

Sky not falling after Ecodensity decision

Highrises won't be sprouting all over
and cars won't be disappearing soon



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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

With little fanfare and after more than two years of debate, Ecodensity was translated into policy and a list of actions when Vancouver city council voted to move forward with the concept a couple of weeks ago.

Don't hold your breath for the sky to fall, for highrises to sprout along Dunbar Street or for a mass rezoning in 18 of Vancouver neighbourhoods — a threat highlighted in one of the brochures handed out by opponents of Ecodensity. Nor should you expect cars to disappear from our streets or for the air to be immediately cleaner.

But you can breathe just a little bit easier knowing that you, and a large number of your neighbours, actually thought for a few seconds about our quality of life in Vancouver and how we

might be able to protect it by doing a better job of planning our human settlements.

Before I reread the Ecodensity Charter and the 16 initial approved actions, I reviewed many of the submissions filed by those who opposed Ecodensity. I reread the submission that purported to represent the broadest coalition of those opposed to the initiative, an ad hoc organization of 28 neighbourhood groups calling itself "Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver."

The group charged that Ecodensity failed on three counts. It failed to balance the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. Actually, the group added a fourth leg to the sustainability stool — "social" — one I have never heard associated with the concept before. It also attacked the process, arguing that the debate was truncated — dragging on for a mere two years. Finally, it charged the city shouldn't be setting broad directions for policy or adopting action plans.

Ecodensity is all about finding a more sustainable way to build communities where we have a limited

Ecodensity has only started process that has a long way to go

study all the possible impacts and report back with some options on how homeowners might be allowed to build small cottages at the rear of their lots.

We might also see some different forms of midrise housing along arterial streets. These streets are the old streetcar routes, where there is a healthy mix of commercial and residential uses. In many other cities around the world, you would typically see buildings seven or eight storeys high along these streets. In Vancouver, the height is typically restricted to three or four storeys. Council wants more research on best practices and some options that might include increasing the height in future planning.

Finally, secondary suites in single-family homes were approved across the city with little outcry during Larry Campbell's term as mayor. As one of the action items under the Ecodensity initiative, city staff will report back with a plan on how to allow secondary suites in duplexes, townhouses and apartments.

Clearly, none of these actions will have earth-shattering consequences. It appears the public process hasn't ended, but only just begun.

Ecodensity has been approved and we can now say we care about the way our human settlement impacts our natural ecosystems and our quality of life.

Despite the ironic fact that the fateful vote that ceremoniously ended Sam Sullivan's short reign as mayor came two days before the vote on Ecodensity, and perhaps Ecodensity was one of many contributors to his downfall, we can thank the mayor for taking us down this important road where no other North American city has yet gone.

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From L6

land base, a growing population base, finite resources and a fragile natural ecosystem.

The two new rezoning policies enacted as immediate actions under the Ecodensity initiative are North American firsts: All privately built buildings in Vancouver developed on rezoned properties must now meet minimum "green" standards, requiring designs that conserve energy and achieve water and waste efficiency.

The second policy is for rezonings on larger sites. Not only must the buildings on these sites meet green standards, but they incorporate a whole range of additional green initiatives. These include developing a business case for efficient energy systems, incorporating urban agriculture, finding ways to manage recycling and reduce waste collection costs and incorporating new transportation ideas that reduce the reliance on the traditional automobile.

Neither of these huge steps toward a more sustainable city is contingent on the dreaded "D" word — density. They basically position the "ecology" part of Ecodensity before the "density" part.

Three initiatives that do hold the promise of increasing housing supply, while keeping development compact, still require loads of public process.

Backyard or laneway housing was one of the few proposed initiatives that attracted an expression of some support in neighbourhoods across the city. Council has asked city staff to look for a volunteer neighbourhood for a pilot project, do some more consulting with citizens,