

Mayor points way to smart development



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SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES

While the world is here, talking about big concepts and planning for big outcomes in rapid urbanization, we in metro Vancouver might remind ourselves we have made some big strides here toward protecting our special quality of life.

Our almost perfect city served as the stunning backdrop for the discussion of a whole bunch of weighty issues at the United Nation's World Urban Forum. Many of the agenda items were so weighty they seemed almost lost in theory and devoid of practical action.

Much of the talk of the international policy makers, politicians and social scientists was about the special challenges of developing countries in combating poverty and providing those things we here in Vancouver so casually take for granted — access to basic shelter and services, like clean water and sanitation.

Perhaps the challenges are almost too daunting knowing that we live in a world where half of humanity lives in cities and, where in the next 50 years, that proportion is expected to reach two-thirds of the global population.

Meanwhile, as the world's cities were put under the researcher's microscope, some of our more parochial challenges were hoisted on what was a perfect podium from which to get some media and public attention. This was more like the urban doctors doing some basic diagnosis and prescribing real treatment than it was research and theorizing.

Canada's cities and communities have not been immune to the consequences of rapid and relentless change that globalization has brought over the last 30 years. Former premier Mike Harcourt believes this change has created a feeling of powerlessness in Canadian cities and towns facing new challenges.

Harcourt wants to tackle this malaise. He released a long-awaited report summarizing what for many might be the long-forgotten exercise assigned to him more than two years ago by former prime minister Jean Chretien to chair the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. He was charged with rethinking the way Canada and its communities are shaped.

Harcourt and 14 committee members from across the country, including Vancouver's Cheezying Ho of SmartGrowth BC fame, weren't timid in their recommendations.

They reminded us that the challenges may be global, but the responses are all local. While many of Canada's communities have been managing growth rather than facing decline, Harcourt's committee warned that little can be taken for granted.

"Growth is not delivered in government offices but by the choices made where change happens ... places shape the dividends from growth."

They prescribed some strong medicine for Canada's cities. Chief among their recommendation is a re-ordering of government structures in Canada, with what they term a "double devolution" of responsibilities from the federal government to the provinces and territories and then on down to municipalities.

They argue that government's roles and resource bases should move to the most local levels at which they can operate effectively.

Property taxes are not an adequate funding source for municipalities to meet infrastructure challenges. They argue cities need more autonomy in raising tax revenue. In the meantime, they want the federal and provincial governments to provide increased funding for municipal infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the initiative that promises to have the quickest and most profound positive impact on preserving our unmatched quality of life in the greater Vancouver region is the EcoDensity strategy released by the current Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan last week.

Sullivan wants to see the city increase the density of housing in neighbourhoods outside the downtown while protecting the environment.

By attacking sprawl and advocating more efficient land use, Sullivan is providing the political leadership that so many of us who advocate smart growth are always bemoaning is lacking.

It takes leadership at this level to not only stand up to NIM-Byism that is exacerbating sprawl, but also to elevate an issue high enough that both awareness and education help to alleviate the fears that lead to opposition to higher density developments.

Local leadership. Perhaps that will be the legacy of the World Urban Forum in Vancouver.

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