

Time to consider how our neighbourhoods should work

With growth slowing down, time for reflection has increased



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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

The rapid pace of growth we have experienced in Metro Vancouver over the last decade or so hasn't allowed much time to pause to consider how our streets, blocks and neighbourhoods are functioning in creating a sense of community and nurturing the ideal lifestyles for which we strive.

Many have taken for granted

the lifestyle they enjoy in neighbourhoods that have seen the benefits of a prosperous society, but that have avoided much change. Others are the pioneers of a new urban lifestyle, leaving behind the single-family subdivisions of the '60s and '70s and living in smaller forms of multi-family housing, in more dense, modern, more urban places. Growth has enabled their new lifestyles.

The pace of that growth has now suddenly slowed. The world beyond our homes and our immediate neighbourhoods all of a sudden feels like a pretty uncertain and unknown place — a world that could even one day be hostile to our notion of an ideal lifestyle.

Maybe it's time to stop and turn toward the place we know and to those fundamental things that are important to us: home, family, security, health, friends

and neighbours. Perhaps it is time to evaluate how our most familiar place — our neighbourhood — is working and how it might work better and function in a way that offers us more comfort and security.

Last week, I sat in on a meeting of a group of citizens who were doing some of that kind of stock-taking and some dreaming about the future of their Vancouver neighbourhood. They were talking about the issues and the opportunities of the few square blocks that they call home. Their happens to be a unique neighbourhood — one that is one part older single-family homes in an established suburban precinct just off a busy cross-town arterial and one part new transit-oriented, high-density urban centre with an extremely

See **RESIDENTS REMAIN** E4

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From E2

diverse population. The new growth that brought change to the old neighbourhood also brought a lot of new community benefits and amenities. Residents in this neighbourhood enjoy some of the best community facilities in any Vancouver neighbourhood.

The room was full of people of all ages, from all backgrounds — old-timers from one of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods and newcomers who chose the place because of its mix of relatively affordable housing and its easy access to SkyTrain. There were young students and retired seniors in the room. There were families and singles.

Everyone seemed to share the same sentiment — by working together and focusing on the little things that matter in their neighbourhood, they can make it a safer, cleaner, more vibrant, more fun and more culturally rich place.

They acknowledged the strengths of their neighbourhood, including the wide range of community amenities and the robust range of social services that serve them. They also identified the needs and the places where those needs are slipping between cracks — cracks that are beginning to look like big fissures. I was pleasantly surprised that there

was almost no talk about too much growth or how density had been bad for their neighbourhood. There was talk about the need for more affordable housing, but almost no doom and gloom about a crashing real estate market.

The talk centred on issues that ordinary people could tackle and on areas where citizens working together could make improvements. They talked about community gardens, street landscaping, lighting that will deter street disorder. They came up with ideas to support the local arts and culture community, strengthen local food security, support a local economy and celebrate the cultural diversity of their neighbourhood.

The ideas that were generated at the meeting were practical ideas, not some pie-in-the-sky wish list.

The people in this neighbourhood that has been shaped by change believe they can make it an even better place, embracing the change that had already happened and managing change that has yet to happen.

They are determined to focus on the things that really matter right there on their street, in their block in the neighbourhood they love and cherish.

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