

Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver

June 30, 2009

Mayor and Council
City of Vancouver
453 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, BC
V5Y 1V4

Dear Mayor and Council,

Re: CityPlan Community Vision Implementation Program Review

We are writing to express growing concern about the aims and motivation for the Planning Department's ongoing Vision Implementation Program Review (VIPR). Frankly, it has been our perception from the outset that the VIPR is in essence an effort to undermine the CityPlan process and to reduce the role of local Vision Implementation Committees (VICs) in defining the pace, priorities and focus of vision implementation. Moreover, it is an unlikely coincidence that the VIPR process has effectively sidetracked and impeded neighbourhood-based planning and consultation just as the Planning Department pursues city-wide rezoning policy that would bypass and override Community Visions.

A recent VIPR progress meeting on June 9, 2009 (followed by a communiqué from the Planning Department on Friday June 26) confirmed and reinforced these perceptions. Following a brief review of the VIPR process, the meeting focused on "Small Group Discussion" of "Recurring Themes Across Community Visions" identified as "the most common [denominator] Vision directions" for all Neighbourhoods. Participants from the nine Vision areas "were arranged with an idea to have a mix of people from different Vision communities at each discussion table" and were requested to "identify [pre-identified] themes within the Vision Directions of greatest importance to them". Finally, according to the Small Group Discussion Guide, resulting "input will be used by staff in conjunction with information from other stakeholders in the development and prioritization of a city wide Vision Implementation Action Strategy".

Nearly every "theme" (including ones added by participants, e.g. affordability) was identified as a priority. The diversity of needs was striking. Much of this information was already available to staff through the Action Plans that most CVI Committees have produced. When participants expressed frustration that many of their priorities had not been implemented, the excuse given was that this was because the engineering department had other priorities—talk about the tail wagging the dog! In fact, both planning and engineering staff's approach has been to pursue their own priorities (after all, they consider themselves to be the preeminent "stakeholders") and approved Vision Directions get implemented only when these happen to coincide. This has been a growing source of frustration for CVI Committees, some of whom have been advised by staff to "leave the planning to the experts."

The foregoing approach clearly reveals that the VIPR is moving well beyond a review of implementation process and procedures and is, in fact, seeking to shape the substance and priorities of local Community Visions. In particular, by pooling the totality of Vision Directions from all nine Vision areas, mixing participants from various VICs and focusing on “Recurring Themes Across Community Visions”, the essential element of neighbourhood-based planning is being averaged out.

The aim of CityPlan Community Visions is to realize a “City of Neighbourhoods” evolving around existing “Neighbourhood Centres” where appropriate development enables local neighbourhoods to become more complete, inclusive and sustainable communities. The essential facet of Community Visions is that core CityPlan objectives are to be achieved and accommodated in ways that preserve and promote the distinctive character of individual neighbourhoods.

There is understandably a very substantial degree of similarity from Vision to Vision, and this reasonably reflects the guiding influence of both CityPlan principles and related City policy. As a result, Vision implementation will generally serve to advance core CityPlan objectives. The emphasis, however, should be on implementing Community Visions in ways that simultaneously accentuate and enhance the unique character and flavour of local communities as part of a “shared vision” for a vibrant and sustainable future.

For example, all Community Visions support the development of various higher density housing types. Thus, consistent with core CityPlan objectives, related development will generally lead to more compact, affordable and inclusive neighbourhoods. The crucial difference (in contrast to city-wide rezoning) is that CityPlan ensures that new housing variety and increased density are achieved at a pace, proportion and scale that serves to preserve and enhance the unique character and feel of each particular neighbourhood. For instance, Community Visions support “infill” housing. Under City Plan a Vision Area should be able to permit more or less of it, limit height to one story or two, extend it to additional zones, or restrict permitting to encourage retention of existing character homes, mature trees or increased rental opportunities. These are the sorts of local variation that preserve and promote diverse and distinct communities. This approach also provides opportunities for experimentation and learning, an important consideration, especially when introducing change.

For the same reasons, it is crucial that Vision Implementation be reunited with parallel planning and development of Neighbourhood Centres. It is clearly impossible to build sustainable communities with unique character by transforming the centres out of all proportion with the surrounding neighbourhood and leaving the local community to implement its Vision within the margins. There is simply no basis in CityPlan Terms of Reference to anticipate that the future of our Neighbourhood Centres would be dictated by a separate process with little regard for the local Vision. Neighbourhood Centers are by definition central to Community Visions and should be restored as an integral and inseparable component of Vision implementation.

Mayor Robertson, at the Heritage Hall reception we gave the new Council following the election, we very much appreciated your expression of gratitude for our diligence in exposing the truth about the overly centralized, top-down EcoDensity Charter and Initial Actions which does not “build on” Community Visions, as its apologists claim (it would be more fitting to say that it “piles on”).

For many Vancouverites, the election was in large part about restoring accountability and meaningful public consultation in connection with planning and development. All but one member of the current Council committed their support to “CityPlan and related neighbourhood-based Community Visioning as the primary basis for future planning in Vancouver neighbourhoods,” and that “Community Visions developed through a decade-long neighbourhood consultation process should be respected and faithfully implemented”

However, the City’s Planning Department has continued to pursue an entirely different course, while apparently making every effort to disable and impede the CityPlan process. Since November the City has virtually abandoned the Community Visions process in West Point Grey, has effectively pulled the plug on CityPlan Vision Implementation in eight other neighbourhoods, and has focused instead on the unsupported process in Norquay and city-wide rezoning initiatives under EcoDensity.

For all of these reasons we are calling on you, our Mayor and Council to honour the commitments you have made to CityPlan as the foundation for Vancouver’s sustainable future, and to take the following appropriate actions to restore trust, a sense of common purpose and good-faith cooperation toward that end:

1. Reject city-wide rezoning proposals that undermine flexibility and discretion that are essential for successful implementation of unique Community Visions.
2. Direct Planning Department to conclude the flawed and misguided Vision Implementation Program Review process and redirect related staffing and budget to support local Vision implementation.
3. Direct Planning Department to reintegrate Neighbourhood Centres planning processes as part of unified, neighbourhood-based Community Vision implementation.

As per the Vision Vancouver election platform, it is time to “restore accountability and trust and to put citizens back into the decision making process”. The current “top-down”, “one size (XL) fits all” approach to neighbourhood planning and development is completely at odds with Vancouver’s “shared vision” for a city of distinct and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Regards,

Ned Jacobs
On behalf of the Steering Committee
Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver