

Vancouver a healthy example for developers' convention

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BY DERRICK PENNER, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 8, 2014 8:48 AM



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Photograph by: Stuart Davis, PNG

VANCOUVER — If Vancouver has something to teach other cities about building a community focused on better health, you might find more familiar touches of it being built around North America following the Urban Land Institute's conference being held here this week.

"You can go across the United States, or North America, and see the people who participate (in the ULI) are the leaders of their firms," said Stefan Moores, a member of Vancouver's ULI chapter and president of the consulting firm the Castlemain Goup. "These are the people driving (their) markets."

And from his observation, Moores said, the results of debates sparked at a conference "really emerge 18 to 24 months later in the market."

This marks the first time since 1985 the ULI has held its spring meeting outside the U.S. It chose Vancouver because it was looking for a location to expand its increasing "global nature," according to its CEO Patrick Phillips.

Vancouver "was perceived to be a safe step outside the U.S. border" to be the ULI's gateway city, Phillips said. But the setting also coincides with the ULI's current focus of research on health: building communities that emphasize healthy lifestyles, or building housing appropriate for people's health needs.

"(Vancouver) really illustrates the concept very well," Phillips said, and not just for its natural setting with good parks that promote outdoor activity.

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The conference will bring together 3,000 delegates representing a cross-section of the development industry, including developers, architects, engineers and academics from universities across North America for an event that will be as much a field trip as site-centred conference.

Along with 36 topic discussions (between general sessions and breakout meetings), the conference is hosting 12 tours with titles like Surrey: Creating the Components of an Urban(e) City Centre, and Gastown, a Fine Balance: Treading Between "Hip," "History," and "Heroin."

The indoor sessions cover a wide range of topics, from managing interest rates and understanding how to attract institutional capital to trends in energy efficiency and innovation in real estate.

However, there is also a strong undercurrent of health-related topics, from finding the market for health and wellness to an examination of Vancouver as a livable city, which local expert Gordon Price said delegates won't be limited to just talking about.

Price, director of Simon Fraser University's City Program, said "livable density" has become boilerplate discussion in planning circles these days, "but what does that look like?"

"For a lot of delegates, I think the real learning will be in getting outside the convention centre and experiencing the immediate city around them," Price said.

Price, who is a delegate to the event and leading some of the tours, said in particular the tours of most interest will be to see how "livable density" has been done in Metro Vancouver's suburbs.

For Moores, being able to host the conference is a coup for a chapter that has only been around since 2005.

Mary Beth Corrigan, ULI's senior vice-president for meetings, said the spring conference is the smaller of their two annual events, but members come to learn, to network and potentially do deals.

The ULI bills itself as an organization that provides leadership on responsible land use for creating sustainable communities. The 2015 spring conference is set for Houston.

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