

Ransford: Have your say in planning changes

Vote: Metro Vancouver housing picture a key talking point in civic election campaigns

BY BOB RANSFORD, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 20, 2014



Realists, says Bob Ransford, know people with roots in this region want to ensure that change is well-planned and they want some say in that change.

Photograph by: Steven Senne, AP

Beware anyone who tells you they can make housing more affordable in Metro Vancouver and at the same time protect your neighbourhood from change. This is a false promise.

You'll probably hear a lot of politicians in Metro Vancouver make this false promise over the next few weeks as they campaign for the civic elections on Nov. 15. They're doing what most politicians do at election time — telling you what you want to hear.

Many of them know they're playing with you while they're playing with the truth. I guess they expect to find different words to explain, if they are elected, how and why the change that inevitably will come to your neighbourhood will help to temper housing prices that continue to climb in the region.

There are others on the campaign trail perpetuating this promise — about having your cake and eating it, too. They naively believe we can continue to protect single-family neighbourhoods from any density, oppose higher-density along arterial streets and transit lines and stop growth from sprawling on to farmland.

Their naiveté goes further. They also believe they can perform this magic and still provide a diverse range of housing to meet the needs of evolving demographic groups — with that, housing at prices that will be within reach of those in all income groups. Some of them also believe supply and demand don't matter because government can intervene and provide housing for the masses.

They are the same candidates who will spend a lot of time over the next few weeks talking about process, about empowering citizens, about consulting more and putting neighbourhood interests above developers' interests.

If these candidates are elected to serve on municipal councils, they'll have a rude awakening —

probably within their first year in office — and they'll be scrambling to find appropriate words to reconcile their promises with the decisions they'll inevitably begin to make. They will probably talk about process stuff again. They'll tell you they are searching for the perfect consultative process, but while the search is on, decisions need to be made.

The really dangerous groups are those who might get elected and not wake up to reality. They'll exacerbate the housing affordability challenge we all face in Metro Vancouver, the same one people face in many cities and towns throughout the Western world. They'll slow down the process of approving changes that will result in land for housing being used more efficiently.

Imagine every in-fill project in a single-family neighbourhood that has the promise of creating more dwelling units on less land — without a wholesale revamping of the neighbourhood's character — being treated like a mega-development.

Imagine layer upon layer of reviews, consultations, re-works and approvals that add the costs associated with time and other unnecessary burdens to the total cost of new housing. Imagine if no one has the fortitude to bring new gentle density to our first-ring suburban neighbourhoods. You think housing prices are astronomical today? If these people get elected to councils, just wait, because you ain't seen nothing yet.

Even more dangerous could be the actions of this group of politicians who might try to both tinker with supply using government resources to build lots of subsidized new housing and tinker with demand by using blunt regulatory tools, like special levies on non-resident property purchasers or taxes on temporarily unoccupied homes. Moves like these will destabilize the housing market, driving prices down in neighbourhoods where established residents will see their equity quickly vanish, and pushing prices up in other segments of the market faster than we've ever seen.

Moreover, if you think property taxes are almost unbearable today, imagine the levels they'll rise to if government jumps into the housing development business and tries to provide subsidized affordable housing for middle-income earners.

The people you want to elect to city councils are the realists who know Metro Vancouver will, for the foreseeable future, be a destination for those seeking livability, from wherever they come. These are the candidates who also understand that those of us fortunate enough to have roots here and cherish our neighbourhoods want to ensure that change is well planned and that we want some say in planning that change. They're the realists who understand that our needs for housing — those of us who are long established in neighbourhoods — are changing. And, to meet our needs, new housing stock is required and neighbourhood change is inevitable.

They are the people who understand that the more supply of new housing is constrained, the higher prices will climb, as those demanding housing bid up the prices.

It won't be easy to discern which candidates are which. The rhetoric of political campaigns makes that the toughest challenge. Good luck to all voters.

Please participate. Listen to the candidates and vote.

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