

The Tyee...The Feisty One On-line

US Needs Vancouver as a Model

So do BC's own suburbs, urges noted American livability expert.

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Vancouver has emerged as one of the world's great cities. Listed at or near the top of many quality of life and livability surveys of world cities over the past decade, the rich mix of ethnic groups, Asian, European and North American wealth, smart infrastructure investments and superior urban planning has produced world-class results.

So it is with great humility that an American can venture north to offer suggestions about the built environment to a place that is so highly regarded.

An April 21 [article](#) in The Tyee by Canadian Murray Dobbin ended with this advice to his country about your relationship to the U.S.: "Better for both of us that we Canadians strengthen our own country. Let us enhance our communitarian approach, build on our social programs, reverse the decline in education spending, take the lead in fighting climate change, and revive our tradition of progressive international engagement and leadership. That way, if and when, in desperation, our neighbours look for a model to follow, there will still be one. Just next door."

I second that opinion. Over the past two years or so, Americans have been awakening to the fundamentally wrong approach we have pursued for the past generation and more regarding the environment, our health, the built environment and the impact of oil dependency on foreign policy. The unprecedented 80 per cent of the electorate who currently feel the country is "heading in the wrong direction" is just one sign of this questioning.

Having models of an alternative approach is crucial to get us back on track; seeing is believing. We Americans only have a few places, like Portland, Oregon, where we can learn about an alternative to how to build our metropolitan areas . . . and most Americans are tired of endlessly hearing about Portland. We need additional models. Europe is too alien for most Americans (remember that only 20 per cent of us have passports). Canada is so close and you have been exporting friendly images and personalities to us for years; who can't relate to Red Green?

A lot more to do

Yet there is even more to do in Metro Vancouver to provide a model for the future. While your metro area has many examples of great walkable urbanism, over 85 per cent of you still use the car for most of your travel needs around the region. That indicates a metro with an over-dependence on a single form of transportation and one land use option; the drivable suburban option.

Many of you are living with the unintended consequences of drivable suburban development. The traffic congestion, high and getting higher gas prices, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and loss of open space has meant there has been a negative reaction against ALL development and especially higher density development.

The fact of the matter is that high-density, transit-served places, providing a mix of uses and incomes in a pedestrian-friendly manner, are just what are required to provide the model America and you need.

Vancouver and British Columbia as a whole have certainly taken the next step toward a more sustainable future. The proposal for a \$14 billion expansion of the transit system is crucial. That is because, as any urban planner will tell you, transportation drives development. The transportation system the public invests in will promote either low-density drivable suburban development or high density, walkable urbanism. By investing so heavily in transit, the option of walkable urban development becomes possible. Without it, many people are stuck in traffic and not offered other options.

Yet there is more to do. Transit without legal encouragement through zoning reforms means you are not getting the real return for your multi-billion dollar investment. Within 500 to 1000 metres of each of your current and proposed transit stops, there should be what Americans call "overlay districts" or what you call special transit zoning, which allow for mixed-use, high density walkable urban development. Hopefully mechanisms will also be put in place to encourage and financially support mixed-income housing as well. This is the necessary pre-condition for the real estate industry to produce the low-energy and low-carbon development required and demanded by the market today.

Footloose places

The Denver metro area is in the middle of expanding its light rail system as well, having taxed themselves over \$4 billion US locally to do it (the federal government in our country is "missing in action" regarding transit). There will be over 50 new stations and around most of these stations overlay zoning within walking distance will encourage high density walkable urban development. This approach is required in many parts of Metro Vancouver, as many of your developers, planners and public officials will attest, but it needs to be expanded.

Places like Whalley in Surrey should have more high density development within walking distance of the transit station, something that may be rectified over the next few years due to recent development plans. Metrotown in Burnaby needs to recognize that its 1970s version of walkable urbanism is more of a compromise between urbanism and suburbanism; it is neither fish nor fowl, and creates an even denser place. Each of these places will evolve their own character and feel. Each will reflect the micro-culture of the place. In total, these places will satisfy much of the future population growth which is coming to the metropolitan area.

Late last year, I released a Brookings Institution survey www.brookings.edu/walkableurbanism (scroll down to "Footloose and Fancy Free") of the regionally significant, walkable urban places in the largest 30 metropolitan areas in the U.S. It may surprise you that there were 157 of these kinds of places in these U.S. metro areas today, places similar to downtown Vancouver and Granville Island. It translated into one of these walkable urban places for every one million population in these 30 metros. Surprisingly, Washington, D.C., metro had the most walkable urban places per capita; there are 20 of these places up and running today with 10 more emerging. The Metro D.C. ratio is six of these places existing or emerging for every million people.

A suburban makeover?

Another surprising finding is that only 50 per cent of these walkable urban places were in the centre city of the region, such as downtown D.C. and the Dupont Circle area of the District. That meant that the other 50 per cent were, remarkably, in the suburbs. The city is coming to the suburbs and no where more than in the Washington region where 19 of the 30 existing and emerging walkable urban places are in the suburbs; places like Ballston in Arlington County (V.A.), Reston Town Center in Fairfax County (V.A.) and Bethesda in Montgomery County (M.D.). For a grand overview of the changing Metro Washington, D.C., area, see [this article](#), written by Vancouver's Gordon Price.

Since over 70 per cent of the metropolitan population lives outside the city of Vancouver, but most of the current walkable places seem to be in the city, it stands to reason that the bulk of the growth in walkable urban development should be in the suburbs. Using the six walkable urban places per million experience of metro Washington, D.C., there should be 12-14 walkable urban places in the Vancouver region. It is my impression there are only six to eight today and most of them in the city.

Why make the suburbs more walkable and transit-oriented? First, the Vancouver market probably wants it. Assuming that folks who live in B.C. are somewhat like those who live in the U.S. regarding demand for housing and living options (something that should certainly be double-checked), there is probably pent-up demand for many more walkable urban places. Every day of oil price escalation just makes the motivation that much stronger. The price premium per square metre of walkable urban housing downtown versus the suburbs is just one indicator of this pent-up demand.

The global warming imperative

However, one of the most compelling reasons is climate change. Research by UBC scholar, Dr. Laurence Frank, to be released later this year by The Brookings Institution, will show that carbon dioxide emissions and energy usage by fringe single family households completely dependent on the car for transportation is from two to three times higher than walkable urban households with access to transit. Considering that the built environment (real estate and the infrastructure supporting it) generates over 70 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions, encouraging more walkable urban development could be the most important tool in stabilizing climate change.

The Vancouver metro area has taken huge steps in showing the U.S. a means by which to build a more sustainable future. The proposed investment in transit over the next decade is yet another sign that you will continue to provide a model. However, there is much more to do. Please do not dawdle; the U.S. needs you to help show us the way.

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- [The Myth of Dense Vancouver](#)
Stats show city isn't countering flight to suburbs.
- [Plan Well or Perish](#)
Interview with Richard Balfour, author of Strategic Sustainable Planning: A Civil Defense Manual for Cultural Survival
- [Growing Suburbs May Reroute BC Politics](#)
Gordon Campbell's party faces strains after he's gone.

Leinberger Talk Tonight

Christopher B. Leinberger is speaking today, April 25 at 7 p.m. at Simon Fraser University Segal Graduate School of Business, 500 Granville Street, Vancouver. Admission is free, but reservations are required. E-mail city@sfu.ca or call 778-782-5100.

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