

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **What kind of Vancouver do we want? Let's ask those who live here**

Vancouver Sun

Fri Aug 6 2010

Page: A11

Section: Issues & Ideas

Byline: **Jonathan Ross**

Source: Special to the Sun

In recent weeks, the media have been drawn to the brewing dispute over the City of Vancouver's attempts to introduce the Short Term Incentives for Rental Housing program into the West End. Of course, the colourful and unfortunate language used by Mayor Gregor Robertson in a candid moment has only added to the intrigue.

The issue and the subsequent divide between the two sides are straightforward. City council is determined to create greater rental availability in a city with a vacancy rate of less than one per cent and an average rental price for a one-bedroom apartment at more than \$1,000.

Certain West End residents are defiant in their protests, however, claiming that council is introducing "radical" rezoning applications that will change the character of their surroundings. They also argue that there has not been enough citizen involvement when it comes to determining the future of their neighbourhood.

Putting aside the particulars of this battle for a moment, the situation must be considered as a microcosm of a massive and concerning trend that is standing in the way of a long-term future for the city.

The pejorative notion of "Not In My Backyard" groups of citizens hijacking the path of development is not new, particularly when considering Vancouver's history. It wasn't always such a minefield when it comes to navigating through Vancouver's neighbourhoods, however.

In 1992, then mayor Gordon Campbell was prompted to introduce "CityPlan" as a result of complaints over development in Shaughnessy and an abundance of land that could be alternatively developed in the largely uninhabited downtown core.

The program was designed with the intent to "prepare a city plan reflecting a shared vision for the future of Vancouver" garnered from the direct involvement of citizens.

On two key fronts, the enactment and follow-through of CityPlan in the mid-1990s is striking when contrasted with contemporary times.

First, more than 20,000 people participated by making submissions and attending events as part of the program. Residents of all backgrounds and profiles were excited about the ability to be a part of crafting Vancouver's future. There was a genuine enthusiasm for the opportunity to shape the foundational principles of how Vancouver's citizens would move forward collectively.

Second, and more striking, is the way in which local concerns and citywide awareness were not at odds. The Community Visions program, which allowed citizens to work directly with city staff to create visions for their neighbourhood's future, merged seamlessly with peoples' interest in contributing to a "shared vision" for Vancouver.

Fast forward 15 years, and the parameters of the game have dramatically changed. Affordability and property values within the city's housing stock are in a state of flux, particularly when it comes to giving young people the opportunity to live and work in the city in which they were born.

Increasing density is the new reality when available property options for those interested in initiating projects has been dramatically reduced over 20 years of booming growth.

Sustainability and environmental stewardship are considerations at the core of city council considerations of new developments.

Finally, Vancouver's acquired diversity when it comes to culture, income levels and demographics means that accessibility, tolerance and equality of opportunity are all essential components in our long-term future.

In light of these pressures being exerted on both residents and politicians, the time is now to renew the notion of widespread citizen involvement within the planning process.

Restoring public confidence will come by extending a friendly and broad invitation, which in turn will ideally be met with a consciousness that is wider than the purview of one's own backyard.

**Jonathan Ross** is a public affairs commentator based in Vancouver.

Edition: Final

Story Type: Opinion

Length: 603 words

Idnumber: 201008060035

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **Ambitious agenda at Vancouver city hall is crying out for opposition**

Vancouver Sun

Wed Apr 7 2010

Page: A11

Section: Issues & Ideas

Byline: **Jonathan Ross**

Source: Special to the Sun

Looking for drama within Vancouver's city hall these days is like showing up to the library in search of a rave -- unexpectedly serene, and decidedly less stimulating for the senses.

So while arriving at a city council meeting could initially be inspired by a genuine interest in a particular policy or decision, sitting through the proceedings might subsequently induce a nap.

This staid environment can't be blamed on a lack of ideas or commitments, though. In fact, Mayor Gregor Robertson's pledges to end street homelessness and establish the city as a global leader in sustainability are bold.

No, the element missing from the mix at 12th and Cambie is any effective dissent. Accordingly, the Vision Vancouver agenda lacks the legitimacy achieved when standing up to such debate.

The definitive results delivered by Vancouver voters in the 2008 election present an uphill battle for those elected to serve as opposition. Yet it isn't as though the political histories of the city and the province aren't filled with fighters who have made the best of a difficult postelection climate. Rather, it is a complete lack of effort that is at the heart of the current state of affairs.

On one end of the spectrum, the lone holdover left from the last NPA administration, Suzanne Anton, appears uninterested in sitting outside of government. On the other reside two COPE councillors, David Cadman and Ellen Woodsworth, who owe their jobs to a friendly neighbour agreement with the ruling party and who now seem content to cruise on Vision's coattails.

The NPA and COPE represent the two solitudes that have polarized Vancouver for the past 40 years and as a result are now backed into separate corners of irrelevance.

If there is anything the last election taught us, it is that traditional battle lines that carved up the city by geography, income and issues have evolved into a more holistic consciousness.

As I detailed in a past column, a fundamental transformation has occurred in the sentiment of Vancouver's electorate. There is no longer tolerance for blind adherence to dogma or politics that appeal to only one half of the city.

Vision Vancouver may have been partly inspired by former mayor Larry Campbell's frustration over the Che Guevara-inspired speeches of his former COPE colleagues. But as a new political entity, the party emerged with populism not seen in several decades.

In 1968, the TEAM movement was born as a moderate reform group attempting to appeal to persons of all ideologies. The founders felt civic decision-making should be open to the public, with leadership coming from a cross-section of the population rather than unelected bureaucratic "experts."

TEAM swept to power in 1972 and formed a majority on council for the next six years before eventually splintering. In much the same way, Vision Vancouver's electoral success is premised on a middle-of-the-road coalition brought together by an appetite for action over ideology. As an example, the party's mayoral nomination in 2008 was a groundswell of diversity on par with any of the celebrations that took hold of the city during the Olympics.

Whether or not this is a new era for agenda-setting and accomplishment or little more than a free ride for the lowest common denominator has yet to be determined.

Unlike their predecessor, Vision's counterparts are hard pressed to stand on their own merits, with Robertson's agenda untested and so far unproven.

What is the next step in the homelessness strategy? Is greening the city an economic undertaking or a broader attempt to change lifestyles? These kinds of questions aren't being asked.

Strong and disparate visions of how the city should run only serve to sharpen the offerings of the victor; competition breeds excellence, and a lack thereof embraces mediocrity.

It is for this reason that Vision Vancouver's strength and popularity must be carefully scrutinized. The legacy for this group will be judged on accomplishment but solidified by an array of viable political choices.

**Jonathan Ross** is a Vancouver-based civic affairs commentator at CivicScene.ca.

Edition: Final

Story Type: Opinion

Length: 663 words

Idnumber: 201004070033

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **Who really runs Vancouver City Hall?; Bureaucrats use many tricks to keep politicians in the dark**

Vancouver Sun

Tue Mar 9 2010

Page: A9

Section: Issues & Ideas

Byline: **Jonathan Ross**

Source: Special to the Sun

There is a well-known story told among Vancouver's city staff that recounts a conversation between a former city manager and one of the members of the staff.

On the eve of a civic election that was poised to install a new party and corresponding policy shift, said staff person asked what might change under such a scenario. The answer delivered by the holder of the most dominant and highly paid job within the City of Vancouver was succinct and unequivocal: "Absolutely nothing."

Herein lies the irony of being elected to "power" in Vancouver's municipal arena, where the ability of the mayor and city council to show leadership is severely limited when compared to other municipalities across Canada.

In 1953, the Vancouver Incorporation Act was completely revised to become the Vancouver Charter, which in turn adopted the council-manager system of governance.

In theory, the city was reconstituted into a more business-like corporation that employed improved accounting procedures, modern methods of administration and a greater reliance on technical expertise.

In reality, these changes set the stage for an entrenched and hierarchical bureaucracy ruled for many years by the iron fist of Gerald Sutton-Brown, an English urban planner who became the city's first director of planning.

Sutton-Brown controlled the information flow and agenda setting within city hall, had unilateral powers to hire and fire staff, decided upon the responsibilities administered by each respective city department and prepared the annual budget for submission to council.

The most blatant example of Sutton-Brown's supremacy came with Vancouver's well-known debate over freeways. Presiding over the Technical Committee for Metropolitan Planning, he released a report that recommended a \$450-million plan for freeway construction throughout Vancouver to the exclusion of a rapid transit system.

Socio-economic considerations such as the impact on neighbourhoods were bypassed in favour of the sole criterion of traffic demand estimates. For nearly 15 years, Sutton-Brown preserved the freeway plan in spite of various elections returning a variety of incarnations of council.

In 1972, the TEAM government was elected largely as a result of a platform that called for the introduction of rapid transit. Upon meeting Sutton-Brown for the first time, newly elected councillor Setty Pendakur described him as "imperious" and compared the experience to "being granted an audience with the Queen."

Sutton-Brown was subsequently dismissed from his position, and modern-day Vancouver is still without freeways.

Fast forward to today, and little has changed within the structures at city hall.

Take for example the Olympic Village financing fiasco that almost sank what is now considered one of the defining legacies of the Olympic Games.

Until the release of a recent KPMG report, neither the public nor the mayor and council were aware that city staff had readjusted the city's criteria for potential developers, allowing the initial third-place bid to win a contract for a project that ended up costing more than \$1 billion.

In other words, the evaluation matrix was completely and deliberately changed after the first round of assessment to heavily favour the offer price. Additionally, city staff failed to engage in basic due diligence to see whether the winning bidder had the capacity to pay for such an amount.

Let's also examine the debate over the 250-unit social housing component of the Olympic village.

Original estimates from staff put the cost at \$65 million, while that figure now stands at more than \$110 million.

A city administrative report from last year hides from responsibility by blaming the cost overruns on higher construction costs, a tougher economic climate and rigid deadlines for completion.

But how did staff oversight allow these units to be outfitted with stainless steel railings, fritted glass and other high-end elements? And even worse, why didn't city council catch such extravagances and vote them down?

The irony of all this is the fact that in 2008, the Southeast False Creek project office (tasked with managing the construction of Olympic Village) was out of money and initiated a \$1.3-million increase in its budget.

City staff acted unilaterally without the approval of council and, according to the same administrative report, began to "operate beyond its existing budget approval in the spring of 2008."

They got around to "asking" council to cover such costs more than a year later.

A decision on whether to keep the popular Olympic streetcar is upcoming, and will be based on an engineering department that acted without TransLink's involvement and which is estimating a continuation cost of an exorbitant \$90 million.

Personally, I'm getting a little scared of the power being wielded by unaccountable city bureaucrats. For the sake of my money and yours, I'm hoping that a pendulum swing back in favour of democratically elected officials occurs soon.

**Jonathan Ross** is a Vancouver-based civic affairs commentator at CivicScene.ca.

Illustration:

- Photo: While politicians like to think they are in control at city hall, the reality is that much of the power is in the hands of the bureaucrats.

Edition: Final

Story Type: Opinion

Length: 781 words

Idnumber: 201003090036



# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **Moderation of Vancouver's civic politics is a refreshing change**

Vancouver Sun

Thu Nov 5 2009

Page: A17

Section: Issues & Ideas

Byline: **Jonathan Ross**

Source: Special to the Sun

As Vancouver approaches the one-year anniversary of the 2008 municipal election, pundits will inevitably focus their analysis on Vision Vancouver's victory or offer a post-mortem on the NPA's tenure as a political force.

Both of these kinds of postscripts, however, ignore a broader understanding of the fundamental transformation that has occurred with the priorities and preferences of Vancouver's electorate.

First and foremost, there seems to be little tolerance for adherence to narrow ideologies or tunnel vision overtures made to geographic slivers of the city.

That wasn't always the case.

In a University of B.C. study on the 2002 election published in the Canadian Journal of Political Science, it was determined that Vancouver voting choices "are determined largely by ideological orientations and provincial partisanship, with local economic evaluations and local issues playing only a very small role."

The study's reference point is a partially socialist-inspired COPE council that showed an aversion to growth through pockets of opposition to initiatives such as the Canada Line and the Olympics.

Instead, certain councillors placed a higher priority on demonizing developers, forwarding motions calling for world peace and campaigning for city-owned brothels.

This faction within COPE eventually caused a split of the caucus and the subsequent formation of a new political party, Vision Vancouver.

The rift also allowed the NPA, historically the city's most dominant political entity, to regain a slim majority after the 2005 election.

Yet in traditional fashion, the brain trust continued to rely heavily on garnering support from the west side of Vancouver, catering to the interests of Vancouver's business establishment, and focusing on candidate selection and internal political battles.

The result of these two regimes has been the dramatic ascendancy of a party that campaigned and now governs from across the spectrum. Mayor Gregor Robertson's measures to cut city bureaucracy and spending have correspondingly been met with the bold decision to maintain social housing as part of the Olympic Village development at a cost of \$600,000 per unit.

Similarly, ostentatious pledges to make Vancouver the greenest city on the planet have been buffered by the development of the city's first economic development strategy in two decades.

Quite simply, this is a paradigm shift within Vancouver's political scene, where in taking away traditional party affiliations from the electoral equation, a party is left with the political capital garnered by the exchange of ideas.

As an example, the Vision Vancouver administration angered as many people as they pleased when they first introduced their single-lane bike trial on the Burrard Bridge.

It was a daunting proposition because of the policy's previous failure in 1996, opposition from the large vehicle lobby, and the uncertainty about the potential for complete gridlock downtown.

Over three months later, the experiment is roundly lauded as a success, with the bridge accommodating as many cars as it was before the trial while increasing bike traffic by 25 per cent.

Of course, not every idea works out as smoothly.

Despite the Homeless Emergency Action Team being able to provide temporary shelter for 450 people, the initiative was met with controversy when a downtown neighbourhood fervently protested the disruptive behaviours of certain residents. In response, two of the five shelters were shut down in order to maintain peace and order in the area.

So while fostering a marketplace of ideas has proven to be a mixed bag for the Vision mayor and council, it has also demonstrated that creativity and innovation in policy development can garner widespread respect, regardless of political preference.

This is a high-risk, high-reward endeavour that relies on accomplishment rather than blind partisanship when it comes time to asking for support.

It's a strategy that takes nothing for granted.

It's to be hoped this approach can also begin to address the woeful voter turn-out rate of 31 per cent in the last election, which is the lowest since 1956. The cynicism generated by the polarizing impacts of Vancouver's political past can largely be attributed as the cause.

This is not to say that looking into electoral reform shouldn't be a part of the process.

A promised referendum in 2011 on this potential change to a ward or mixed electoral system could go a long way towards reengaging the public.

Nonetheless, until the next election, Vancouverites will be able to experience governance that isn't afraid of the unknown, and is willing to be judged on merit in exchange for the confidence of the electorate.

**Jonathan Ross** is a Vancouver-based civic affairs commentator with CivicScene.ca.

Edition: Final

Story Type: Opinion

Length: 736 words

Idnumber: 200911050043

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **Fiscal responsibility is back at Vancouver City Hall**

Vancouver Sun

Wed Oct 14 2009

Page: A13

Section: Issues & Ideas

Byline: **Jonathan Ross**

Source: Special to the Sun

For many politicians, the possibility of capturing the public's imagination is a powerful motivator. Presenting a grand vision -- take Mayor Gregor Robertson's pledge to end street homelessness by 2015 for example -- is often the inspiration behind the decision to run for office. And I, like most Vancouverites, sincerely hope that he succeeds in his efforts to bring shelter to our most vulnerable.

The reality behind political performance, however, is that it consists of just as many aspects of governance that are nowhere near as compelling.

This is particularly true with regards to managing the public purse responsibly.

Making the tough choices when it comes to budgeting is always arduous and rarely advantageous politically, but entirely necessary for the sake of the city's long-term sustainability. Thankfully for Vancouver taxpayers, we finally have civic leadership that is ready to take on the challenge of fiscal accountability.

Before getting into what is currently being undertaken at city hall, let me provide a little context.

Between 2005 and 2008, the operating budget for Vancouver went up by 15.6 per cent, or \$121 million.

Under the regime of former mayor Sam Sullivan, the budget was out of control, including such expenditures as \$12.3 million to establish the 311 information and referral telephone contact centre, \$872,000 in annual costs for the Downtown Ambassador private security program, and \$300,000 for Project Civil City (the majority of which went toward the salary of the appointed commissioner and consultant fees).

Perhaps the most damning example of this record of irresponsibility comes from the recently released KPMG report on the Olympic Village.

Not only were the criteria to choose the developer changed to allow the last placed bid to win the contract, but according to the findings, "[d]etailed financial information was not included in the submissions from the three developers and, accordingly, there was a limited basis to assess financial ability."

Alarming, in a commentary published shortly after the last election, Sullivan played down the importance of the project's cost overruns and whether the city would be on the hook for them because "Southeast False Creek is just one development in the citizens' real estate portfolio."

In other words, a billion-dollar project was minimized in importance and as a result, handed over without adequate due diligence on the bidders' ability to pay.

As we are all aware, the global economic crisis has made managing finances, whether personal or public, an exercise in caution and restraint. Vancouver is currently engaged in a major services review to stem a

2010 budget gap of \$61 million caused by lower revenues from development, cuts in funding from senior governments, wage hikes from a 2007 labour settlement and the aforementioned out of control spending.

Outside of this specific endeavour, a "culture change" as described by new City Manager Penny Ballem is being introduced within city hall.

Inefficiencies will be aggressively targeted, including measures such as the amalgamation of the separate groundskeeping crews for the park board and the City of Vancouver, the centralization of the 12 technology help desks that are spread across several departments and the cessation of the practice of stockpiling supplies.

Hiring and pay freezes have been in place since last February. Overtime, travel and training budgets are being cut back dramatically. And, as part of the first round of cost savings identified, 58 full-time positions will be eliminated in 2010.

Capital projects will now be entered into with a new level of oversight and rigour in terms of adhering to original cost estimates.

The policy of signing blank cheques to cover projects that go over budget will no longer be considered an acceptable way of conducting business. Hiring staff above allocated funding levels and without political approval (as was done with the Olympic Village office) is also a former practice that has been disavowed by the new administration.

These are complex decisions that have major implications, and as a result of a new commitment to disclosure by both city council and the city manager, Vancouver residents are being kept well informed of every detail, no matter how difficult.

Of course, the toughest test for this new direction will come in December, when budget estimates will be finalized.

Coun. Raymond Louie, chairman of the city's finance committee, has spoken publicly about keeping any property tax increase to a minimum, which is a commitment that will be dependent on the progress made with the budgetary review and consultation occurring over the coming months.

Regardless, taxpayers can take solace in the fact that scrutiny has returned to city hall, correcting an absence that has never been properly explained. It's about time.

**Jonathan Ross** is a Vancouver-based civic affairs commentator at CivicScene.ca.

Edition: Final  
Story Type: Business; Opinion  
Length: 766 words  
Idnumber: 200910140040