

Opinion: It's time to renew Vancouver's CityPlan

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Kaye Matheny is the new general manager of licensing at Vancouver City Hall. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP /PNG

It's been nearly 25 years since Vancouver launched CityPlan, engaging thousands of residents in a process that offered everyone in the city a chance to air their views, express their concerns and, ultimately, be real players in the creation of a vision for Vancouver. And while the resulting plan had its critics, it's hard to challenge its legitimacy.

After a century during which planning was often executed in the corridors of City Hall, with input only from those directly affected by an individual project or development application, we had an overarching plan based on input from almost 20,000 citizens.

That early 1990's vision — crafted for a city of 500,000 — is now dated. More than 150,000 people have since joined the population, a 30-per-cent increase. For that and so many other reasons, it's time — perhaps past time — that we had another look. Certainly, the stars seem aligned.

For starters, Vancouver has just restructured the planning department and named its new senior planning team, including Gil Kelley, from San Francisco, and Kaye Matheny, from New York. These are both seasoned professionals, and they face a host of large-scale projects that could transform the city, but are, at this point, poorly coordinated.

Think about, for instance :

- the renewal of St. Paul's Hospital;
- the removal of the Georgia/Dunsmuir viaducts;
- the search for a home (and the money) for a new Vancouver Art Gallery;
- a SkyTrain station to serve the new Emily Carr University campus at Great Northern Way;
- the redevelopment of the Oakridge Transit Centre.

Imagine how much better it would be for Vancouver and its citizens if these projects were all being planned and developed within a comprehensive and strategic approach to real city-building.

Vancouver has grown and changed in many important ways since the early 1990s. The citywide plan we need today — and the process to achieve it — will be quite different than CityPlan. Ours is a much more diverse population, and we have built one of the most vibrant and livable downtowns in the country since CityPlan was completed. In the process, we have won worldwide attention for what is now known as "Vancouverism" — which though sometimes misunderstood as an architectural style (point towers on mixed-use podiums), is actually an innovative planning process — born of CityPlan, and studied by planners, politicians, and community leaders from the world over. It is time for Vancouver to reinvigorate our leadership in city-building.

By failing to inspire Vancouverites through a 21st century version of CityPlan, we leave too much to chance — and too much power in the hands of the self-interested individuals and the small groups of people who always resist change and improvement. We need to look at the issues and opportunities together. We need to rise above the neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood battles to think about where people live, where they work, and how we can best provide the transit and transportation linkages that make the city, and region, function at its best. We need to reconsider, for example, whether to revise the CityPlan policy to preserve

70 per cent of the city's residential areas for low-density housing — especially if we are serious about wanting our children to be able to afford to live here.

With the arrival of new planning leadership at City Hall, now is the time to step back and look at how we preserve the best of our city while tackling the challenges we and future generations face. Anything less than a citywide comprehensive visioning and planning process that once again involves tens of thousands of Vancouverites leaves our city at risk of being less livable, less affordable, and less sustainable.

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