

Background Paper on Communities and Corridors

October 25, 2017

The New Urban Agenda adopted last fall at Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador sets out a new standard for sustainable urban development. In the Agenda, cities are envisioned as complete - in terms of the environment, the economy, inclusivity, equality and equity – and with opportunities for residents to easily and affordably connect to people, places, goods, services and different economic opportunities.

Creating spaces that allow for all of these things simultaneously is a challenge for many cities. Affordable mobility (passage) can often come at the price of complete communities (place).

Moreover, the failure to balance passage and place can have adverse effects on the City's response and resilience to natural disasters. A public that feels actively engaged in their community and the decisions that have shaped it are more likely to have a social structure, trust, norms and social networks that facilitate collective action. In a catastrophe, experience with developing people-driven collective actions proves valuable in providing support, both during and after the disaster. Generally, the most resilient communities are those that have previously worked towards common goals.

This paper will focus on the friction between passage and place within the Lower Mainland and explore how to satisfy the conflicting preferences for mobility and community¹.

CONTEXT

The effects of transit and auto-oriented developments on community has been a recurring political discussion throughout Vancouver's history. Examples include the decision to reject plans for the proposed Strathcona freeway extension in the 1960s, debates on gentrification and transit-oriented development that have been taking place since the Expo Line Skytrain was opened, and debates on the removal of the Dunsmuir and Georgia viaducts.

What these examples have in common is a fear by residents of potential impacts that large-scale transit and auto-oriented infrastructure projects could have on their communities. Such debates illustrate the challenges that planners face when developing community plans and mapping modes of transportation.

Vancouver has followed a process of “debate-and-decide” in planning transportation. This approach gives local government the ability to adapt policy and proposals based on community input. In the above examples, Vancouver planners and politicians responded to community voices.

The ability of Metro Vancouver to create transportation solutions that respond to community input has resulted in many of Vancouver's successes in creating desirable public realms and neighbourhoods, accompanied by high quality rapid transit. Vancouver's Waterfront Station for example connects rapid transit to transportation extending to several urban areas in the Lower Mainland. Likewise, Brentwood Mall and Metrotown Mall in Burnaby, Lougheed Town Centre in Coquitlam, and Moody Centre and Inlet Centre in Port Moody are positive urban planning choices that limit the need for automobile use, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality, promote healthier lifestyles and revitalize declining urban areas while easily connecting individuals to other areas in the Lower Mainland.

The province and municipalities have a positive track record in implementing a disaster-response route plan originally focused solely on roads, but now grown to include railways, marine routes and air transport. The Disaster Response Route is an example of effective collaboration to ensure that, regardless of the transit-oriented or auto-oriented orientation of the parties, a network of pre-identified roads is in

¹ For a more detailed discussion of these issues see: Perl, A., & Kenworthy, J. (2010). The Canadian City at a Crossroads between 'Passage and Place'. In *Canadian Cities in Transition: New Directions in the Twenty-first Century* (pp. 191-209). Oxford University Press

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place that can most effectively move emergency services and supplies in the event of a major disaster. As municipalities move forward in their planning, they are forced to take into account how their plans could affect the Disaster Response Route.

ISSUES

(1) The ability to balance passage and place through inclusive planning practices, such as the “debate-and-decide” approach, pays additional dividends in times when the City is facing a crisis. The alignment of community input with transportation policy has been linked with community resilience in the face of disaster. However when characteristics of a strong community are missing - particularly a lack of involvement in major mobility decisions - the community has less capacity to cope with disasters.

(2) There is a known positive correlation between transit-oriented development, housing prices and increasing land values, since proximity to transit is in many instances desirable for homeowners, builders and developers. Transit-oriented development could lead to gentrification and large-scale displacement of low-income residents if not responsibly implemented.

(3) Local or regional transportation planning can be undermined by the Province. The British Columbia Gateway program, for example, sets out plans to expand auto-oriented development, although the development does not align with plans of several Lower Mainland municipalities. Heavy emphasis on auto-oriented transportation could disrupt the balance between passage and place, a goal of the City of Vancouver.

(4) The failure to align municipal and provincial planning approaches can yield highly inflexible mobility corridors that can be detrimental in the event of a disaster, inhibiting the movement of first responders and equipment into an affected area.

QUESTIONS

As the City of Vancouver moves forward in an attempt to build on prior successes, it is crucial to also take account past errors and mistakes. By highlighting both the more and less successful planning efforts to balance community with mobility in Vancouver, this paper poses questions regarding gentrification, national/local relationships, access/equity, and mobility in a disaster.

1. Does the synergy between commercial and residential elements in transit-oriented development foster a balance amongst social, environmental, economic and cultural sustainability? How is the provision of affordable housing and public space being incorporated into the urban revitalization that is catalysed by large scale transit-oriented developments?
2. Who has access to the spaces surrounding transit-oriented developments and under what terms will this access be provided? What about displacement of residents and businesses?
3. How can we ensure that the national and provincial governments are working in parallel to the municipalities when it comes to transportation and community development?
4. Does an increase in transit-oriented development require adjustments in the Disaster Response Route?

Community and Corridors is one in a series of background issue papers prepared for Shaping Resilience: A Summit on Resilience and Vancouver's Future. Communities and Corridors was prepared by J.B. McEown and Anthony Perl, a Commissioner on the Vancouver City Planning Commission.