

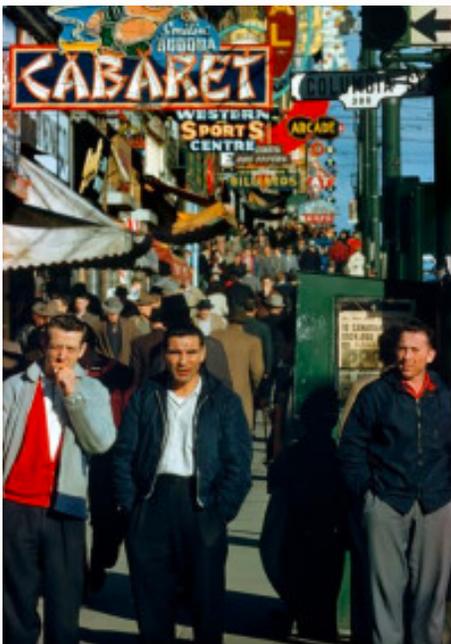
WELCOMING A MILLION PEOPLE TO METRO VANCOUVER?



Aerial of Vancouver Downtown and False Creek.

The recent unanimous vote by the Mayor's Council to fund the first phase of their ambitious and essential Vision Plan for the region's transit and transportation system reminds us yet again that we are living in a dynamic place that welcomes 35,000 new people every year. It also reminds us that we need to keep meeting the needs of our expanding population and economy.

Yet we always seem to be looking for new ways to slam the door on the million new residents who are expected to join us in Metro Vancouver in the next 25 years. Would we even want to? Doing so isn't very practical and it isn't very ethical. What we do need to do is to make sure that their arrival improves, rather than diminishes, our collective quality of life.



Hastings at Columbia by Fred Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Equinox Gallery

Recent provincial legislation that imposes a 15 percent tax on buyers from outside Canada is just one more way to discourage people from moving here. Meant to target offshore buyers of expensive homes on Vancouver's west side, the new tax penalizes all immigrants, people who want to come here to live, work, invest and build our region and our province.

Instead of a Goldilocks approach to population growth – too many, too few, just right – and instead of saying you are welcome but you are not – we need to look at the best way to house the next million and not keep trying to scare people – and investment – away.

We can't just turn off the tap and we don't want to, anyway. Who would we deny? Would we roll up the welcome mat in the maternity wards at St. Paul's and Surrey Memorial? Would we tell immigrant families that they can never reunite, or tell desperate employers that we're ending the supply of foreign workers, despite their expertise, their ambition, their potential investment capital and their creative energy? And how might we sustain our baby-bust economy in 2040, by which time more than a quarter of the region's population will be over the age of 65 and a shrunken force of workers will be straining to pay the bills?

Admittedly, the population wave can seem daunting. According to [Andy Ramlo](#) at the [Urban Futures Inc.](#), a million new residents would increase the regional density from 168 people per square kilometer to 248. But the next million people won't spread themselves around uniformly across the region.

Over the past couple of decades we've seen nearly 150,000 people added to Vancouver's population but the new population landed strategically, with little effect on single-family neighbourhoods. Most of the new residents moved into the Downtown area (including Yaletown and the north shore of False Creek). Others moved into the denser sections of Renfrew-Collingwood and into Kitsilano. And on the West Side? Virtually no change in Dunbar-Southlands and West Point Grey; while the population in Shaughnessy declined slightly.



UniverCity on Burnaby Mountain.

This is generally good news. First, the urban neighbourhoods all lie within or near existing infrastructure that can serve and accommodate the growing population. Second, every family that chooses an urban option makes it easier to sustain the farms, parks and forests that help make this region healthy and beautiful. Consider that [UniverCity](#), the model sustainable community that we are building next to [Simon Fraser University](#) on Burnaby Mountain, has a density of 65 housing unit per acre, compared, say, to the one to four units per acre in outlying suburban developments.

But a “garden city” development like UniverCity is ultimately measured by its livability, not its density. The community is compact and walkable, with a full range of services, schools and a great employer all within a five to seven minute walk. It also sits on one of the best-connected transit hubs in the region. And the community is being built almost entirely on SFU parking lots that had become redundant thanks to increased transit use. Out of the 385 hectares that SFU originally had available for development, 320 are now protected in perpetuity as part of the Burnaby Mountain Conservation Area. And the new services and homes have greatly improved the quality of life for people at SFU who once had no choice but to commute long distances.

The takeaway is this: when we invest in transit, when we concentrate development on underutilized property – like the sprawling parking lots in suburban-style shopping malls like Brentwood and Lougheed malls – then a population increase that is probably inevitable can also be beneficial, for all.

The drawbridge guards need to stand down. They were never going to succeed, anyway.

Gordon Harris is a practicing professional planner in Canada, an international planning consultant, and CEO of SFU Community Trust, the developer of UniverCity, an award-winning low-carbon community on Burnaby Mountain beside the campus of Simon Fraser University.