

# **The Future of Vancouver**

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**TEAM Reunion**

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As a native of Vancouver and one who lives with my daughter in the Dunbar house I grew up in, I have deep roots here. I acquired my interest in civic politics from my mother. I remember how excited we were when Tom Alsbury – another teacher like my mum – was elected as mayor in 1957. I asked if I could stay up late that night to hear the end of his acceptance speech and she said “Oh no – that man will talk all night!” It was a shrewd observation on her part and a lesson for me about overstaying one’s welcome on the podium.

It is a great honour to be asked to address this reunion of TEAM. I was in temporary professional exile in Toronto for most of the party’s time in office, but its achievements even penetrated the massive cloud of self-absorption for which Toronto is so famous. And I was able to chronicle the chapter and verse of some of its major accomplishments such as the redevelopment of False Creek South, in the book “City Making in Paradise” that I co-wrote with Mike Harcourt and Sean Rossiter. The book is dedicated to TEAM founder Walter Hardwick and it is available from Amazon.ca at a handsome discount. All the authors’ proceeds go to charity.

Before I go further I want to share with you my concept of cities as organic entities because it is important to what I am going to say about the future of Vancouver. Cities occupy an area that is defined by various markets – for labour, for commerce, for housing, for culture and so on. Different parts of the entity play different roles but each is essential to the health of the whole. Seen this way, it is clear that the real city of Vancouver – the organic entity - comprises much more than the area west of Boundary Road. It is also clear that the governance of Vancouver involves a complex interaction that includes not only City Council and its elected Parks and School Boards, but also regional bodies, other municipalities and federal and provincial entities such as the port authority and the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. Good governance happens when these various entities work together in pursuit of agreed upon goals and plans, and it does not happen when they do not.

Looking back over the 42 years since TEAM was founded, what is astounding and impressive to me is the extent to which its members embodied, promoted and demonstrated this modern concept of city governance. In the view of TEAM, the interests of the City of Vancouver proper were indivisible from the interests of the broader region. This view was given tangible expression in TEAM’s support for regional planning (and the first Livable Region Plan) and its

support for regional approaches to parks, housing and pollution control. The concept was reflected in the energetic regional leadership roles played by Art Phillips, Walter Hardwick, May Brown, Marguerite Ford, Darlene Marzari and Mike Harcourt. It drove City Council's own local decisions such as promoting residential zoning in the downtown to reflect the regional objective of reducing travel demand by putting more homes close to jobs and vice versa. The result was not only a reduction in vehicle travel into the downtown but also a more vital and interesting place.

This strong leadership from Vancouver gave a tremendous boost to the role of the fledgling Greater Vancouver Regional District, now unfortunately known as Metro Vancouver, which was only a year old when TEAM was founded. It spawned the saying that "the GVRD works when the City of Vancouver takes it seriously, and not when it doesn't," as well as the concept of the GVRD as a municipal federation of equals, which Gordon Campbell used so effectively in his time at the GVRD.

I have been asked to speak a bit about the future, and I think it is important to first chronicle the ways in which the region has changed in the past 40 years or so. On the plus side, we have cleaner air, cleaner receiving waters, safer drinking water, less solid waste per capita, more parkland, practically no traffic congestion by international standards, growing transit use and a peaceful, culturally diverse population. We have protected, by and large, our agricultural land base in the Green Zone, and we can now see what the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board planners meant in the late 1940s when they envisaged the region as "cities in a sea of green." Within the urbanized and urbanizing areas we have some outstanding examples of good planning and a lot of garbage, particularly suburban commercial developments and business parks.

We even have a new term for what we have done here, called "Vancouverism," which Mike Harcourt, never the shy one, defines as "getting it right most of the time."

Now all of this was a fairly well-kept secret until two and a half months ago, when the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games transformed how our city was viewed, not only by its residents but by the rest of the world. There were many heroes at those Games, but one of the biggest heroes was the city itself – its people, its systems, its culture and its public spaces. We are only beginning to comprehend the global impact of those few weeks in the spotlight. I'll sum it up in a quote from the New York Times article on Vancouver: "You're gorgeous, baby, you're sophisticated, you live well...Vancouver is Manhattan with mountains. It's a liquid city, a tomorrow city, equal parts India, China, England, France and the Pacific Northwest. It's the cool North American sibling." It is clear to me that the Games have transformed Vancouver, not

only physically but more importantly psychologically, into an internationally recognized example of the benefits that well-managed cities can provide to humanity.

And not a moment too soon, for just as the Olympics showcased the global village of sport, it is increasingly clear that the future of the human race is in jeopardy globally if we don't change how we live locally. More than half the world's population now lives in cities, which is a good thing, because cities can provide an appropriate setting and the organizational wherewithal to deal with challenges such as greenhouse gas reduction, fossil fuel depletion, disaster recovery and access to the basic necessities of life. So the story of our survival or extinction as a species will essentially be the story of how we manage cities.

Vancouver already has a proud record of contributing to the global cause of better human settlements, having hosted Habitat in 1976 and the World Urban Forum in 2006. The Vancouver-based International Centre for Sustainable Cities has for more than 15 years been promoting best practices and peer-to-peer learning among cities globally. We have a lot to contribute to the resolution of some of the world's most important issues, and the Olympics were the perfect springboard.

We can't, however, play that role if we are not managing the real City of Vancouver – the broader region – effectively. Unfortunately, the state of play we have on the regional level is a pale shadow of the activist scenario pursued so effectively by TEAM. Regional planning has been essentially stuck on a dime and growing progressively weaker for nearly a decade. The connection between growth management planning and transportation planning and implementation – two sides of the same coin - has been dismantled and the Province now dominates transportation decision-making. We're back to freeways, if you can believe it.

The city that calls itself Vancouver represents only 27 percent of the region's population. It may become the greenest city in the world, but it might resemble Venice surrounded by Phoenix. It must not risk becoming smug and resting on its considerable laurels. It must learn from the folly that is now Toronto, a once great city that three decades ago could be described as "New York run by the Swiss," but today is more like Los Angeles than Lucerne.

So we need one of two things – either the reinvention of the strong leadership that TEAM brought to the region when it was in power, which seems unlikely, or a revamping of governance arrangements that would provide a stronger voice for the real city's vital interests both within the region and beyond.

The design of these new arrangements should be the task of a project set up for this purpose, but in my view there should be two components.

The first would be the reconsolidation under a regional body of responsibilities for water, sewer, solid waste, housing, transportation and law enforcement, together with a broad mandate for planning for the physical, economic and social well-being of the region. This body should be provided with ability to raise revenues to support its services, apply user pay principles where possible as is currently the case with water and solid waste. In this way, a portion of the economic growth generated in the region can be used to deal with the negative side-effects such as homelessness, drugs and crime. The governors of this body would be chosen through the “double direct” election system that was in place briefly in the 1970s. An important objective of these changes would be to “reset” the relationship between the region and the provincial government – if the US and Russia can do it, so can we! Provinces are just no good at planning and managing cities, and instead of meddling through megaprojects our provincial government should support the development and implementation of widely supported plans at the regional level.

The second component of the reform would be the consolidation of municipalities into a smaller number of larger entities, numbering perhaps 8 in all. This would result in more viable units, less confusion for citizens and businesses and the elimination of distortions in planning that arise from the illogical boundaries at places like Scott Road.

These changes would produce a form of governance that is better able to take decisions, to provide services and to represent the real city of Vancouver at home and abroad. If we make them, we can expect to see continued improvement in the quality of life in Greater Vancouver for the next forty years. If we don't, we run the risk that Gordon Price has described as the creation of two galaxies spinning away from each other – one being a highly livable set of communities with reducing footprints in the west and the other being a sprawling, car-oriented mess spreading up the Fraser Valley. The only problems there are that both galaxies share an airshed, water resources and a need for food security and the land base is constrained by the mountains, the water bodies and the US border.

I am a great fan of the kind of regional governance that TEAM pursued in its heyday. It has taken me a long time to realize that the institutions we have are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. I hope we will have the foresight and courage to do something about them before it is too late.

In closing, may I say again how much I appreciate having been asked to take part in this reunion. The organization and the people we are commemorating today deserve a great deal of the credit for the creation of the outstanding place that stepped out on the world stage with such impact a few months ago. Let's keep on making it better!

Thank you.