

Ned Jacobs: Comments on the current state of planning in Vancouver.

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I would like to draw attention to the shift that has occurred over the last several City Council terms in regard to how land use planning is conducted in Vancouver. As profits from development have soared, along with homelessness, the political influence of the development industry has grown immense, a fact that has been confirmed by former senior planners, including former directors Ray Spaxman and Brent Toderian. Checks and balances have been removed or weakened, and traditional professional arms length between city staff and the ruling faction on Council has been seriously eroded.

While planners gather and consider public input on planning directions and development proposals, the development "go-to" guys, primarily Councillors Louie and Meggs, confer with the land assemblers, developers, and real estate promoters that collectively contribute millions of dollars to the Vision Vancouver and NPA campaign coffers. For the sake of optics, these politicians do not want to be seen rejecting or amending staff recommendations in favour of the interests to whom they are beholden, so they have restructured the bureaucracy to ensure that the recommendations they want to approve are conveyed to staff through the office of the city manager. Extensive reports containing these recommendations are typically made public and placed on Council agendas just 3 or 4 days before meetings, or, in the case of a rezoning, a week or two prior to public hearing, at which time members of the public can wait many hours or several evenings to have up to five minutes to respond.

Members of Council also frequently send signals to planning staff and developers by praising proposals through news media prior to public consultation being conducted or considered. Moreover, the gag-orders that have been placed on staff by this administration mean that media often cannot get timely answers to questions, with the consequence that news reports are more likely to be inaccurate or misleading, and slanted by developer spin.

Now that planning staff and mainstream media are increasingly functioning as servants and public relations hacks for the development industry, public involvement in decision making—once the cornerstone of Vancouver's CityPlan—is pretty much a farce.

Our current city administration is one of the least transparent and accountable in generations. Vancouver doesn't need a Council or Parks Board that is more to the "left", "right" or "centre." Such ideological pigeon holes are not very relevant or informative, especially at the municipal level of governance. What we need are elected leaders with well-defined principles and policies, who are not caught in a web of systemic conflicts of interests but are truly committed to responsible, inclusionary and participatory democracy. I repeat, once again, what Jane Jacobs (who I knew very well) used to say: "For a city to work well for everyone, it must be planned by everyone."

Ned Jacobs, who lives in the Riley Park neighbourhood, and has participated in numerous planning processes in Vancouver and other cities, serves on the Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver Steering Committee.