made only passing reference to what is a stunning bit of information about growth in the Lower Mainland.

The document stated that region's population has increased 70 per cent since the mid-1980s — which certainly helps explain the recent real estate boom.

The population in the rest of Canada grew by just 35 per cent over that same time period.

Population pressures in southwestern B.C. appear to be the result of a confluence of events, over which people here have little control.

Urbanization, a global phenomenon, has meant that while 68 per cent of B.C. residents lived in urban areas back in 1951, 86 per cent do today.

And because the Lower Mainland is B.C.'s principal economic engine, 60 per cent of British Columbians, or 2.6 million people, live in the region.

By contrast, Greater Toronto accommodates 44 per cent of Ontarians. The Montreal area is home to 46 per cent of Quebecers.

In B.C., the urbanization trend is being accelerated by a slump in commodity prices and a pine beetle infestation that have resulted in smaller resource-based communities bleeding jobs, forcing their inhabitants out.

And then there is immigration. Most newcomers to the province also see their best economic hopes in the Lower Mainland.

This, of course, has all translated into enormous pressure on the housing stock in a geographically constrained part of the province. Few believe the answer lies in advocating urban sprawl eastward. That would be an environmentally unsustainable option that has been widely rejected in favour of a policy of urban densification.

In his budget, Finance Minister Mike de Jong largely rejected direct action by the province to ease housing pressures, and pointed to densification as the answer to affordability challenges.

But if densification is to be a means of easing the Lower Mainland housing squeeze, it must be done with sensitivity.

A new survey, sponsored by the Real Estate Foundation of B.C., offers important pointers to policy-makers who control the densification levers. The survey of 1,701 B.C. residents, carried out last July, shows half do not believe "ordinary citizens" get enough say in planning and development. Meanwhile, 81 per cent would support "at least some" densification as long as it is in the form of low rise structures.

Municipalities would be wise to take careful note of such opinions.

Densification is generally viewed as a necessary evil in a region that is growing so quickly.

But it still requires a healthy degree of social licence.