Challenges in Evaluating Livability in Vancouver, Canada

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Introduction

Vancouver appears "*at or close to the top of nearly every international list of the best places to live*" (Harcourt et al, 2007: 1). While its verdant coastal mountain setting contributes to its appeal, Vancouver's innovative approach to public planning has been acknowledged in making it the "*poster child of North American urbanism*" (Berlowitz, 2005). The term "Vancouverism" has even entered the lexicon of urban professionals describing a philosophy and approach to planning characterized by "*multiple-use, high density core areas; a transit-focused and auto-restrained transportation system; exquisite urban design to echo a spectacular natural setting; and peaceful, multicultural population*" (Harcourt et al, 2007: 1). Its collaborative approach to urban development involving extensive public and stakeholder engagement has been recognized through a variety of awards and distinctions. Indeed, Vancouver was the host of the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1976, where its cutting edge participatory planning model was showcased to the world (Timmer and Seymoar, 2005).

Figure 1. Downtown Vancouver

Source: www.flickr.com.

However, the contention that Vancouver represents an urban paradise is not without challenge (Boddy, 2006; Tomalty, 2002). Major concerns around growing income inequality, lack of affordable housing, uncertain economic prospects and a large ecological footprint raise questions around its sustainability and whether all of its citizens find it so lovable. Furthermore, outside of the City of Vancouver, much of the metropolitan region resembles the sprawling, automobile-focused development found elsewhere in North America (Tomalty, 2002). It seems there may be "*serpents in the purported Garden of Eden of Southwestern British Columbia*" (Wynn, 1992: xi).

Table 1. Vancouver Regional Planning Programs

Program	Period	Features
Livable Region 1975/ 1986 (proposed plan) (LRP)	1970–1983	• Innovative public consultation process delivers ambitious vision of regional livability. • Emphasis: residential growth targets, regional job balance, regional town centres, transit-oriented development, open space protection.
Choosing Our Future Process and Livable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP)	1989–2008	• Regional planning revived after 1980s Dark Ages. • Another major public consultation process leads to new livability / growth management strategy. • Growth Strategies Act provides more legislative authority to regional planning. • Emphasis: green zone, complete communities, compact metropolitan region, transportation choice.
Sustainable Region Initiative (SRI) and Regional Growth Strategy (RGS)	2001– present	• "Sustainability" provides new framework through which all regional decisions made, plans and corporate practices evaluated. • Partnerships as key focus. • Emphasis: sustainable, compact metropolitan structure; diverse and affordable housing; strong, diverse regional economy; protecting natural assets; sustainable, region transportation system.

Source: adapted from Timmer and Seymoar, 2005.

Vancouver makes an interesting case study through which to explore the challenges of planning livable urban regions and evaluating these efforts. Urban areas around the world grappling with the challenges of growth can learn both from Vancouver's best practices and its shortcomings. This paper focuses on three pivotal planning programs that have attempted to define and promote livability in the region (see Table 1). Each program is analyzed before concluding with specific lessons relevant to evaluating livability (and sustainability) in the region. The meanings of these key concepts will not be defined here. The negotiation of meaning is indeed part of the collaborative planning process.

The Greater Vancouver Regional District — Background

Perched dramatically beneath the Coastal Range Mountains of British Columbia (BC), Vancouver has grown out of the temperate rainforest along the shores of the Fraser River and the bays and inlets of the Georgia Strait. The past century has seen a series of colonial resource outposts isolated across the mountains from the rest of the country grow to become Canada's third largest urban area (at 2.3 million), its largest port and celebrated gateway to the emerging Pacific Rim. The Greater Vancouver Regional District (recently rebranded Metro Vancouver) was established in 1962, emerging out of an earlier structure the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board. The GVRD is a partnership of 22 largely independent but highly interconnected municipalities and one unincorporated area, anchored by the City of Vancouver proper (population: 600,000) (see Figure 2). These municipalities differ remarkably in physical geography, area, population size, density, demographic composition, aspirations and sense of place. The Vancouver region is a major magnet for immigration and its population has been growing rapidly (6.5 per cent between the 2001 and 2006 censuses with the Municipality of Surrey growing over 13 per cent in that period (BC Stats, 2007)).

Figure 2. Municipalities of the GVRD (Metro Vancouver)

Source: Vancouver Foundation, 2008.

The region is one of the most ethnically diverse in Canada, with approximately 40 per cent of the population referred to as "visible minorities" including large Chinese, South Asian and Filipino communities.

The GVRD is not another level of government but a cooperative arrangement to provide regional services. Such services include monitoring air quality, managing the region's recycling, garbage and sewerage, maintaining a network of regional parks, ensuring reliable access to drinking water and developing regional growth management strategies. The region has no taxing powers and relies on provincial grants and charging municipalities for the services. Decisions are made "horizontally" through consensus of elected representatives (i.e. mayors and councillors) on the Metro Board. The implications of this arrangement for growth management and promoting livability are significant. The region cannot coerce municipalities into complying with the regional vision, for which it has been both praised as "*Canada's most effective model of local democracy*" (Lorinc, 2006: 203) and criticized as toothless and ineffective (Tomalty, 2002).

Towards a Livable Region (1970s)

Until the late 1960s, Vancouver was on much the same trajectory as other metropolises in North America. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Canada had the highest urban growth rate amongst western industrial nations. Growth was viewed as positive and the purpose of planning was to facilitate progress through minimizing uncertainty and ensuring "*orderly, economical and convenient development*" of communities (Lash, 1976: 15). The metrics by which plans were judged included miles of streets, sewers and water mains and the provision of enough schools and parks. Bill Rathie, mayor in the early 1960s, proclaimed "Let's Get Vancouver Moving", a battle cry to support the kinds of projects happening in other North American cities: inner-city "urban renewal", low-density suburbanization and freeway expansion to increase auto-mobility (Berlowitz, 2005).

However, as the GVRD's first planning director Harry Lash recognized, "*sometime in the sixties the growth-is-good concept began to fall apart*" (1976: 15). While growth was producing material abundance, many citizens in Vancouver perceived a diminishing quality of life. A new era of scepticism, growing environmental concern and outrage against war and civil injustice had found fertile ground in the city and translated into oppositional action (Harcourt et al, 2007). Citizen mobilization in 1967–1968 stopped a major freeway project that would have paved over now-treasured inner-city neighbourhoods Strathcona and Chinatown (Wai, 1998). The "great freeway debate" catalyzed major change in regional consciousness and led to unprecedented public interest in planning (Harcourt et al, 2007; Ley et al, 1992). It also led in 1972 to the election of The Electors Action Movement. TEAM was a short-lived, progressive political party that set in motion a number of important reforms establishing the context for socially and environmentally conscious, collaborative planning at the Vancouver municipal level. In this climate of social awareness, the Province established the Agricultural Land Reserve. In hindsight, it was a remarkably prescient and politically bold act where 4.7 million ha of land were set off limits for development. Not only would this move preserve some of the most valuable food producing land (much of it in the Vancouver area), it would become one of the most important components of the region's growth management success (Harcourt et al, 2007).

Lash and his colleagues recognized that traditional regional planning goals were no longer in tune with shifting public values. In 1971, the GVRD Planning Committee responded by declaring a new planning purpose "*maintaining and improving the livability of the region*" (Lash, 1976: 16). "Livability" would become the overarching discourse of regional planning. However, Lash and his colleagues then had to grapple with the question of what livability actually meant and how it could be measured. Various computer models, social indicators and livability indices were explored but were found, by themselves, to be dead ends. The alternative finally arrived at would revolutionize regional planning. As Lash explained:

> "*Quite suddenly, early in 1972, we did discover the signpost: find out from the public what livability means; abandon the idea that planners must know the goals first and define the problem; ask the people what they see as the issues, problems and opportunities of the region*" (Lash, 1976: 54).

Lash believed planning could be improved if the planners, politicians and the public could abandon stereotypical roles (e.g. the whining citizen, the scheming politician and the aloof bureaucratic planner) and interact with each other in a more human way (Perkins, 2005: 36). There was great scepticism surrounding this new approach, with suggestions that it constituted an abdication of responsibility on the part of the planner, who was presumed to be the expert. Indeed to this day how to integrate the perspectives of planners, politicians and different publics remains a challenging question in Vancouver and in planning theory circles more generally (Fainstein, 2000, 2005; Healey, 1996, 2003; McAfee, 1997; Seelig and Seelig, 1997).

Out of the lengthy public process emerged general agreement that livability was an appropriate term for describing community aspirations. However, what livability meant and specifically how to view the relationship between growth and livability was complicated. To some, Vancouver should be "*a thriving urban centre, a world city, with more jobs and business opportunities and a great variety of things to see and do*". To others it should be a "*village on the edge of the rain forest*" with an endearing "*small-city character*", rooted in the local and wary of both unwanted land use decisions and unwelcome neighbours (Ley et al, 1992: 235).

Figure 3. Sketch of the vision for Vancouver from *The Livable Region*

THE REGIONAL PICTURE IN 1986
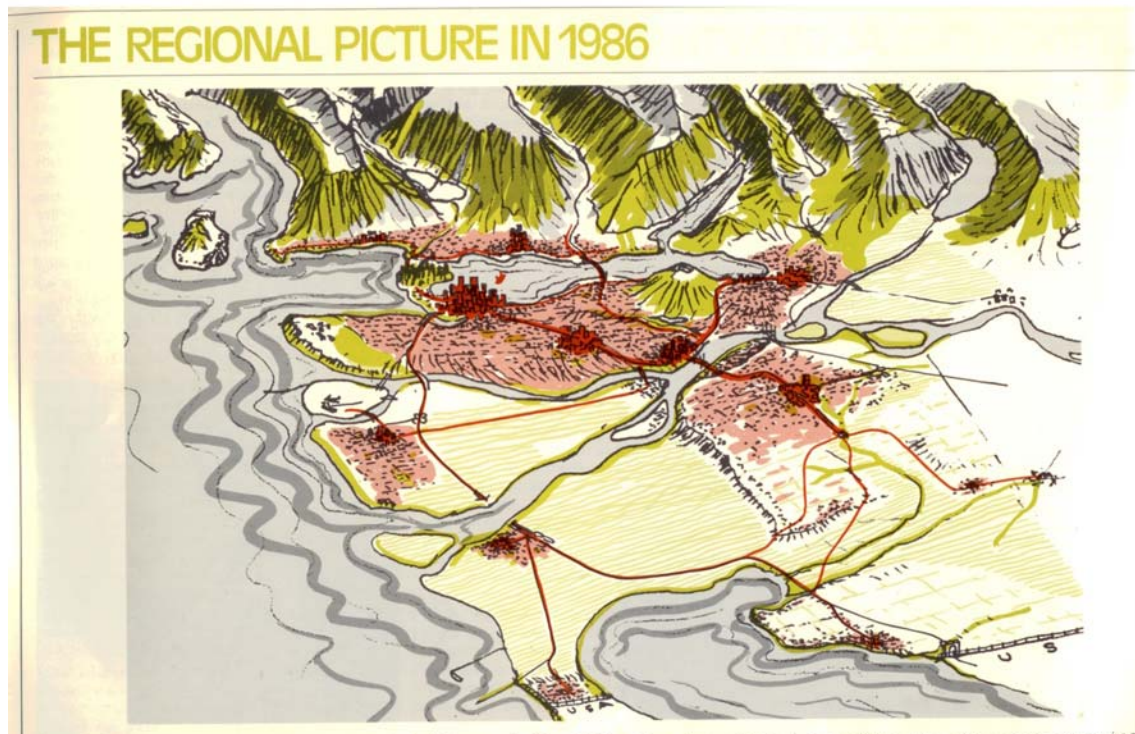
Stopping growth altogether did not seem feasible to the GVRD planners, however they were firm that growth should not simply happen but should be managed and directed in socially beneficial ways, drawing on informed public opinion (Lash, 1976). How to accomplish this was laid out in *The Livable Region 1975/1986* (proposed) plan (LRP), "*the first… metropolitan plan… to have been developed out of an extensive citizen participation process*" (Hodge and Robinson, 2001: 337). Although never formally adopted, it would set the backdrop for regional planning over the next decade.

The specific thrust of the LRP, what livability implied on the ground, was the creation of compact regional town centres connected by transit and surrounded by abundant green space (see Figure 3). Livability became the "benchmark" against which policies and projects would be measured with the guiding question being whether "*a project was going to make Vancouver a more enjoyable, more rewarding place to live*" (Perkins, 2005: 36). Monitoring and evaluation involved regional modelling using computers (remarkable for the early 1970s), "*'maddeningly detailed' cross-impact analyses to gauge the effects of more than 60 policies on 40 different issues*" (Perkins, 2005: 37) and regularly reviewing specific targets of population and job growth, transit expansion and green space protection (GVRD, 1975). Lash rejected the rigid rational planning model where monitoring and evaluating were steps in a linear process. Instead, he saw monitoring and evaluation as ongoing, deliberative process—a continuous adaptive learning exercise. In his systems approach, complexity and uncertainty were best respected through involving more people at all crucial stages of the planning process.

Unfortunately little monitoring or evaluating planning objectives actually occurred. In the 1980s, in a shifting global political economic climate (Ley et al, 1992) and local conflict over development in the Agricultural Land Reserve, the Provincial government "gutted" regional planning (Hodge and Robinson, 2001: 337). Until the planning role was legislatively restored

in 1989, the LRP had advisory but no statutory authority (Tomalty, 2002: 434). A more comprehensive evaluation of the LRP did not come until then, but some evidence of its impact could be observed. In the 1980s, regional town centres in Burnaby (Metrotown) and New Westminster had developed and were eventually connected by the light-rail Skytrain system. The City of Vancouver had continued to resist automobile-focused development and developed innovative communities such as South False Creek, which featured cooperative, mixed-use housing and emphasized walkability (in the foreground of Figure 1). As well, land conservation through the Agricultural Land Reserve had generally been respected.

On the other hand, there was little evidence of job relocation to the other town centres and much low-density development had occurred in regions poorly serviced by transit. Unaesthetic development on hillsides and increasing tensions around poverty, housing, immigration and the plight of aboriginal peoples called into question the livability of the region.

Choosing Our Future and Livable Region Strategic Plan (1990s)

Pressing regional concerns led to a revival of the GVRD and its planning function after the dark ages of the 1980s (Timmer and Seymoar, 2005). Commencing in 1989 the *Choosing Our Future*[1] process sought to restore the cooperative momentum of the earlier LRP. In the spirit of Harry Lash, this process was an "*open, inclusive and honest search for solutions that all residents of the region could widely support*" (Hodge and Robinson, 2001: 338). Over 4000 citizens and stakeholders contributed to public attitude surveys, forums, meetings, and seminars and raised over 200 concerns. The culmination of the *Choosing Our Future* process was this ambitious vision statement adopted by the GVRD Board in 1990:

> "*Greater Vancouver can become the first urban region in the world to combine in one place the things to which humanity aspires on a global basis: a place where human activities enhance rather than degrade the natural environment, where the quality of the built environment approaches that of the natural setting, where the diversity of origins and religions is a source of social strength rather than strife, where people control the destiny of their community; and where the basics of food, clothing, shelter, security and useful activity are accessible to all*"
> (GVRD, 1990: 1).

The vision can be read as an attempt to integrate the "World City" and "Village" discourses, while also embracing a new social conscience not evident in the earlier process. A clear reference to embracing diversity departed from the anti-immigration aspect of the "Village" discourse, but environmental concerns would be at the forefront and communities would control their own destinies. The opening statement clearly implied Vancouver was positioning itself as a global example.

In 1996, the GVRD published the *Livable Region Strategic Plan* (LRSP). Along with other specific functional plans (in such areas as solid waste, water supply, air management, major parks and health care) and a transportation plan (*Transport 2021*) that supported these objectives, the LRSP was meant to put into action the results of the deliberations over the preceding five years. The plan was presented as an alternative to the business-as-usual approach which "*put development pressure on farmland, increased the distance between jobs and housing, cost too much for public services and utilities, and resulted in worsening air pollution from increased automobile use*" (GVRD, 1996). It involved four strategies:

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1.   *Choosing Our Future* was the name of the process while *Creating Our Future* was the name of a subsequent publication. To avoid confusion, this case study uses the former title only.

1. Protecting the Green Zone: preserving natural assets (2/3 of the GVRD's land base) including parks, habitat and farmland.
2. Building complete communities: creating a better balance in the distribution of jobs, affordable housing and public services by creating complete communities around town centres.
3. Achieving a compact metropolitan region: concentrating growth in specific places to support transportation and environmental goals.
4. Increasing transportation choice: prioritizing walking, cycling, public transit and goods movement and discouraging the dependence on single-occupant automobile travel.

The LRSP resembled the earlier LRP in a number of ways, most notably in its emphasis on livability and its commitment to an extensive public process. Both plans emphasized the mutual reinforcement of strategies. For example, "*by encouraging dense housing combined with employment opportunities within complete communities and concentrated growth areas, the LRSP releases pressure on the Green Zone of parks and agricultural land and concentrates people and goods in areas that can be served by transportation and urban services*" (Timmer and Seymoar, 2005: 13).

One important difference from the earlier LRP was that new Provincial legislation would, in theory, provide more implementation authority. The 1995 Growth Strategies Act required member municipalities to show how their own official community plans reflected the LRSP's objectives through submitting "regional context statements" for the approval of the GVRD Board. Provincial legislation required municipalities' zoning to conform to their official community plan thus completing the link between regional livability goals and local implementation. In terms of monitoring and evaluating progress towards these livability goals, the Growth Strategies Act required the regional district prepare an annual report, which would track a set of 29 indicators linked to the four strategies. Examples of these indicators that would be monitored over time included:
- area of Green Zone;
- number and proportion of total and new dwellings in municipal and regional town centres; and
- total and per capita transit ridership.

The LRSP received mixed reviews from both internal and external sources (GVRD, 2002; Tomalty, 2002). The protection of the Green Zone was an impressive success, one attributed to the fact that the idea elicited strong citizen support and that municipalities had been given the authority to designate the areas in their jurisdiction that would be set aside (Tomalty, 2002: 443). As well, the City of Vancouver had created an urban realm supportive of the LRSP objectives (see Punter, 2003; Sandercock, 2006).

However, in other parts of the region homes and businesses continued to be dispersed away from town centres and transit links. One reason was that fierce regional (and global) competition for investment lead suburban municipalities to accommodate business and residential development in greenfield areas, rather than directing growth into the more expensive town centres. Suburban municipalities were also reluctant to embrace the City of Vancouver as role model. While the city was praised by some for its livable urban realm to many others in the region Vancouver represented an overpopulated, expensive, exclusive "resort" attractive only to the wealthy, mobile creative class (Boddy, 2006: 21; Florida, 2002). An alternative vision of livability favoured the space, privacy, safety and quiet of the suburban landscape, despite that privileging these values contributed to congestion, land depletion and pollution. Finally, municipalities and their citizens, who were supportive of

regional livability goals in the abstract (i.e. during public consultations on planning principles), were much more reluctant when, for example, "*specific intensification projects or bridge tolls*" were proposed (Tomalty, 2002).

The Growth Management Act was unable to ensure the implementation of LRSP objectives. Despite the requirement of regional context statements, the vague wording of the plan allowed municipalities to pursue development contrary to its spirit.

Sustainable Region Initiative (2000s)

By the GVRD's own accounting, the LRSP while containing a "noble statement of vision" had ultimately failed (GVRD, 2002). In 2001, the Board publicly admitted the objectives of the LRSP had not been met. Moreover, it recognized that many concerns had not been addressed by the plan. Regional economic sustainability and important social issues, such as poverty, drugs, crime and homelessness "*loomed large in the conscience of our community but not in our plan*" (GVRD, 2002).

In response, the GVRD has launched a new development framework called the *Sustainable Region Initiative* (SRI). With the implementation of the SRI, the GVRD's discursive focus has shifted from livability to sustainability. While the earlier livability initiatives are not perceived as contrary to the spirit of sustainability, there is a new emphasis on integration – specifically the reconciliation of "*widespread and long-term economic prosperity, social wellbeing and ecological health*" (GVRD, 2005). The SRI is intended to serve both as an overarching framework within which all regional efforts will be prefaced and as an action plan. As such, it focuses on the following:

1. reviewing and coordinating all regional and business plans in that same light – including the development of a new *Regional Growth Strategy* to replace the LRSP
2. examining all corporate practices in light of sustainability principles; and
3. reaching out and building a network of partners to grow a region-wide commitment resulting in a truly sustainable region (Metro Vancouver, 2007).

Underscoring these efforts is a commitment to developing a set of measures and targets to evaluate progress within the context of the sustainability framework (Metro Vancouver, 2008). Through 2007 and 2008, the GVRD (now Metro Vancouver) engaged with stakeholders and the public and an integral part of this engagement involved dialogue around appropriate indicators (see Figure 4).

As in the time of Harry Lash, Metro Vancouver continues to employ sophisticated computer modelling systems. Furthermore, the region has pursued partnerships with the highly engaged civil society in the region. Vancouver has a long history of civil engagement in social and environmental matters, dating back at least to the late 1960s, when Greenpeace formed here to protest against unsustainable whaling and logging of old-growth forests. More recently, a remarkable number of research organizations[2] have been conducting sustainability indicators work, trying to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the economic, ecological, social and cultural state of the region (see Table 2).

How this knowledge is harnessed to support action in regional sustainability policy is a significant challenge and critical question. Keough's (2005) research on Calgary, Alberta concluded that citizen-lead sustainability indicators coupled with strategic action can influence policy direction, but the contribution is difficult to measure. Metro Vancouver

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2.   The Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory created an inventory of over 50 organizations conducting sustainability indicators research relevant to the region.

Figure 4. Example of GVRD soliciting feedback on indicators

Measuring progress on livability and sustainability

How can our progress toward a livable and sustainable region be measured?
While considering what elements should be included in the regional growth strategy,
it is also important to think about how implementation is going to be measured.

Some suggestions are provided in the table above.

Do you have other suggestions or comments on this preliminary list?

Targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions	Should provincial targets be used or should the region develop its own targets? Should targets be based on sectors, such as transportation, residential, industrial?
Targets for proportion of trips by walking, cycling, transit, and car pooling	This target measures the availability of transportation choices as well as indicating better environmental choices. Should overall regional or subregional mode split targets be developed?
Transit supply provisions	In order to increase transit ridership, much more transit service needs to be provided- how and when should this be staged?
Number of people living within 500 metres of a major transit corridor	This is a measure of accessibility to transit.
Percentage of office jobs located in Metro Core and regional town centres	This is a measure of the degree which major centres capture office jobs, therefore increasing accessibility to jobs, especially by transit.
Percentage of residential growth occurring in established areas	This helps measure the degree of urban containment to be achieved.
Number of hectares removed from Green Zone and Agricultural Land Reserve	These indicators measure loss of lands currently protected from urban development.
Length and area of greenways and ecological corridors	This measures progress in establishing ecological and recreational greenway systems.
Percentage of households spending 30% or less of income on housing	This is an indicator of housing affordability.
Track housing construction by amount and housing type	This is an indicator in determining progress in meeting housing supply. Diversity and affordability targets could be added.
Number of hectares of industrial land and percentage vacant industrial land	This measure tracks the supply of industrial land.

Tell us what you think the choices for the region should be.
Fill out the questionnaire included with this guide or fill out the
on-line questionnaire and send it to us by email, mail or fax.

Source: Metro Vancouver, 2007.

planning staff interviewed for the present paper suggested published findings from such projects had an influence in terms of informing planners, challenging parochial institutional "groupthink" and influencing popular discourse, all of which had some indirect but difficult to measure impact on policy direction. However, they expressed concerns that the consensus (both in terms of municipalities and of different interest groups) around the broad livability and sustainability visions fell apart around questions of legislating targets. Despite the best monitoring capabilities, evaluation remains highly politicized.

**Table 2. Examples of Indicators Projects in GVRD**

Organization / Project	Features
Centre for Native Policy and Research — Aboriginal Indicator System — 2005	• Developed indicators to inform decision making for the urban Aboriginal population in GVRD.
Cities^{PLUS}(Planning for Long Term Urban Sustainability) — 2004	• Partnership of private consulting firm, international nongovernmental organization, GVRD and the Liu Centre for the Study of Global issues. • Extensive process to develop a 100 year plan / vision to support regional livability, sustainability and resilience.
Fraser Basin Council Sustainability Indicator Reporting — ongoing	• Bi-annual reporting on sustainability in the extensive watershed of the Fraser River. • Directions include: Understanding Sustainability; Caring for Eco-systems; Strengthening Communities and Improving Decision Making.
Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu) "Counting On Vancouver" 2005–2006	• Intensive expert and citizen based process to develop a set of values-based sustainability indicators. • Member of UN-Habitat Global Urban Observatory network linked local priorities with Millennium Development Goals.
Sustainable Region Initiative — Social Action Team — Municipal Engagement Strategy — 2007	• - Collaborative effort between GVRD and NGOs (including RVu) "*to engage and collaborate with interested municipalities... around the creation and implementation of regional indicators for social sustainability*".
Vancouver Foundation — Vital Signs — ongoing	• Aligned with community foundations from across Canada and aimed at producing a report card of "civic wellness".

Source: adapted from RVu, 2006; and RVu, unpublished.

One current regional debate provides further insight into this political challenge of evaluating livability and sustainability. The "Gateway Project" (Gateway) administered by the Provincial Ministry of Transportation in consultation with the local transportation authority (TransLink) involves a series of massive infrastructure investments in bridge and road building to expand transportation capacity in the Vancouver region over the next 10 years (see Figure 5). Gateway is portrayed as a bold investment to secure Vancouver's place on the global stage by improving transportation connections for commuters and commercial truck traffic. In promotional material it is linked to other great national construction feats such as the St. Lawrence Seaway and transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railroad (British Columbia Ministry of Transportation, 2006). Opposition to the project is decried as parochial and economically irresponsible, ignoring the bigger, global picture in a "*new age of prosperity*" and "*global economic shift to Asia*" (*ibid*).

A different story is told by a diverse assemblage of governmental (including Metro and the City of Vancouver) and non-governmental opponents to the project. They regard Gateway as a major misallocation of resources in a form of urban development already rejected in the 1970s. They are dubious that road expansion will address congestion, suggesting that instead induced demand will only exacerbate the problem. They also question a number of assumptions including: that the automobile can be sustained as the primary mode of transportation into the future in light of evidence of "peak oil" and climate change and that overseas trade will continue to increase as projected in what will likely be a very different

Figure 5. Map of proposed "Gateway Project"
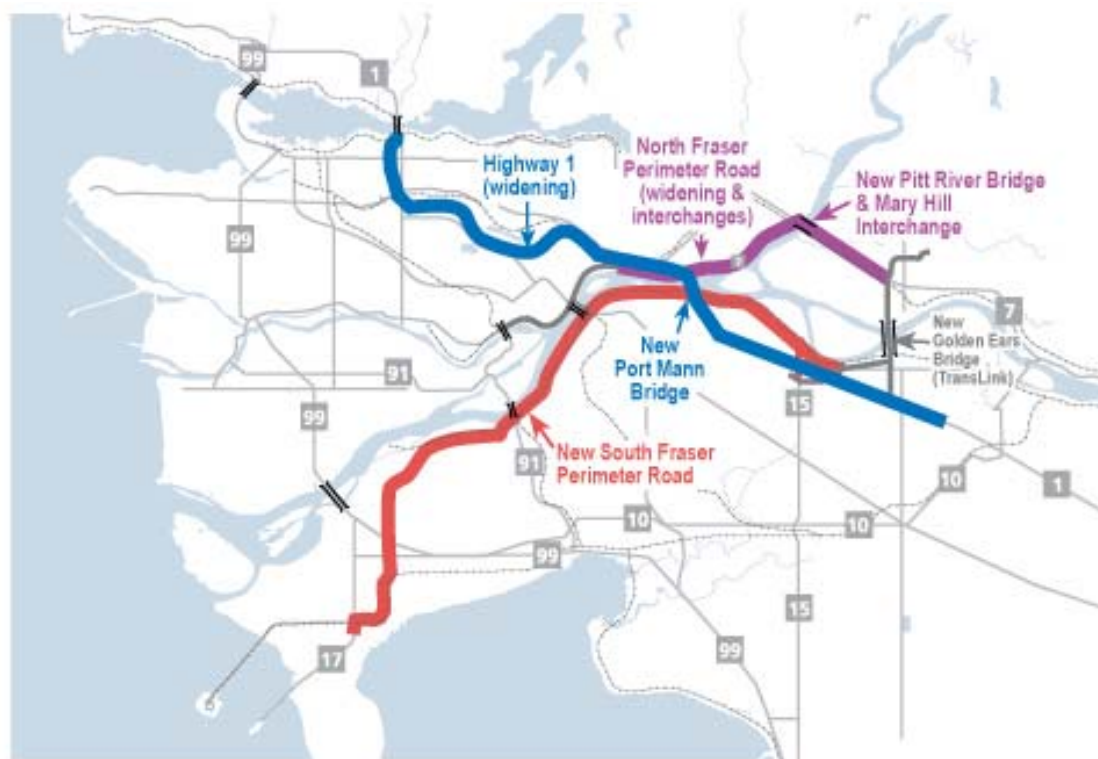
Source: British Columbia Ministry of Transportation, 2007.

economic climate. Gateway opponents argue that the program contradicts the longstanding livability vision explored in this paper. Opponents would prefer to see improvements that supported this vision including the design of complete, compact communities, improving public transit and improving rail infrastructure for the transportation of goods (Livable Region, 2008).

The present challenge is that both groups claim their respective positions enhance livability, but would measure success in very different ways. The Province (and other Gateway proponents) would privilege such indicators as trade volume and traffic mobility while the project opponents would privilege other indicators such as decreasing automobile use and reduced greenhouse gas emission. Evaluation is an intimately political matter.

Concluding Comments and Lessons to be Learned

Important lessons can be drawn from the GVRD case. Evaluating livability (and sustainability) is a challenge, since there are no universally agreed upon definitions for these concepts. In Vancouver, regional planners, following Lash, have approached this challenge by opening up the discussion. Lash implored that the benchmark for projects be whether they make Vancouver "*a more enjoyable, more rewarding place to live*" (Perkins, 2005: 36). Lash saw sophisticated monitoring and evaluation complementing ongoing public and stakeholder input. The collaborative tradition has been developed over the past decades and planners, politicians and citizens have developed an ambitious regional vision.

How this vision has translated on the ground is open to interpretation. Guarded optimism is afforded through the successes in preserving green space and the impressive development of

the City of Vancouver. However, serious shortcomings in the regional vision are recognized. Accounting for the mixed reviews of Vancouver's planning efforts provides valuable lessons:

- The planning/implementation gap is not the result of a lack of capacity to monitor and evaluate. Metro Vancouver and local civil society organizations have developed many useful indicators of livability but mobilizing this knowledge is challenging.
- The liberal economic climate inspires municipalities to compete for investment leading to development decisions often contrary to regional goals. Furthermore, the regional structure has few enforcement mechanisms. Other jurisdictional tensions, for example between the Province and the region over the Gateway Project provide further evidence of the constraints of context. Braun argues that in this era of extensive interconnections, "*we cannot assume that local planning alone can make cities sustainable*" (2005: 639).
- To some extent, this economic climate supports livability, if viewed as creating an exciting and healthy urban realm for the creative class (Florida, 2002; Harcourt et al, 2007: 192). An alternative vision of livability favours the space, privacy, safety and quiet of the suburban landscape, despite that privileging these values contributes to congestion, land depletion and pollution. For example, suburban municipalities have been reluctant to embrace the City of Vancouver as role model. Many see Vancouver as an overpopulated, expensive, exclusive "resort" (Boddy, 2006).
- The ambitious regional vision is supported in the abstract (i.e. during public consultations), but there is less enthusiasm when, for example, "*specific intensification projects or bridge tolls are proposed*" (Tomalty, 2002: 444).
- The success of the Agricultural Land Reserve suggests that bold leadership in support of community defined goals gets results.

The case illustrates the inescapably political nature of defining and evaluating the livability of the region. With such pressing concerns as climate change and growing pockets of desperate poverty planners, politicians and citizens urgently need to find ways to realize the ambitious vision of a sustainable, livable region for all.

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