

Vancouver City Planning Commission

Interim Report:

Jan 28 2004

Alternative Futures: The VCPC Housing Initiative Website

1) Introduction

On October 9th, 2003, City Council approved a \$10,000 supplementary grant request to the Vancouver City Planning Commission (VCPC) for the *Alternative Futures* project. Some Councillors indicated that they would appreciate a report on the status of the project at regular intervals. This is the first such quarterly report to City Council from the Commission as submitted by the Project Chair, Tom Pryce-Digby.

2) Background

The Vancouver City Planning Commission (VCPC) hosted a unique and challenging public forum on housing in April 2003. “The Future of Housing in Vancouver” attracted about 250 audience members and strong media coverage. The forum included a presentation by demographer David Baxter and a panel discussion by experts including developer Michael Geller, tenants rights advocate Vanessa Geary, neighbourhood activist Helen Spiegelman, and UBC professor of landscape architecture Patrick Condon. Audience participation was vigorous and positive. A majority of City Councillors was in attendance as well. Many attendees submitted comments praising the event and a number asked that more work be done to engage the public around the critical issue of housing affordability and choice.

Towards the end of the evening a question arose from the floor: “How can we make these housing ideas available to citizens? Does it end here . . .tonight?”

VCPC Commissioners have taken up this challenge: a diverse group of talented individuals were recruited to shepherd the ideas forward. Among the options generated after the forum was an idea to create an interactive website for “Alternative Futures, the VCPC Housing Initiative”. This idea soon emerged as being the most accessible, most affordable, and most effective way to communicate the VCPC’s vision of the future of housing in Vancouver.

3) Alternative Futures: Overview

Alternative Futures is an interactive website and video resource. It is an opportunity, for the first time, for citizens to have immediate and personal access to future visions of Vancouver. It is a tool to democratize the debate around housing.

Too often, when a development is proposed for a neighbourhood, inquiring citizens feel they have only two options: passive acquiescence or complete opposition. Citizens are confused when they come into conflict over housing. They lack information, and are only dimly aware of generations of uncertain neighbourhood relations which have left a legacy of doubt.

Alternative Futures is about “ground-truthing the theory”. Using this technique we take theoretical ideas of development, neighbourhood intensity, liveability, and sustainability, and make them tangible and more understandable for the inquiring mind. The interactive website and video resource is a comfortable medium, and like slipping into a warm bath, or reading the Saturday news; the user is immersed, absorbed and engaged. With this tool, citizens become part of the narrative. The website informs and levers a political will. It ends up being the voice of the people – owned by the user, about the user, for the user.

4) Alternative Futures: Users and Publicity

Who will use this tool, and why?

We have tested this question with project team members, VCPC Commissioners, City Councillors, city staff and many other contacts.

The target audience will be those citizens with a) the time and interest or b) the pressing need to be concerned with neighbourhood housing issues. Some users will find this site when they perceive some form of a neighbourhood housing ideas, proposals or perhaps even conflicts. It may be an issue in which they are directly involved. Some may be aware that the alternative position to development is not always “complete opposition”. Still they may be anxious about their rights, and perhaps even their responsibilities.

The website must acknowledge these concerns, but draw the user into the bigger picture of Vancouver and the changes taking place throughout the city. So while important segments cover Know Your Rights (i.e. What can you demand from developers and city staff?), it must also provoke the user’s interest in the larger discussion (i.e. Where is this all going, anyway?).

Citizens will be directed to the website by persons mediating (or precipitating) the issue: city councillors, city staff, developers, other neighbours. As well, a portion of the project budget will be set aside for the VCPC to advertise the website resource through civic media.

Alternative Futures

By providing a source of alternative visions from local Vancouver settings, and other cities, citizens can be empowered to work with developers, city staff and neighbours. They can learn, see the context of the city, see where it has been, and where it is going.

The tool is not a technical summary of the building code! The city has significant resources and a capable staff to provide this kind of information. Consistent with the internet/video medium, this tool's underlying message is that citizens can think beyond the building code to understand how and why development is happening. They can participate in the development process, and resist, support, challenge, and influence the outcome. This tool supports democratization of the housing debate because democracy is more than a process, it requires leadership, talent and information.

5) Alternative Futures: Format

Alternative Futures will be an interactive website and video resource accessed over the internet at www.VCPC.bc.ca/AlternativeFutures.html, and a link will be provided from the City's website.

The design concepts include pleasure, brevity, clarity, a "facilitated journey".

At the home page, the user is offered segments for exploration. Each segment relates to a housing concept and may include:

- Graphics: Maps, photographs, drawings
- Text documents: Written reports with graphics and links
- Video clips: Engaging 3 – 4 minute video segments featuring interviews, visual descriptions, walking tours of locations, meetings with community members.
- Flash Media visuals.
- Feedback resources: Interactive boxes for responding to specific or general questions posed on the website; discussion areas for users
- Links to related internal content
- Links to external websites

Users may drill down within the hierarchy of a segment; or they may link out to another segment, at any time. The product will be easily navigable and provide an effective use of the user's time. Website design must continually ask about the "event flow" and the "life-cycle of the tool", meaning how will the user use it? What impression will be left?

A major benefit of the interactive website design is that it can grow incrementally, as permitted by the capacity of the volunteer management team and funding resources. It can be revised and changed as content is updated or outdated.

6) Alternative Futures: Content

The Alternate Futures team members are extremely excited about the quality and quantity of information that can be made available through this project. We have access to all significant housing resources in the city through our various contacts.

We are currently preparing video scripts and still content suggestions for all of the following areas:

Conceptual Segments

- Alternative Visions – interviews with leading thinkers in housing affordability and choice, urban design, demographics.
- Virtual Housing Tour Segment: Featuring working examples of liveable density and successful in-fill development. In Vancouver's older neighbourhoods, we have many examples of innovative, more sustainable forms of housing adaptation and infill – from multi unit conversions, to coach houses to duplexes and live-work additions. A tour of these sites could inform the debate on the future of housing in other more suburban single-family neighbourhoods in Vancouver. This segment will include interviews with the real experts...those people who've had to live with the consequences! Secondary suites are a key element of this segment.
- Vancouver's Bold Experiments: False Creek, Brewery Site, Woodward's. See also the GVRD GOMDH site: <http://www.gvr.bc.ca/growth/gomdh2003.htm>

Historical Segments

- Current structure of housing/Vancouver
- Current structure of housing/neighbourhood by neighbourhood
- Zoning discussion: RS zoning and secondary suites
- Interviews with long-time Vancouver residents

Specialized Segments

- Know Your Rights
- Affordability and Rental Housing
- Housing & Transportation
- Seniors
- Assisted Housing
- Urban Agriculture
- Green Buildings/Green Roofs
- Micro Developments – insights for small scale home renovators on sustainability (water, pesticides, agrarian traditions, green roofs.)

Some video resources that have already been identified:

CMHC Market Analysis team

Clips from VCPC Housing Forum April 2003

Clips from Herbert Dreiseitl: Water in the City – May 2003

GVTV

7) Alternative Futures: Volunteer Management Team

Current Chair: VCPC Commissioner Tom Pryce-Digby, Intellectual Property Lawyer,

Members:

Chris Bouris: Digital media consultant.

Helen Goodland: CMHC Market Analysis

Ned Jacobs: Writer and Planning Critic.

Michael Mortensen: MA, Urban Geography

David Beers: Journalist and Author, VCPC Vice-Chair.

Robert Buller: VCPC Manager, staff support.

8) Budget:

Project budget September 2003 – September 2004: \$26,453.50

Funding obtained to date

Real Estate Foundation of BC: \$10,000

VanCity Community Foundation \$2000

City of Vancouver \$10,000

Central Mortgage & Housing \$ 3000*

Total Grants Secured as of December 2003: \$22,000.00

* CMHC grant may be increased to \$5000; confirmation is pending.

This would increase total funding to \$27,000.

The project team has decided that even though funding obtained to date is below our first year projected budget requirements, it was still reasonable to commence the project given the substantial funding that has been secured, and the possibility for additional funding from other sources.

9) Execution and Time-Line:

Total Volunteer Hours to date: 60

Total Paid Hours to date: 0

Anticipated Website Launch Date:

March 1, 2004

Quarterly Updates to the website:

June 1, 2004

September 1, 2004

December 1, 2004

Timeline Notes: December 2003:

Video taping officially commenced on December 13th, 2003 with a three-hour interview at the home of Laurie & Nic Ruggeman. The site is a leading example of “coach house in-fill” type of development in Vancouver. This interview will form a site on the “Housing Tour” component of Alternative Futures. The Housing Tour will take users on a virtual guided tour of the many kinds of housing existing in Vancouver today which provide solutions for our growing population and changing demographics.

Committee members are scheduling further interviews for January and February 2004.

10) Conclusion

The Alternative Futures website is an exciting new way of exploring the future with maximum citizen engagement. Once proven as a useful tool it can be expanded to include many other topics of interest. The Planning Commission is very appreciative of Council for their support of this initiative.

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