

Barbara Yaffe: Lower Mainlanders strongly against continuing densification

BY BARBARA YAFFE, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 25, 2016



Survey respondents overwhelmingly said they covet the nature and green space around them, with just 13 per cent supporting more 'high-density communities'.

Photograph by: Gerry Kahrmann, PNG

Local politicians for years have tried valiantly to convince Lower Mainlanders the only real solution to unaffordable housing is densification.

But if results of a new survey on preferred development are to be believed, there is a big problem with their strategy: The public is not buying it.

Incredibly, 44 per cent of those surveyed last July said, "All or most future development should be single, detached homes" — a category of shelter considered something of a relic in a region with a shortage of land and housing stock.

Indeed, single-family homes have become prohibitively expensive, and are expected to decline in number — from barely 33 per cent of the region's housing stock in 2011 to 10 per cent by 2040.

Respondents overwhelmingly said they covet the nature and green space around them, with just 13 per cent supporting more "high-density communities". And where there is to be density, they want low-rise development.

Tellingly, half of respondents believe that "ordinary citizens don't have enough say in planning and development."

"It's clear that B.C. residents need a more complete, inclusive conversation with planners and developers about density," remarked Jack Wong, CEO of the Real Estate Foundation of B.C. which sponsored the survey of 1,701 British Columbians, nearly two thirds of them from the Lower Mainland.

"With a million people expected to move into the Greater Vancouver region in the next 40 years, we need to come up with a new shared vision of what an ideal community looks like."

Wong's philanthropic foundation awards grants to non-profits working "to improve B.C. communities and the natural environment".

His remarks are an understatement. The survey suggests that municipalities have utterly mishandled the task of involving and educating their residents to enable them to cope with the enormous challenges facing the region.

Developers are more interested in building high-density towers than low-rise buildings because, obviously, there is greater opportunity to profit through economies of scale.

Meanwhile, communities have felt shut out of decision-making, as exemplified by recent pitched battles over official development plans in Marpole and Mount Pleasant, and heritage restrictions in Shaughnessy.

More recently, a No Tower Coalition has sprung up to battle a 12- to 15-storey building pegged for Commercial Drive and Venables.

At the same time, 75 per cent of those surveyed reported being "extremely or quite concerned about the cost of housing."

Regardless, they are not making the connection that the way to lower housing costs is to densify. Or, they refuse to accept densification in exchange for affordability. Young urban renters expressed the greatest tolerance for density.

The "proof of the pudding" is that densification used to date has NOT brought affordability. -cjk

Those surveyed contend that if densification must take place, it should be low-rise. People clearly are less enthused about the highrises — many of them architecturally uninspiring — that, at least in the Lower Mainland, have been sprouting around rapid transit stations.

More encouragingly, 80 per cent of respondents report the quality of life in their communities is good or excellent. And those residing on Vancouver Island and in the southern Interior were most positive about the quality of life in their communities.

Respondents who were less enthused about where they live cited irritants like crime and drugs, overpopulation and crowding or urban sprawl.

And there is a fair degree of pessimism out there, with 62 per cent unsure or pessimistic that their communities would be better places to live in 10 years.

"This is striking," observes the survey, "given that a general expectation of continuous improvement has long been a social norm."

Clearly, more work needs to be done to ensure citizens are informed about the pressures and challenges this region face. And people have to be more included in the decision-making taking place around development.

Municipal planners must start seeing citizens as genuine partners, and make their development compromises a lot less grudgingly.

Planners may be experts in urban development, but Lower Mainlanders are the experts on knowing how they want to live.

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