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Opinion: Development taken to new level by Vision Vancouver

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Photo Dan Toulgoet

Elizabeth Murphy is a private sector project manager and a former property development officer for the City of Vancouver's Housing and Properties Department and for B.C. Housing. She is also one of the fiercest public critics of the city's urban development blitz.

Over the last two terms, Vision Vancouver has become even more development-friendly than the NPA, Murphy says — perhaps not surprising given the heavy financing of past civic campaigns by developers.

The buzzword “ecodensity,” first heard during the term of former NPA mayor Sam Sullivan, promised the best of both worlds. Buyers with bucks would have a shot at owning small but ritzy condos stacked like Ikea shelving units, helping spare the Lower Mainland from urban sprawl and a widening ecological footprint.

Yet the facts do not support the claims frequently made for ecodensity, Murphy insists.

“Vancouver has the highest number of towers per capita in the world. However, towers are the least energy-efficient form of development. They may be appropriate in some locations such as downtown, but not because they are “green.” Glass wall concrete construction with elevators all increase energy consumption,” she writes by email.

Murphy discovered glass wall construction has a thermal rating of only about R2 while even a standard insulated 2x4 wood stud wall in an older building is R15 at minimum. “Also, in steel stud framing the rating is halved compared with wood. Glass wall buildings need air-conditioning which most other forms of development in this climate do not.”

One envelope consultant told her, off the record, that the thermal profile of high-rise glass towers is comparable “to castles in the Middle Ages.”

In addition, high-density development inflates land values; this in turn increases redevelopment pressure on the more affordable older building stock. The end result is higher property taxes for urban property owners.

“Before the Regional Growth Strategy there was the Liveable Region Strategic Plan that was brought in in the early ’90s,” Murphy tells me over coffee in Kitsilano. “And that’s what the whole city plan was in response to... to meet the objectives of the Liveable Region Strategic Plan.”

Not only has Vision tossed aside the city plan, she says, they also replaced the “liveable” template for a “growth” template. “And the growth is not just up, it’s out! They’ve weakened the protection of the green zones, not only the ALR but all the conservation lands.”

What’s even “more appalling” to the project manager than the leapfrogging tower heights is that Vision changed the tower separation guideline from 400 to 75 feet. In built-up sections of the city, sunny days are no guarantee that light will strike the streets for any length of time. With towers separated by a stone’s toss, a staggered city skyline will offer shrinking corridors of light and severed sightlines.

“Shadow diagrams” for building construction used to be part of the approval process, she observes. “It’s completely disregarded now, they don’t care.”

“If you have a regional plan that not only allows you to build towers anywhere you want but also allows you to build out subdivisions wherever you want, all you are doing is promoting growth up and out. It’s not doing anything that’s reducing our ecological footprint. It’s increasing it many times over.”

Under Vision’s watch, the numbers of homeless have tripled, mostly due to the displacement of lower income residents by development pressures. The NPA initiated 14 sites of affordable housing, but they still have not been completed under Vision, she observes. As for the much-heated but arguably progressive bicycle lane program, that was launched back in the mid-’90s. The NPA’s electoral smash-up resulted in Vision picking up the derailleurs.

So is the “Greenest City” branding more like a Potemkin Village initiative, leading Gregor Robertson’s party to become the default choice of urban hipsters and environmentally conscious boomers alike?

“It’s really just a bunch of bunk. The whole idea that Vision is creating this greenest city, it’s just baloney. It’s governance by spin, that’s what it’s about.”

Murphy is no fan of either party, but insists the NPA “are less in the pocket of the development industry than their successors, if you can believe it. They used to be the development party, but Vision has gone far beyond, gone far beyond.”

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