

Barbara Yaffe: In my opinion

Vancouverites are a breed apart from the residents in the other cities where Brian Jackson has done urban planning work.

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OPINION

Lamenting caustic civic discourse

'Haters and hypocrites': Retiring city planner says he, staff dealt with 'unprecedented' level of scrutiny



Barbara Yaffe

Vancouverites take their city personally, and do not like change. Which has made Brian Jackson's job something of a tightrope act.

Jackson, who is retiring today after 3½ years as Vancouver's chief planner, says people here are different from residents of other U.S. and Canadian cities where he has worked — Los Angeles; Clark County, Nev.; Toronto; Richmond.

"There are so many people here who are passionately interested in following everything that is happening around planning. They are well-educated about planning issues and it's an important part of their lives."

In a recent interview reflecting on his job stint, Jackson said this has been both a curse and a blessing.

People love the city — exactly as is. But it's tough to have no change in a city poised to receive 5,000 new residents a year over the next 30 years.

"My staff, when they go to public meetings, have been spit at. They've been called names. They've been told they're in the pockets of developers."

Several weeks ago, Jackson delivered a speech to the Urban Development Institute blasting the "haters and hypocrites" who have criticized him and his department.

In his office near the city hall building, a utilitarian space offering a peekaboo view of the North Shore mountains, Jackson told me the level of discourse around civic issues has plummeted in recent years.

He blames social media for amplifying controversies.

Jackson believes the next city planner — still unchosen — may have to fight fire with fire and start doing battle with the nay-sayers online.

Jackson also questions the ethics of former planners who issue catcalls from the sidelines long after they have left the city's employ. He won't name names, but says: "There is an extraordinary interest from former planners in Vancouver, in continuing to comment on what's going on in the city. It does not happen in any other city I'm familiar with. It crosses the line."

Jackson says the level of scrutiny he has received is "unprecedented," and points to two development issues that caused particular grief: the community plan for Grandview-Woodland, and proposals for a new tower adjacent to the downtown railway station on Cordova.

Jackson suspects public negativity around planning matters is the result of residents growing exasperated with a lack of housing affordability, disruptive demolitions and changes to leafy single-family neighbourhoods.

Affordability, he says, has worsened because of another circumstance unique to Vancouver — the city has not seen a significant price correction since 1985. When he moved back to Vancouver from L.A. in 2006, he rented, waiting for prices to drop.

"I waited and waited and waited. Prices never dropped."

In 2008, Jackson plunged in, paying nearly \$700,000 for the two-bedroom condo in Yaletown where he now lives. He foresees no change in ever-upward



Outgoing Vancouver city planner Brian Jackson says two of the most contentious development issues he's dealt with are the community plan for Grandview-Woodland and proposals for a new tower on Cordova.

pricing pressures on housing unless Ottawa shifts immigration policy or applies land purchase restrictions on foreign buyers or the Bank of Canada hikes interest rates.

Jackson's greatest concern as he takes his leave is for the people "being left behind."

To that end, he believes more rental housing is needed in the city. He notes the planning department has rezoned parts of Norquay and Marpole for

townhouse development.

The city also is expanding its "tenant relocation packages," programs aimed at assisting those evicted from their rental units.

But the city, alone, cannot afford to create the affordable social housing needed in a city like Vancouver, he says. The public needs to let federal and provincial politicians know that all government levels must pitch in to address what is a unique

situation in Vancouver, whereby those with modest incomes are left scrambling for housing.

Challenges aside, says Jackson, Vancouverites should not lose sight of the fact that "planners come from around the world to study what we've done in Vancouver. ... And they can't believe what we've been able to deliver."

"There's no place on earth like Vancouver."

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Lamenting caustic civic discourse 2

'Haters and hypocrites': Retiring city planner says he, staff dealt with 'unprecedented' level of scrutiny

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NICK PROCAYLO/PNG FILE

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Perhaps they also do not know the price/
cost of what was delivered! - cjk

"There's no place on earth like Vancouver."

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