

Charrette system may be just what city needs for planning

People in all neighbourhoods and from all perspectives need to be part of the process for the future - not just in words, but in actions

BY BOB RANSFORD, SPECIAL TO THE SUN AUGUST 6, 2011

Vancouver's Vision council has called the bluff of neighbourhood activists who have been leading a series of recent battles against development proposals by arguing that neighbourhoods can't accept new density and accommodate change without proper plans in place. Those plans will soon arrive.

Citizens of Vancouver are going to have an opportunity to make plans that guide the future of their neighbourhoods, starting with three new neighbourhoods where planning has now been launched: Grandview Woodlands, Marpole and the West End. City council recently approved the launch of an ambitious program to complete these three plans simultaneously within less than two years.

This is just a start to land-use and physical planning in Vancouver. Less than a year from now, council will begin tackling a city-wide plan. That plan will knit together the neighbourhood plans and align future planning at all scales with the city's various policies, such as ecodensity, greenest city initiatives, transportation planning and urban design.

This is not an easy task in a city where most people resist change of any kind, but want to protect a quality of life that is under threat because we don't have plans that embrace and manage change. Unaffordable housing prices can be traced back to this unrealistic approach to managing growth.

Vancouver council seems wise to this paradox. It has signalled that the new planning regime that will create a flexible framework to guide positive change and development is one that must face reality.

No neighbourhood will be able to claim it is an island unto itself. Future community plans - including a new city-wide plan - will need to integrate issues from multiple perspectives. Neighbourhoods will have to contend with global, regional and city-wide challenges, including the big-picture issues such as climate change and peak oil, public health, demographic shifts and changing economies.

Council has also said that plans must be flexible, "living documents," not rules or "rigid blueprints." They must be clear frameworks capable of giving way to emerging new global, provincial, regional and city-wide trends and changes.

So the tone has been set. Yes, plans are needed to manage change and protect quality of life in neighbourhoods. Citizens will craft them. But those plans have to be realistic. Development is going to continue occurring. Big trends can't be ignored. Plans have to be nimble and people need to be flexible.

The big question is how to craft those plans with those ground rules in place and truly engage citizens in the process. Getting people to the table means building trust where, these days, it is in short supply.

So far, the city has talked about a few new ideas to better engage citizens and build that trust. Planners

will use new tools and technologies such as social media, web-based engagement and increased language translation. They will try to build better capacity at the neighbourhood level by educating people on planning principles, terminology and on big trends.

But building trust requires more. People need to feel as though they crafted the plans that will guide physical change. They need to be at the drawing table and the pencil needs to be in their hands - literally.

It's not enough to publish pages and pages of comments and questionnaire results then transform these words into more words in the form of policies, regulations and guidelines. A plan that builds trust is one that people can look at and say "we were at the table when those plans were drawn. That plan shows what our neighbourhood will look like in the future."

Plans need to graphically depict the future built form and the public spaces. They need to show where various housing forms will be located, what they will look like, where commercial services will be located and what the streetscape will look like when they walk between their home and the grocery store.

The best way of crafting those plans is not the way the city has mostly done it in the past. The charrette is the answer to collaboratively drafting plans for physical change. There is a rigour to a real charrette and it is based on the participants collaborating over an intensive period of time, providing immediate feedback in a series of progressive developments of a design-based plan, culminating in a joint solution.

Ironically, the National Charrette Institute will be delivering training on this system in the Vancouver area for the first time Sept. 26 to 28. Anyone interested in effective community planning can find out details about this course that teaches the charrette system at <https://shop.charretteinstitute.org/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=CS3-11> Hopefully, anyone who wants to constructively contribute to Vancouver's ambitious goals of crafting a physical plan for the city will learn about the techniques of the charrette system. It may just be the answer for engaging citizens in realistic planning.

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