

Opinion: No need to be frightened by higher densities in neighbourhoods

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Gordon Harris

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neighbourhood was further freighted by the presumption it could not also be a densely populated one.

With respect, this is just wrong. The Metro Vancouver region is now full of quiet neighbourhoods that are bustling with well-behaved people and yet devoid of the dangers and disturbances that certain suburbanites associate — inevitably — with any housing form besides the single-family dwelling.

Walk through Vancouver's West End any time other than fireworks night and you'll find a peaceful, quiet and pedestrian-friendly community. Enjoy the tranquillity of creekside Yaletown or the River District on the revitalized Fraser Lands. Or come up to UniverCity on Burnaby Mountain. Grab a coffee on the High Street. Marvel at the greenest child care centre on the planet, one we expect to be certified as the first Living Building in Canada. Play in the urban park or explore the 28 km of trails in the Burnaby Mountain Conservation Area.

That is a 576-hectare preserve, a place — like the Agricultural Land Reserve — that will never be developed. And that's because, when it came time to develop Simon Fraser University's endowment lands, the university and the City of Burnaby chose density over sprawl. They chose to concentrate this walkable, livable and sustainable community on 65 hectares and to dedicate the remaining 320 hectares to the conservation Area. They chose a footprint a little larger than Queen Elizabeth Park to preserve an area four-fifths the size of Stanley Park. It was a tradeoff and people in line to buy homes on Burnaby Mountain clearly believe it was a good one.

In his complaint about density in Vancouver, Gibson praised the notion of the ALR, suggesting we establish an Urban Land Reserve "for our quiet neighbourhoods." There is a problem with Gibson's math: if we are to protect the agricultural belt around Vancouver and drop a sparsity cloak over suburban-style neighbourhoods such as those on Vancouver's West Side, where might we house the million people who will move to, or be born in, the region in the next 25 years. If not in Gibson's back yard, whose?

Density, for all of Gibson's skepticism, is a solution to a host of social challenges. As Larry Beasley, Anne McAfee and the other pioneering planners at the City of Vancouver have proved, dense neighbourhoods, when well-designed (False Creek/Fairview, the former Expo lands, the Athletes Village), tend to be friendly and safe, full of kindly people watching, quietly, over one another. Compact urban communities are economically efficient, easier and cheaper to serve with everything from sewer and water to excellent transit. They have critical mass to support shops and other services in easy walking distance. They are good for mothers walking their children to school and equally good for the aged and infirm, for people who can't (or don't want to) drive.

There are reasonable discussions to be had about limits to density. It's marvellous, for example, that the people of Grandview-Woodland will have access to a Citizens Assembly to help determine how many more people they will welcome to their quiet neighbourhood.

But if we are to have those discussions we must be reasonable. Better yet, we should be optimistic. We should grasp the challenge of creating — or expanding the capacity of — the vibrant, livable, safe and quiet neighbourhoods throughout the region and do so in a way that preserves green space, for our immediate pleasure and for everyone's future.

We cannot — and should not — stop growth in our beautiful city. It is our challenge to accommodate it thoughtfully, affordably and sustainably. In that pursuit, compact urban communities will always be the preferred choice.

Gordon Harris is the president and CEO of SFU Community Trust, which is responsible for developing UniverCity, the model sustainable community on Burnaby Mountain.