

# Urban landscape faces challenges

**Competing interests:** Yet a lack of regional planning and co-operation is going to make life tough

**MEG HOLDEN**

SPECIAL TO THE SUN



**O**ur region is growing. More people are coming — a million of them between 2011 and 2041 — adding to our regional population of 2.5 million today. This is not an unprecedented growth rate (our regional growth rate was 14.3 per cent between 1991-96, faster than any other city in Canada).

But it may be unprecedented growth in terms of the socioeconomic diversity of the newcomers. Many of them will be filthy rich. Fair numbers of them will be excruciatingly poor.

We will continue to be told, as we are told today, that we need development, for the sake of these newcomers, and for the sake of maintaining our quality of life. The coming decades will prove that this is more of a codependent relationship. Developers need the region, its underlying infrastructure, its governance, and us, its public, at least as much as the inverse is true.

In very basic ways, the functioning of the habits and expectations of our daily lives depends upon the existence of the surrounding region — the way we travel, the goods we buy, consume and dispose of, the homes we rent, buy, renovate and sell to others, the people we share our workdays with, our gas and electricity and the infrastructure that gets those to our homes, workplaces and vehicles.



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Current growth trends suggest that now when we need it most, regional thinking seems to have fallen to its nadir. Instead, municipal planning seems to hold sway, ignoring important issues such as improvements to public transportation that could help prevent future traffic gridlock.

Regional thinking toward better decision making and quality of life has both risen and fallen in B.C. Its rise happened 50 years ago, in 1965, when the province created regional districts. One of the key motivations for creating these regions was to address the problem of equity across the spectrum of highly urban to rural areas within the same watershed, "job-shed" and "lifestyle-shed." And regional districts work to prevent the free riding of exurban and suburban municipalities on infrastructure and amenities paid for by urban centres, or the inverse of urban municipalities free riding on the green space and natural infrastructure preserved in the exurbs.

We have not yet solved the



problem of regional equity. In fact, today's growth trends suggest that now when we need it most, regional thinking seems to have fallen to its nadir. The regional transportation referendum failed this year, driving us into likely gridlock on our roads, and delays in planned public transportation improvements, due to an inadequate regional transportation system. Regional land use planning has recently come head-to-head with municipal planning, and municipalities don't all buy the argument that regional thinking will serve their best interests when it

comes to where, when and how to develop.

Our growth implies that in the coming years, we will all assimilate a new normal understanding of "house" and "transportation" that takes the scarcity of our regional common wealth better into account. This transition is well underway: last year, under 27 per cent of new homes constructed were single family. As of now, 75 per cent of us get around via private automobile, but with three million new daily trips added to our transportation system in the coming years, this needs to change too. Our suburbs are folding in on themselves; our city and town centres are folding in yet again. Like regional origami.

Recognizing the value of our regional infrastructure and public space means a lot more than tallying up the usual suspects of bridges, farms, and shorelines. It also includes our streets, our public institutions, the pipes and other infrastructure that lies in between us and beneath our feet. We have mayors and other leaders in our region who recognize this and have assumed a new role as advocates for our regional interests, against those of the provincial and federal governments: against more tankers in Burrard Inlet, against a bigger pipeline for Kinder Morgan, against insufficient action to combat climate change. This kind of metropolitan activism strikes some of us as bluster, others as unbecoming. New federal leadership will surely help, but Ottawa and Victoria still have a long road to travel to develop a metropolitan vision of where good growth and development come from. This clash means that the more we hear from Ottawa that "x is good for Canada," the less there may be in "x" for us, as a region.

Rethinking the Region IV, the fourth in an annual series of daylong events, will take place in early May 2016. Co-hosted by the SFU Urban Studies Program and SFU School of Public Policy, and open to the public, this event will provide us an opportunity to look more deeply at the regional nature of our Lower Mainland and craft a better urban future.

*Meg Holden is an associate professor in the Graduate Urban Studies Program and Geography Department at Simon Fraser University.*