

Vancouver City Planning Commission

Subject: Central Waterfront Hub Framework

Date: February 29, 2016

To: Mayor and Council

The Central Waterfront Hub Framework, with its ambitious vision for a spectacular waterfront, a world-class transit interchange, a vibrant waterfront district, and a welcoming ‘front door’ to Vancouver, has been a focus of interest for the Planning Commission in the past year. The Planning Commission strongly supports this vision; however, concerns remain about its implementation. In response, we are advocates for the development of a comprehensive and proactive implementation strategy, based on the “parameters to guide future work” set out in the Framework document (pg. 5), including the identification of project champions, as well as:

- careful phasing of future development with the transit facilities and other improvements identified in the Framework, including the Granville extension;
- drafting of detailed development standards and urban design performance criteria, compatible with established area character and landmark historic buildings;
- a rigorous hazard mitigation plan;
- a robust public process in support of the implementation strategy; and
- commitment to advancing high-level of sustainable building and development standards and a vibrant public realm.

A. Our Understanding

The Planning Commission began to look closely at the Central Waterfront Hub Framework in response to public concerns raised by the development proposal at 555 West Cordova. To further our understanding, we participated in a SFU City Conversations on this topic by providing the online documentation of the public discussion.¹ We also hosted a presentation/conversation with City staff (Brian Jackson, Anita Molaro, and Paul Storer), and a presentation by the Downtown Waterfront Working Group. Through this effort, and our own background research and discussion, we arrived at the following observations based on our interpretation of the Waterfront Hub Framework:

- The Central Waterfront Hub Framework is a ‘framework’ document and not a policy plan in the way that we would expect, for example, from a Policy Statement for a specific site or an Official Development Plan. Its intent and purpose is not to detail specific development controls or public investments but rather to outline a vision, and to guide future work towards its realization and implementation (while also providing some specific directions and requirements);

¹ Future of Our Downtown Waterfront: SFU City Conversation, June 4, 2015. [Video and presentation transcripts.](#)

- The concept plan (p. 35) and related diagrams are intended to be illustrative and not regulatory, recognizing the potential for alternative approaches while depicting ‘one way’ in which the Framework directions could be expressed.
- The Framework anticipates ‘further, more detailed planning’ (p. 5) that will result in revisions to ODPs, as well a revised strategy for financing amenities and infrastructure north of Waterfront Road, and a revised public benefits strategy to the south (p. 33; map p. 7);
- The vision of a ‘world-class transportation interchange and dynamic extension of the downtown waterfront’ is bold, compelling and worthy of public effort and engagement to realize, and will require the mutual effort and coordination of private landholders and multiple public agencies and levels of government;
- There is a commitment by the City to follow through in providing the necessary leadership at the outset, as captured in the Council 2009 motion directing staff ‘to develop a strategy for seeking the support and involvement of senior levels of government, area landowners and other stakeholders in the implementation of the vision established in the Central Waterfront Hub Framework’ (Council [Minutes](#), P&E, 2009 June 11, p. 2).

B. Key Issues and Concerns

Building on our understanding as well as our support for the vision, there are several key issues and concerns that we believe need to be addressed before any further development takes place in the waterfront hub area:

- **A proactive implementation strategy needs to be developed** to advance the Framework vision, including convening stakeholders and initiating further planning work. In the absence of a strategy, the City has been responding to individual development applications, beginning with 320 Granville Street and more recently with the 555 West Cordova proposal. A proactive strategy is needed to ensure that work on transit facilities and other improvements at the core of the Framework vision advance in step with development, as envisioned in the Framework for Area B (p. 44). Further, considering the scale of potential development, design studies and detailed design guidance would be advantageous.
- **Compatibility with area character must be a key criterion of urban design performance.** We are hopeful that a revised proposal for the 555 West Cordova project will demonstrate an improved relationship to the adjacent heritage buildings and a floorplate/building mass closer in spirit to the illustrative concept plan. We note the requirement for a heritage impact statement for proposals, and for design that complements landmark heritage buildings (p. 30).
- **A mitigation measures plan for this potential hazard zone is needed.** Considering the intensity of development expected in proximity to rail and associated hazard material transport, and the risks from seismic activity and sea level rise, a rigorous hazard mitigation plan is needed.
- **Attention is needed to how policy documents are presented to the public,** particularly where there is potential for a perceived contradiction between an illustrative concept and a zoning schedule. Clearer communication of policies and objectives in relation to implementation would help to clear confusion about Vancouver’s development process and strengthen public trust.

C. Ideas for Moving Forward

Based on our discussions with staff and community members, we are optimistic about the potential for positive outcomes in the central waterfront area. We support the following coordinated actions toward the realization of the Framework vision:

- **An implementation strategy for the Framework, including a coordinated, proactive strategy for advancing all the components, including the transit interchange and public realm.** As noted, the Framework is a high-level policy document and does not provide the specific development guidance that would be expected from a site-specific policy statement or Official Development Plan. The implementation strategy is needed to build the support of senior governments, landowners and other stakeholders, as well as to advance the detailed planning specified in the Framework. Further, in addition to the review and update of ODPs relating to the area and the creation of a new strategy for public benefits and for financing amenities and infrastructure,² the planning work should include the development of urban design guidelines and a risk mitigation plan.
- **Identification of the ‘champion’ described in the Framework.** This step is described as one of the keys to moving forward (p. 4). The champion could be ‘a single party or a consortium, with the capacity for multi-year involvement, lengthy negotiations and significant financial investment, as well as the ability to present a comprehensive approach to development which demonstrates how the complex, interlinked challenges could be resolved.’ While the City cannot itself be the champion, staff and Council can play a catalytic role by convening stakeholders seeking support from senior governments.
- **A robust public process** during implementation to generate interest and enthusiasm for the compelling vision for the central waterfront.
- **Exceptional urban design** to create a great urban place, with sensitivity to the surrounding area, heritage context and transportation demands, along with a well-developed public realm that contributes to ‘a vibrant waterfront district that remains lively at evenings and weekends’ (p. 26).
- **Commitment to the highest standards in sustainable building and development for the site as a whole.** The central downtown waterfront could be an international showcase demonstrating the best in urban planning, design and sustainability.

D. Conclusion

In speaking out on this matter, the Planning Commission believes that we are acting on our duty under our mandate³ to offer advice on current initiatives that could have a significant impact on how the city evolves.

We were encouraged in December by the request from Council to staff for a history and update on development proceeding in the central waterfront hub area,⁴ and hope that this review will be a step in the direction towards the development of a comprehensive implementation strategy.

² ‘The portion of the Framework area south of Waterfront Road is part of the Citywide DCL area, and development will be subject to DCLs. The area north of Waterfront Road is covered by alternative arrangements for funding amenities and infrastructure (i.e. the “direct costs”). These arrangements were put in place through the Central Waterfront Port Lands Policy Statement (1994), are out of date, and will need to be reviewed.’ (p. 32)

³ By-law No. 5064, 7(b): to consider and report to Council on any proposal likely to have a significant effect on the future of the City.

Commissioners have had numerous discussions about a process to identify a champion to build collaborative support for achieving the vision. Given the prominence of the federal government as a stakeholder in the waterfront hub area, the recent shift in priorities at the federal level suggests that the next few months are an opportune time to approach the relevant federal Ministers, through the City's new office of Intergovernmental Relations and Strategic Partnerships, in order to encourage a federal elected official to bring new energy and resources to the development of a Waterfront Hub that all Canadians can take pride in.

If this approach does not result in the identification of a federal champion before the summer break, ahead of the fall federal budget process, then local strategies to identify the champion could be explored. These could include creating a new governance body such as a waterfront commission to coordinate the complex process. Successful waterfront district developments usually also have a political municipal champion, often the mayor but sometimes a councillor. Although a waterfront commission would require funding, the City could take an early lead by convening a 'blue ribbon' panel of respected community leaders to explore possible directions, including the possibility of federal funding. We have some ideas and suggestions for this and would be happy to share them.

We seek to be supportive of the efforts of Council and staff in seeking to build a great city that is a wonderful place to live, work and play. We are in strong support of the Framework vision, and enthusiastic to support its realization. Urban waterfronts, when well designed and implemented, capture the hearts of residents and visitors alike, and become a legacy for future generations.

Respectfully yours,

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⁴ Council [Minutes](#), Regular Meeting, 2015 December 1, p. 8.