

Regional growth plan ignores economy, lacks coherence

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A goal without a plan is just a wish.

American talk show host and columnist Larry Elder

Metro Vancouver, our unelected regional governing body, has identified ambitious goals in its Regional Growth Strategy to 2040, from responding to climate change, to developing complete communities, to creating compact urban areas, to supporting a sustainable economy.

However, its strategies for achieving them are as ephemeral as a rainbow and oblivious to the realities of living in the Lower Mainland.

It acknowledges that the region's population will grow by 1.2 million over the time frame of the plan and forecasts that 574,000 new dwellings will be needed, but offers no measures to accommodate this growth. In fact, it speaks about containment rather than expansion, and seems to seek to preserve the status quo rather than build for the future.

Arguably one of the most serious challenges facing the region is affordable housing, yet there is little in the 80-page document that directly addresses it beyond a reference to the 2007 Affordable Housing Strategy, which had a 10-year timeline. Worse, although the regional government cannot compel municipalities to build residential projects, it can stop them from doing so if they don't comply with the plan's restrictive land-use policies.

Affordability is measured as a multiple of the median household income and Vancouver ranks third among the world's least affordable cities. The average home costs 9.5 times Vancouver's median household income of \$63,100, yet there is not a single paragraph in the plan about stimulating economic growth to raise incomes.

There is lip-service about supporting a sustainable economy, but economic development takes a back seat to climate change and mass transit. As important as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing public transit services are, they won't happen in the absence of a competitive economy that provides well-paid jobs to the people who live here.

The plan's commitment to "preserve" industrial lands is insufficient assurance for investors that their businesses will have room to grow and prosper.

We agree with the goal of trying to encourage people to live where they can walk or cycle to work, to school, to shops and to recreation and entertainment. Where we part company is when the plan gives scant attention to the movement of goods. Given the importance of Port Metro Vancouver as Canada's Pacific Gateway, and Vancouver International Airport as a vital global transportation hub, the plan should speak to the infrastructure needed to facilitate trade through these portals. Instead, the plan argues against "capital-intensive expansion" of the road network.

The document misrepresents the composition of the regional economy, emphasizing the importance of agriculture, which accounts for about 9,000 jobs, while completely ignoring manufacturing, which employs 106,000.

Metro Vancouver's grand vision can only be realized if the regional economy is vibrant and competitive, but the plan offers no measures to improve it. Unfortunately, people don't live the way Metro Vancouver wants them to; nor do industries adhere to the decentralized model advocated by the regional government. First of all, in a two-income household (which is the norm), wageearners are more likely to work in different municipalities than they are to commute together to the City of Vancouver. What's more, industries tend to locate in clusters to take advantage of the efficiencies of proximity, rather than setting up plants scattered in various jurisdictions for the convenience of their workers. The plan put forward by Metro Vancouver defies these facts on the ground.

In sum, the Regional Growth Strategy is a flawed document that most egregiously ignores the economic foundation upon which all of its other initiatives depend and fails to take into consideration the way people who live in the region work, travel, shop and entertain themselves.

Before this plan is cast in stone, it needs to be reconsidered and revised to reflect something more substantial, real and coherent than the dreams of planners. Until then, it is merely wishful thinking and should be withdrawn.

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