FOUND IN TRANSLATION: DISCOURSE, IMAGINARIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING IN PLANNING URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

by

Emilia Kennedy
B.Sc., Environmental and Conservation Sciences, University of Alberta, 2005

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Name: Emilia Kennedy
Degree: Masters of Arts
Title of Thesis: Found in Translation: Discourse, Imaginaries and the Production of Meaning in Planning Urban Sustainability

Examination Committee:

Chair: Nick Hedley
Chair
Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, SFU

Geoff Mann
Senior Supervisor
Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, SFU

Meg Holden
Supervisor
Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, SFU

Shane Gunster
External Examiner
Associate Professor, Department of Communications Simon Fraser University

Date Defended/Approved: ________________________________
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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a keyword in contemporary discourses on environment and society, operating as both a long-term vision of the future and as a basis for policy and decision-making in a range of governance settings. Cities in particular have enthusiastically adopted sustainability discourses, as exemplified by the City of Surrey’s development, beginning in 2007, of a municipal “Sustainability Charter”. This research seeks to understand how sustainability discourse operates generally, proposing valuable insights can be gained by analyzing sustainability from a Laclauian discourse theoretical perspective. This research also investigates why and how the City of Surrey came to institutionalize sustainability as a policy objective. Participant interviews and analysis of policy discourse reveals important intersections between the City’s sustainability discourse and neoliberal entrepreneurial city dynamics. The discourse is found to act as a basis for place promotion, as well as an accounting mechanism for managing interests and complexities.

Keywords: sustainability, sustainable development, discourse analysis, Laclau, entrepreneurial city, urban planning and policy, Surrey
For my grandparents,

Annamarie Kennedy and James Kennedy

– who epitomize love and devotion, respectively –

and to my mother, Marianne Kennedy,

who embodies both.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iii
Dedication ........................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................. v
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................................... vii
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................... ix
List of Tables ...................................................................................................................................... x

## Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Objectives .................................................................................................................................. 3
2. Empirical Context .......................................................................................................................... 6
3. Contribution .................................................................................................................................. 6
4. Methodology .................................................................................................................................. 7
   i. Document Analysis .................................................................................................................... 8
   ii. Interviews ............................................................................................................................... 9
   iii. Participant Observation ....................................................................................................... 10
   iv. Analysis .................................................................................................................................. 10
5. Thesis Organization ...................................................................................................................... 11

## Chapter 2: Story-lines, Quilting Points and Chains: Using Discourse Analysis to Understand Sustainability

1. Approaches to Environmental Discourse Analysis .................................................................... 14
   i. Hajer’s Environmental Discourse Analysis ........................................................................... 14
   ii. Lacanian Discourse Analysis in Planning ........................................................................... 19
   iii. Neo-Gramscian Discourse Theory .................................................................................... 22

## Chapter 3: Our Common History: Sustainability and its Imaginaries

1. The Roots of the Pillars: The emergence of sustainability ......................................................... 39
   i. What’s in a Chain? A provisional definition of sustainability ............................................. 40
   ii. The Astronaut’s Perspective ............................................................................................... 44
2. We Have a Problematique: The Limits to Growth .................................................................... 48
3. Limits to No Growth .................................................................................................................... 53
4. Sustainability Arrives .................................................................................................................. 58
5. Consensus ‘Lite’: The Rio Declaration and ‘Mainstream Sustainable Development’ ............. 67
6. Sustain-ability or Sustain-able development? .......................................................................... 70
## Table of Contents

i. The Development of Development ........................................................................ 70

ii. Development avec Sustainability .................................................................... 74

VIII. Sustainability Emptied: on Equity and the Social ........................................... 75

i. Social Sustainability as Need Fulfilment ............................................................ 76

ii. Social Sustainability as Equity .......................................................................... 78

iii. Social Sustainability as Laundry List ................................................................. 80

iv. How Many Bottom Lines? The Ultra-Emptyed Signifier ................................... 83

IX. Everything and Nothing: The Value of Understanding Sustainability as a Chain of Equivalences .................................................................................. 84

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### Chapter 4: ‘Made in Surrey’: The Charter Fix and its (Dis)contents .................. 86

#### I. Surrey: Growing and Pains ........................................................................... 88

i. Growing the Suburbs ......................................................................................... 88

ii. Growing the City ............................................................................................... 91

iii. Growing a Reputation ..................................................................................... 93

#### II. “Made in Surrey”: The Surrey Sustainability Charter .................................. 96

i. Charter Precursors ............................................................................................ 96

### III. The Sustainability Charter .......................................................................... 100

#### IV. From Growth City to Balanced City .......................................................... 106

#### V. Entrepreneurial Surrey ................................................................................. 113

i. Balancing Responsibilities ................................................................................ 117

ii. Balancing Taxes ............................................................................................... 126

iii. Open for Business .......................................................................................... 131

iv. The Future Lives Here ..................................................................................... 134

v. An Urban Experiment ....................................................................................... 138

vi. Florida in Surrey .............................................................................................. 148

vii. Campbell Heights: High Technology Beaver Habitat? ................................... 155

### VI. Understanding Sustainability as a ‘Fix’ ....................................................... 162

i. The Forced Choice of sustainability? ................................................................. 170

---

### Chapter 5: Conclusion: After the Vision .............................................................. 176

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### Appendix ........................................................................................................... 183

### Reference List ..................................................................................................... 185
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Three pillar and one pillar models of sustainability: .................................................................43
Figure 2. Surrey in its regional context................................................................................................................89
Figure 3. Surrey and major features......................................................................................................................90
Figure 4. Components of the Surrey Sustainability Charter...............................................................................102
Figure 5. The Sustainability Cube©: Surrey’s sustainability action framework..............................................124
Figure 6. Environmental pressures and the urban sustainability fix...............................................................166
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Population counts and growth in Surrey.................................................................91
Table 2. Vision items of the Surrey Sustainability Charter....................................................103
Table 3. Goal items of the Surrey Sustainability Charter......................................................103
Table 4. City of Surrey schedule of tax rates by property type.............................................127
Table 5. Local government tax rates in six major population centres in Greater Vancouver.................................................................................................................................127
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“All philosophy in two words, sustain and abstain.” - Epictetus

Entering its third decade in circulation, the discourse of sustainability has thus far proven to be a very sustainable policy program. The concept of sustainability and its attendant paradigm of sustainable development, which together can be most broadly conceived of as the goal of the reconciliation and alignment of (otherwise potentially divergent) social, political, and environmental goals, have achieved widespread adoption and ‘name recognition’ and have contributed to the current popularity of ‘green’ issues in policy, media and Western culture more broadly. Since the popularization of these concepts in the 1987 publication of World Commission on Environment and Development’s *Our Common Future*, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ have become extensively used and debated environmental and development paradigms (Becker *et al.* 1999, Williams and Millington 2004, Redclift 2005). Castro (2004: 195) has called sustainable development “one of the most ubiquitous, contested, and indispensable concepts of our time,” suggesting the popularity, ambiguity and political importance of the discourse.

Sustainability has become a keyword not only in international environmental discourses, but now also permeates the policy language and thinking of an increasing number of non-governmental organizations, institutions and state actors, including, notably, municipal governments. Municipal and urban governments across the world are increasingly turning towards conceptions of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ to frame planning and policy processes, in order to negotiate a diverse range of political, social, and ecological challenges (Roseland 2005). There is considerable consensus that the goals of sustainability and sustainable development are appropriate and desirable for urban development and planning among policy-makers, planners and local governments, in
jurisdictions across the globe – to the degree that Whitehead argues “the axiomatic response at the moment is to build ‘sustainable cities’” (2003: 1184).

Sustainability discourse enjoys continued success, and sustainable development becomes further entrenched in guiding frameworks of every type of institution from ENGOs, governments and corporations, to schools, small businesses and television shows. And yet, contests over the meaning and substantive content of these terms have plagued these twin discourses from the outset of their popularization. Since the publication of *Our Common Future*, sustainability scholars and practitioners alike have problematized the lack of a definite, agreed upon definition of sustainability, and much energy has been expended debating possible definitions and developing typologies, metrics and checklists intended to assist in delineating conceptual contours. Despite this seemingly irresolvable site of contention, people continue to employ the terms sustainability and sustainable development, most often falling back on the Brundtland definition (Adams 2001: 4). Some users of the terms nevertheless maintain a belief in a teleological sustainable end state at the end of the tunnel. Thus, the paradigm of sustainability is simultaneously endlessly contested and pervasively accepted. But how can something so vague and ultimately multi-interpretable enjoy political longevity?

I argue ultimately that it is precisely the vague, ‘fuzzy’ character of sustainability that has underpinned its success as a discourse. For this very reason, the discourse of sustainability merits investigation. Policies and practices continue to be implemented and legitimized in the name of sustainability (McManus 1996: 53), and as such, we should seek to understand why and how a political goal might be both vague and widely accepted. The goal of this research is to understand the political work performed by the sustainability paradigm – that is to investigate the history and structure of the discourse in order to understand why and how it is adopted by municipal governments. By critically examining the potent discourse of urban sustainability, my aspiration is that this research can contribute to a greater understanding of the power and limits of using sustainability as the basis for urban planning specifically, and politics more generally.
I. Objectives

In its broadest sense, this research is concerned with the role of discourse and geographical imaginaries in urban policy-making with a particular focus on the reproduction and production of policy narratives that contain and suture conflict and antagonism. In order to achieve this objective, I examine ‘sustainability’ as a dominant discourse within urban planning, using the City of Surrey’s development of a *Surrey Sustainability Charter* as an empirical case. This involves viewing the concept of sustainability in urban planning and policy-making in three different ways: 1) as a hegemonic discourse evolving through an expanding ‘chain of equivalences’\(^1\), 2) as a translation, a socio-spatial imaginary response to global environmental crisis narratives and politico-economic pressures, and 3) as a problem-making/-solving strategy in which governing bodies attempt to ‘fix’ geographical, social, economic and environmental contradictions in order to maximize consensus.

(1) The ambiguity and vagueness of the concepts ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development,’ far from being a hindrance to their adoption in policy, are essential to their power and usefulness by actors who mobilize them. I contend that the concept of 'sustainability' can be productively conceived of as an ‘empty signifier,’\(^2\) which is capable of absorbing and containing a broad range of desired human-environment and social goals, some of which may be contradictory. I will argue that the concept of sustainability evolved from the ideas set forth in the 1970s in the *Limits to Growth* debates (Meadows et al., 1972), and evolved, through a series of iterations, recastings and reformulations, into a concept with the capacity to absorb almost any policy concern. I aim to uncover the ways in which sustainability seems to have the capacity to act as a policy ‘sponge;’ capable of absorbing local concerns into its empty (though pre-figured in many ways, as I will elucidate) global socio-environmental imaginary framework.

(2) As a policy paradigm with such remarkable absorptive capacity, I am interested in investigating what specific contents come to fill Surrey’s *Sustainability Charter*. Sustainability

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\(^1\) A chain of equivalences, is a discursive construction which renders a series of particulars (be they political demands, word, categories) equivalent, by stressing that which the particulars have in common (Laclau 2005: 78).

\(^2\) An empty signifier refers to a symbol (signifier) that is “emptied of any precise content” due to an unfixed and sliding number of possible meanings (signifieds) associated with it (Torfing 1999: 301).
scholars have demonstrated that sustainability planning is usually motivated by specific local problems or crises (Parkinson and Roseland 2002, CSCD 2007, Betsill 2001, Vigar 2000). I therefore wish to investigate how Surrey’s problems, internal and external pressures, along with their perception by publics and governing bodies, motivate the adoption and translation of new discourses and social imaginaries such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ (Laclau 1990). This leads us to ask what conjunctural forces have made sustainability a desirable or even necessary policy discourse for Surrey. This research, then, is intended to investigate sustainability planning and policy-making processes as ‘meaning making’ exercises which translate global imaginaries in response to both ‘local problems’ (such as local partisan politics and land-use issues), and localized instances of phenomena occurring at wider-scales (such as senior government downloading and regional real estate pressures), in particular the interurban competitive dynamics of the neoliberal ‘entrepreneurial city’.

(3) Maarten Hajer (along with geographers such as Whitehead, While, Gibbs, Jonas, and Swyngedouw) argues that in order to cope with often contradictory ecological, economic and social forces and imaginaries, policy-makers and other recognized ‘stakeholders’ employ sustainability discourses as a policy strategy that discursively renders compatible conflicts and contradictions between differing policy concerns. This way, problems are framed such that crises can be made manageable to the governing bodies (Swyngedouw 2007, 2008; While et al. 2004, Whitehead 2003, Hajer 1995; see also Rose and Miller 1992) and politically palatable to a wide range of competing urban interests. If this is the case in Surrey, the City’s incorporation of sustainability discourse into municipal planning may be viewed as an attempt to render temporarily compatible contradictions in the local interplay between economic, social, geographical and ecological forces. More directly, the adoption of the sustainable development paradigm in urban management might be seen as means of disavowing conflicts within the City’s political jurisdiction through a program of total policy integration.

The central aim of this research is to examine the political work that the paradigm of sustainability performs by formally treating it as an empty signifier. This research seeks to extend the critical discussion of the adoption of sustainability discourses by employing discourse analysis to critically evaluate the success and limits of the sustainability discourse in
municipal planning and policy. I aim to trace a context-specific account of the processes, actors, and institutions through which ‘sustainability’ comes to be filled with specific content in a local planning context, concentrating on Surrey’s Sustainability Charter, as well as relevant antecedent policies, decisions, and sustainability initiatives at the local and regional scale. This research centres specifically on the ways in which sustainability is mobilized as a means of comprehending, defining, solving and disavowing urban problems, in an effort to investigate what type of sustainable city is being produced by Surrey’s actions (Whitehead 2003).

My research objectives are to:

- Explore the value of viewing the concept of sustainability as hegemonic political discourse in order to understand the history, appeal and limits of the discourse of sustainability.

- Investigate the adoption of a sustainability discourse as a socio-spatial imaginary response to local and extra-local pressures such as ecological change, senior government roll-back, crime and regional competition

- To examine the extent to which the sustainability discourse is employed in Surrey as a means of framing policy issues in such a way as to ‘fix’ contradictory or conflicting political goals, while simultaneously contributing to important shifts in the very notion of politics.

The following research questions served as guides in my investigation:

1. Why and how did policy issues facing the City of Surrey come to be framed or problematized as ‘sustainability’ issues; and in what way is the concept of sustainability seen by actors to be able to resolve those issues through planning?

2. What are the spatial and social imaginaries captured within the Charter discourse and what specific local social demands imbue these imaginaries?

3. How and with what substantive policy results did the Charter translate and create a local meaning of ‘sustainability’ for Surrey?
4. How can discourse analysis and ideological critique be used to understand the appeal, usefulness and limits of using a sustainability discourse in Surrey’s municipal planning efforts?

II. Empirical Context

The case study locale for this research is the City of Surrey, located in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia, Canada. Surrey was selected as a case city for two primary reasons. Firstly, Surrey, was one of two urban areas I researched in-depth as a research assistant with SFU’s Centre for Sustainable Community Development Strategic Sustainability project. Through this project, I had the opportunity to become familiarized with sustainability initiatives and implementation, as well as general political issues in the city.

Secondly, Surrey was chosen due to the timing of City’s development of the Surrey Sustainability Charter. In the Fall of 2006, Surrey City Council made a decision to undertake the development of the Surrey Sustainability Charter. The Charter was to be developed in a three Phases: 1) definition and scoping (January to June 2007), 2) charter development and implementation options (June to Fall 2007), and 3) development of implementation strategy (Fall 2007). This matched well with the timeline of my proposed research and fieldwork: background investigation (Fall 2007) and interviews (February to April 2008) and on-going participant observation (June 2007 to October 2008). The actual roll-out of the Charter was delayed. Phase 2 was delayed by approximately one year, having been adopted in October 2008. Phase 3, Charter implementation, is ongoing.

III. Contribution

As Mark Whitehead remarks, “there has been relatively little analysis of the sustainable city as an object of political contestation” (2003: 1184). With this research I aim to contribute to the analysis of the sustainable city in precisely such a way. By critically investigating the producers and production of sustainability discourses, we can better understand the ways in which discourse is circulated, reformulated and integrated with municipal planning and policy-making, with an eye to the resulting and interpenetrating
material effects. We can also gain leverage in understanding current environmental politics and politics more generally.

Most studies of sustainability and cities have a strictly empirical focus and “tend to assume the prior existence of a thing called the sustainable, or indeed an unsustainable, city and ignore the complex discursive processes and socio-political struggles through which sustainable cities are produced” which “tends to give a neutral, almost apolitical, veneer to sustainable cities and conceals the asymmetries of power which inform the social construction of urban sustainability” (Whitehead 2003: 1187). My proposed research, on the other hand, suspends the ontological presupposition of a state of sustainability, and instead seeks to explicitly attend to these discursive processes and struggles in order to reveal and highlight those explicitly political elements, which tend to disappear under sustainability's gloss. A discursive approach seeks to uncover the political logics, social contingencies and conjunctural forces that motivate or compel actors to seek out a ‘sustainable city’.

Few scholars have studied the concept of sustainability planning using discourse analysis. Yvonne Rydin (1999) examined the role of discourse in environmental policy but considered it only with respect to ‘discourse management’ and Habermasian communicative action and discourse ethics. Michael Gunder has perhaps done the most work in the area of discourse analysis and planning, using Lacanian discourse theory to examine sustainability as an ideological empty signifier within the planning field (Gunder 2004, 2006). His work makes an important contribution to the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. This thesis represents the first research to use Laclau’s notion of chains of equivalences as a basis for critical understanding of the discourse of sustainability.

IV. Methodology

This research project was conducted employing a mixed qualitative methodology that consisted of: 1) document analysis, 2) in-depth semi-structured interviews and 3) participant observation of meetings and public fora.

Howarth describes the methodological aims of discourse theory as a “problem-driven approach,” that begins a political problematic, then “seeking to analyse the historical and structural conditions which gave rise to them, while furnishing the means for their
critique and transgression” (Howarth 2005: 318). This approach is akin to Foucault’s strategy of *problematization*, whereby research is “a matter of analysing, not behaviour or ideas, nor societies and their “ideologies”, but the *problematizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought – and the *practices* on the basis of which the problematizations are formed” (Foucault 1985: 11, see also Howarth 2000: 134). Howarth argues, that methodologically, the primary aim of discourse theory is to explain events and process in order “to produce new *interpretations* either by rendering visible phenomenon previously undetected by dominant theoretical approaches, or by problematizing existing accounts and articulating alternative interpretations” (2005: 320-1).

Case studies and comparative research constitute then primary research strategies of discourse theory (Howarth 2005). Data sources for discourse analysis include linguistic sources such as documents and interviews, as well as non-linguistic sources such a participant observation, images and constructs (Howarth 2005: 335). For this research, I conducted a single-city case study, which Flyvberg (2001: 70) argues enables the production of “concrete, practical, and context-dependent knowledge.” Following Flyvberg’s (2001: 79) typology of qualitative case studies, I seek to undertake a *paradigmatic case study*, which aims “to develop a metaphor … for the domain which the case concerns” in order to “highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question.”

i. Document Analysis

Major source of document data were: the Surrey Sustainability Charter, the City’s 1996 Official Community Plan, Charter scoping documents and corporate reports, as well as antecedent sustainability documents. These provided background and context for the development of the Charter, but more importantly contained the rationales and substantive contents of the City’s sustainability discourse.

Other sources secondary data sources analyzed were:

- other City of Surrey planning and policy documents, such as the ‘Surrey Plan for Social Well-Being’ and the ‘Surrey Crime Reduction Strategy’, which are specifically referenced by the City as policy antecedents
- regional government environmental and sustainability policies such as the GVRD ‘Liveable Region Strategic Plan’ and the Metro Vancouver ‘Sustainable Region Initiative’, ‘The Liveability Accord’

- Surrey Sustainability Charter promotional material, and source materials cited by authors of the Charter

ii. Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 key informants, during 17 interviews, between February and June of 2008. In addition post-Charter release follow-up questions were sent to several of these key respondents in February 2009. Informants were chosen to represent various actors involved in the production of the Charter, and were categorized as: 1) City Council Members, 2) City staff, 3) Environmental Advisory Committee members and 4) ‘official’ stakeholders. Interview requests were sent to all nine members of Surrey City Council, and interviews were granted with four Council Members, including the Mayor.

An interview was granted with the City Manager, who acts as the liaison between City staff and Council. Interview requests were sent to General Managers of each of the three City departments charged with the responsibility of the development of Charter (Planning and Development; Parks, Culture and Recreation; and Engineering). An interview was granted with the General Manager of Parks. Also, interviews were requested and granted with two staff members who played major oversight roles during the Charter process, one each from Planning and Development and Engineering. An additional interview was conducted with two planners from the Long-Range Planning division of Planning and Development. Interview requests were sent to all twelve committee members of the Environmental Advisory Committee, which was to play an oversight and consultative role in the Sustainability Charter process. No responses were received.

Stakeholder informants were selected from a list of 25 ‘official’ stakeholder organizations identified in a May 2007 City Corporate Report scoping document, which included local organizations, institutions, community associations. Twenty-one stakeholder
groups were contacted, as contact information for some groups was not available. Interviews were conducted with ten informants during eight interviews.

iii. Participant Observation

An additional source of primary data was provided through participant observation of public meetings and forums relating to sustainability in Surrey. These included a Surrey Sustainability Charter Open House, a Sustainability Charter stakeholder consultation meeting, a Metro Vancouver Sustainable Region Initiative public consultation meeting and a City of Surrey Council Meeting. Field notes and/or live recordings were taken. Participant observation at these meetings afforded me the important opportunity directly to observe the verbal, interpersonal use of, and negotiation and contest over, sustainability discourses. It also gave me a chance to ‘ground truth’ information contained in secondary sources, to observe informants outside the interview context, and the take note of the discourses of other stakeholders, and members of the public.

iv. Analysis

The use of discourse analysis as the primary method of analyzing data entails searching various forms of data for key themes. Howarth (2000: 141) argues that the analysis of empirical data in discursive methods involves three basic operations: 1) the ‘translation’ of data sources into textual form, 2) the application and modification of the abstract concepts and logics of discourse theory to the particular empirical case, and 3) the deployment of discourse analysis techniques to the data collected. The first operation was achieved by transcribing non-text sources such as interviews and participant observation field notes into text form. The second and third operations involved an analysis of the themes and concepts employed by actors, and the application of the notions of chains of equivalences, empty signifiers and political logics to these themes and concepts, paying attention to areas of agreement, areas of contention, and lacunae in actors’ discourses. Analysis using discourse theory enabled the organization and interpretation of collected data so that it was possible to determine if, how and to what extent sustainability could be conceived of as a hegemonic discourse/empty signifier in Surrey’s planning and policy-making practices.
V. Thesis Organization

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 begins with an overview of the literature on political and environmental discourse, and elaborates upon the notion of ‘chains of equivalences’ as a suitable means of analyzing sustainability as a discourse. Chapter 3 traces the historical development of the sustainability paradigm through the explanatory lens of chains of equivalences, and offering problematizations of the sustainability paradigm and its imaginaries. Chapter 4 constitutes the case study of the Surrey Sustainability Charter. In this chapter, I present relevant background information on Surrey and the Metro Vancouver region, and then present an analysis of the conjunctural forces that have given rise to uptake of sustainability discourse in Surrey, in particular through the development of the Sustainability Charter, using interview responses, the substantive contents of the Charter and other relevant media and policy sources which inform Surrey’s sustainability paradigm. The thesis concludes with the discussion of the research, its implications and future research considerations.
CHAPTER 2: STORY-LINES, QUILTING POINTS AND CHAINS:
USING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO UNDERSTAND
SUSTAINABILITY

“The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make a word mean so many different
things.’ The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.”’
- Lewis Carroll

“You have to have an idea of what you are going to do, but it should be a vague idea.”
- Pablo Picasso

Urban planning and sustainability certainly do not make strange bedfellows. Both are
future-oriented means of conceiving a given geographical area and its problems3, and both
are facilitated and actualized by one of modern society’s banal yet powerful modes of
governance – policy-making. In the case of Surrey, the discipline of planning, the practices
of urban policy-making, and the discourse of sustainability have met to form a declaratory
document shaped by a negotiated process of meaning-making, with a traceable history and
particular geographical imagination. This chapter reviews three approaches to discourse
analysis can that contribute to the analysis of Surrey’s discourse of sustainability, accounting
for its history, its geography and its role in Surrey’s urban management.

First, environmental discourse analysis, as elaborated by Maarten Hajer (1995, 2005),
offers an account of how environmental discourses in industrialized countries are shaped
through the auspices of policy-making. Hajer’s focus on environmental discourse is
particularly useful, since sustainability, while incorporating a wide range of policy concerns,
is fundamentally an environmental discourse. Second, Michael Gunder’s application of

3 This is illustrated by the Canadian Institute of Planners slogan: “Shaping our Communities –
Sustaining Canada’s Future” (http://www.cip-icu.ca/)
Lacanian analysis to planning discourse, and planning’s adoption of the discourse of sustainability in particular, allows us to see the appeal of sustainability to urban planners, and to understand sustainability discourse as the mobilization of a desire for coherence and the social Good. Finally, I describe a Laclauian approach to theories of hegemonic discourse formation, and argue that this approach offers a compelling framework not only because it can offer a historicized account of the formation of the sustainability discourse, but also because it is the most cogent model for understanding how the discourse of sustainability functions. In the final section of the chapter, I show how Laclauian discourse theory has been used by policy theorists, and how their work might be applied to an analysis of the sustainability discourse in Surrey.

Discourse analysis, as a methodology, is well suited to a critical assessment of sustainability discourse, since it enables us to situate discursive practices and their underlying rationales within particular historical and social contexts. It allows us to understand the development of the sustainability discourse as the product of a historical accumulation of various political goals, economic claims, and ecological and social anxieties. It also permits an understanding of the political function of discourse, especially its function in securing discursive agreement and consensus between actors. Through discourse analysis, we are better positioned to offer not only a critique of the discourse of sustainability (both in Surrey, and in general), but also to discover how it might be better employed to achieve some of the political goals it symbolically endorses (Howarth 2000: 129). Discourse analysis takes seriously the idea that stories and storytellers can make power and are made by power, that “language has the capacity to make politics” (Hajer 2005: 300), indeed constitutes politics. Foucault observes: “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1979: 101). Discourse plays a crucial role in political change, and its study offers an important way of understanding politics and the social processes that shape and are shaped by politics.

In this thesis, discourse is taken to mean categories and figures of speech and their associated ideas and imaginaries, which are subject to change or be maintained via its production and/or reproduction by various actors. Various authors’ conceptions of discourse have shaped this definition, each with particular emphases. Hajer (2005: 300), highlighting the interpersonal co-construction of discourse, defines discourse as “an
ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.” Torfing (1999: 85) stresses that a discourse is never fully fixed, but is rather an “ensemble” of signs whose meaning is constantly subject to reinterpretation and renegotiation. The negotiability of discourse is key to an understanding how actors with seemingly disparate interests can share a discourse, and therefore change according to the actors or ensembles of actors who invoke them. Richardson points to the links between discourse and hegemony when he defines discourse as “multiple and competing sets of ideas and concepts which are produced, reproduced and transformed in everyday practices, and through which the material and social world is given meaning” (2002: 355).

I. Approaches to Environmental Discourse Analysis

i. Hajer’s Environmental Discourse Analysis

Policy-making, Hajer argues, “appears as the dominant form of regulation of social conflicts in modern industrial societies” (1995: 22). As such, environmental concerns, which are addressed largely through mechanics of government policy, are predominantly negotiated through this “subtle discursive process” (ibid). Since policy is the “socially accepted set of practices through which we try to face what has become known as the ecological crisis” argues Hajer, it deserves analytical attention as the mechanism through which ecology and the environment are framed, debated and made into political objects (1995: 2). Indeed, it is quite remarkable that something so “potentially socially explosive” (Hajer 1995:3) as a global ecological crisis is rendered manageable, and more than that, amenable, to solution by the mundane social practice of policy-making. Throughout this thesis, I aim to demonstrate the fundamental role of ‘policy’ in shaping sustainability discourse, treating it as an object of inquiry in and of itself. Policy-making will receive explicit attention in Chapter 5, which is a consideration of the role of the sustainability discourse in the ‘post-political’ condition.

Hajer’s approach to environmental discourse analysis (EDA) is specifically aimed at analyzing ‘ecological modernization,’ a reformist approach to environmental problems that “recognizes the structural character of the environmental problematic but none the less assumes that existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalize the care for
the environment” (1995: 25, also 2005). Hajer considers ‘sustainable development’ to be a subsidiary discourse to ecological modernization, making his work particularly relevant to this research. Hajer’s approach to environmental discourse is to ask: “How do problems get defined and what sort of political consequences does this have?” (1995: 2). To Hajer, the primary aim of discourse analysis is to discover why particular understandings/framings of the ‘environmental problematique’ gain dominance, while others are discredited (1995: 44). His central thesis, that the framing and definition of environmental problems determines whether or not they are seen as anomalies to extant institutional arrangements (1995: 4), has useful and powerful applications to the question of sustainability in Surrey, since it can help us understand what particular political concerns come to fill the discourse of sustainability there, and to determine whether and to what extent the sustainability discourse serves to normalize, disavow and depoliticize these concerns.

A central contention in EDA is that policy-making should be conceived of not only as a means of problem-solving, but also as ‘problem-construction’, that is, as the rendering or/framing of problems so as to make them amenable to solution via policy-making. To Hajer, “policies are not only devised to solve problems, problems also have to be devised to be able to create policies” (Hajer 1995: 15). This means that policy-making bodies process frame socio-environmental problems in such a way that the proposed solutions are achievable by that the policy-making structure can be framed as the appropriate agent to cope with said phenomenon (ibid. 2).

Given that institutional responses to socio-environmental phenomena often entail a redefinition or reconstitution of the phenomenon itself, Hajer argues that environmental conflict “should not be conceptualized as a conflict over a predefined unequivocal problem with competing actors pro and con, but is to be seen as a complex and continuous struggle over the definition and the meaning of the environmental problem itself” (1995: 14). Since this struggle for meaning happens between actors, and in many arenas, the context (the arena itself) in which policies are negotiated becomes of analytical importance. As such, discourse analysis is not only an examination of uttered statements (written or spoken), but also the practices and forums in which statements are made (Hajer 1995: 299). Therefore, specific attention needs to be paid to the practices and social contexts in which discourses operate
and circulate, since these have determining effects on discursive outcomes (Hajer 2005: 302; Hajer 1995: 2).

Hajer claims that sustainable development in particular, should be analysed as “the first global discourse-coalition in environmental politics”, one that established a common language for talking about environmental (and associated social and economic) matters, and acted as “the linchpin in the creation of the new consensus” on the environment (1995: 1). This consensus was achieved and is continuously reproduced by actors who may have “widely differing social and cognitive commitments” (Hajer 1995: 14). Indeed, the dominance of sustainability as a way of perceiving environmental problems can actually “alter [actors’] perception of problems and possibilities” of social, economic and environmental problems (Hajer 1995: 59; McGregor 2004).

From this perspective, the paradox of sustainable development is that the broad and ideologically diverse “coalition for sustainable development can only be kept together by virtue of its rather vague story-lines at the same time as it asks for radical social change” (Hajer 1995: 14). How can a coalition demand radical change via vague requests? The answer is that, in fact, the radical vision of sustainability is only tenable on such vague terms. The radical change to which Hajer refers are those changes that would be required to achieve the desired “endpoint” of sustainability: a lack of antagonisms between ‘social’, ‘economic’ and ‘environmental’ spheres in the context of an advanced liberal capitalist economy. Agreement on the desirability of this endpoint is relatively easily achieved: who doesn’t want a society in harmony with itself and the environment? Who doesn’t want the comfort and promise of a prosperous capitalist economy? Can we even imagine an alternative?

According to Hajer, the discourse of sustainable development highlights that policy and regulation “[depend] on this loss of meaning and the multi-interpretability of text” (ibid. 62). Since the goals of sustainability are highly abstract and vague, and often realized only decades or centuries into the future, they are interpretable in many ways, and do not pose immediate political threats to actors’ status quo. It is through a lack of contentious, immediate particulars (budget trade-offs, whether or not to send troops), that a high level of consensus among actors about the desirability of sustainability as radical departure from the current state of unsustainability, can be achieved and maintained as a planning ideal.
We can see this, for example, in the ways the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit (which can be viewed as an effort to operationalize goals set forth in the 1987 Brundtland Report) exposed some of the real differences in interest between various actors committed to the sustainable development paradigm. At the Summit, specific actions on and approaches to biodiversity conservation, development and so forth were contested, but the desired end-goal of ‘sustainability’ was left completely undisturbed. A decade later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, which acted as the 10-year follow-up to Rio, revealed even more ideological divisions, fractured commitments and little progress on specific actions (Grenfell 2006: 230-3). Many participants left disillusioned with WSSD, feeling a lack of consensus on ways of achieving meaningful progress towards sustainability (Steiner 2003, Pallemaerts 2003), yet few left feeling the vague term ‘sustainability’ should itself be tossed out (Seyfang 2003). In this sense, the ‘paradox of sustainable development’ hardly seems like a paradox.

In The Politics of Environmental Discourse (1995), Hajer introduces several important analytical categories that enable a better understanding of environmental policy analysis. First is the story-line, which is a condensed narrative of social reality that combines elements from different domains in order to “provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer 1995: 62, see also Hajer 2005: 302, Davies and Harre 1990). The story-line functions by referencing one specific element of the issue, which “effectively reinvokes the story-line as a whole” (1995: 62). The key function of story-lines is to suggest a sense of unity in diverse components of an environmental problem. For example, the environmental issue of ‘rainforests’ spurs the support of, and is enlisted by, a wide array of actors. All actors, from the systems-ecologist concerned with biosphere function, to the WWF concerned with the moral implications of forest destruction, to Sting, concerned with the disappearance of indigenous rainforest dwellers, “speak about the rainforest but mean (slightly) different things” (Hajer 1995: 13). Hajer argues that each of these actors has differing social and cognitive commitments, but that together they sustain a story-line that begins to generate its own social effects (ibid). Story-lines not only help construct a problem but also “play an important role in the creation of a social and moral order in a given domain” (ibid. 64), as the story-line itself, “not interests, form the basis of the coalition” (ibid. 66).
The second concept Hajer employs in EDA is discourse coalition, which he defines as “the ensemble of (1) a set of story-lines; (2) the actors who utter these story lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based” (1995: 65). Discourse coalitions can form among actors of widely differing positions, who are all, for various reasons, attracted to a given story-line. The importance of the discourse-coalition and the various subject positions it can contain is that actors can use the story-line and assume that a listener will understand what is meant (Hajer 1995: 90). Yet often actors speak at cross-purposes, whereby various actors’ understandings of a given concept or story-line are only partially coincident. The more vague, ambiguous or complex concepts and story-lines are therefore often more conducive to creating a political coalition (Hajer 2005: 302): “people… can be proven to not understand one another fully… [but] nevertheless together produce meaningful political interventions” (2005: 302).

A final useful concept, discursive structure, denotes certain regularities in ideas and concepts, as well as the degree to which these concepts and ideas become institutionalized in policy and practice (Hajer 2005: 300). The ‘story-line’ is an especially effective way of understanding sustainability and its discursive ability to achieve high levels of consensus among diverse actors. Yet, EDA suffers from some key limitations with regard to this research project. While it can account for the socially and institutionally situated negotiation and modification of ecological modernization or sustainable development, it cannot account for how these concepts came to being in the first place. In other words, it does not sufficiently historicize discourses. Nor can it account for the emergence of some of the ‘usual suspects’ that have come to fill North American urban sustainability discourses, such as density, and ‘liveability’. How did these labels, in particular, come to be associated with sustainability? For example, how did the short circuit density=sustainability emerge? Nor can it account for mechanisms through in which environmental discourses that circulate internationally become filled with localized political concerns at the regional and municipal level. What about the sustainability enables it to be a discourse about economic self-sufficiency on a First Nations reservation in Manitoba, and about office tower cooling in Toronto, while also being a discourse about tax balance and green space in Surrey (Connelly et al. 2008)?
Lastly, although Hajer makes specific claims of his social constructionist stance towards the environment, i.e., that the discourses and categories we use to conceptualize nature are social, not ‘natural’ (Castree and Braun 1998), he appears to remain squarely in the realist camp when it comes to his conception of discourse actors. That is, while he sees discursive outcomes as contingent and socially negotiated, by arguing that actors “try to secure support for their definition of reality” (1995: 59), he maintains the subject positions of discourse actors as pre-established, conscious and reified.

ii. Lacanian Discourse Analysis in Planning

‘Sustainability’ has arguably become the hegemonic mode through which environmental issues are articulated and discussed, particularly within government and management arenas, from corporate responsibility mandates, to First Nations development schemes and ENGOs’ and federal departments’ mission statements. As McManus argues, “sustainable development has become a dominant discourse for anything remotely environmental” (1996: 48). Furthermore, environmental issues have become increasingly urban in focus. As such, it is not surprising that sustainability now influences, and in some cases dominates, thinking in urban policy and planning circles (Gunder 2006, Wheeler 2004, Owens and Cowell 2002).

Planning theorist Michael Gunder offers several insights that are of use to understand how and why sustainability discourse achieved its current status within contemporary planning practice. Gunder enrolls Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in his critical reflections upon the contemporary raison d’être and formulations of planning. As a discipline, he argues, planning evolved and still is conceived by its practitioners as “striving to partake of the ideal Good within the physical world” (2003: 238). While the practical outcomes of what social Good might entail have changed over the years – from the City Beautiful, to urban renewal, to rationality and efficiency in service delivery – planners rely upon some mental-image of the ideal to carry out their important coordinating function in society (ibid.). But, according to Gunder, over the past several decades many factors, including with the collapse of the welfare state, the rise of neo-liberalism, urban decline, as well as “[a] loss of faith in planning expertise… to deal with emerging societal concerns, particularly those pertaining to race, gender and the environment” (2006: 208; see also
Gunder 2003: 250, Berke 2002, Marcuse 1998), precipitated a legitimation crisis in planning practice. This eventually led planners to adopt new guiding principles, including planning’s communicative (Habermasian) turn, participative turn, as well as its embrace of multiculturalism, liveability and sustainability as planning ideals.

Gunder claims sustainability operates as a master signifier in the planning discipline. Lacan’s concept of the master signifier, or point de capiton (quilting point), indicates a word that lacks a specific signified (an item or idea which is to be represented). Lacking a direct signified of its own, it functions to ‘quilt’ or ‘pin’ other elements of a discourse, in order to temporarily fix their meaning (Gunder 2005: 90; Zizek 2002: 87). Master signifiers act as “stopping points”, in order to “create points of order out of disordered nebulous aggregations of associated knowledges, beliefs and practices” (Gunder 2006: 301), giving them “common identity even in their diversity and ambiguity” (Gunder 2006: 211, from Zizek 1989: 88). Zizek argues that the master signifier acts like a container accommodating shifts in the signification of a concept. He illustrates, stating: “we are all for “democracy”, although the content of this term changes because of hegemonic struggles” (Zizek 2000: 224). The same could be said for “sustainability.” In order to pin other signifiers in a discourse, the master signifier must be empty of specific meaning; “[w]hile once these anchoring signifiers may have had a clear and easily explained meaning, for example, the verb to sustain, they now have somehow slipped into becoming empty signifiers, for example, sustainability, lacking specific signification and concise meaning in their own right so as to accommodate a set of conflicting discourses of diverse meaning under one single label” (Gunder 2004: 301).

It is important to recognize that master signifiers often “tie together complex and often tangled messy and contradictory sets of discourses” (Gunder 2005: 88). Gunder argues that within planning practice, “complicated, conflicting or multifarious discourses are regularly encapsulated under a single general label, sign or signifier, for example, “democracy”, “public good,” “freedom,” “sustainability,” or “market forces”” (2004: 301). This “looseness and ambiguity allow us to accommodate incompatible beliefs and political positions” (2006: 213), and “[allow] this concept to be a “real” or “good thing” for all those who embrace it, regardless of the particularity of their individual understandings, dreams or desires” (2006: 212, see also Zizek 2002: 58). In other words, it is the ambiguity and
flexibility of the word sustainability that in part gives it its ideological power (Gunder 2006: 211).

It is not surprising that planning, a discipline that orients urban policy towards the future (Gunder 2005: 83) has taken up the concept of sustainability, which Gunder describes as planning’s new ideal. Gunder calls sustainability a “catch all term” that “now acts as a point of identification and belief for many in planning and in wider society” (Gunder 2006: 209). Sustainability may provide a “sense of personal identification” for planners and policymakers. Indeed, popular policy direction entails that “good planners are now expected to support sustainability” (Gunder and Hillier 2004). According to Gunder environmental concern in planning existed before the rise of the sustainability discourse, but it was the transcendence of the word sustainability “into the role of being a name of subject identification and purposeful belief (or at least the appearance of belief)” that enabled planners to be able to address ecological concerns, and to connect them to social and economic concerns in order to constitute a new “planning mission” (even though this mission is fuzzy and ambiguous) (2006: 213). If we accept that ‘the environment’ plays a key role in contemporary struggles for control over place and space (Castells 1997 in Brand and Thomas 2005: 73), its political attractiveness “lies in the fact that it constitutes a universal reference for reconstructing a sense of community, solidarity and common interest in a socially fragile and fragmenting world… accommodating difference and articulating a new sense of totality” (Brand 1999: 644). Once the environment is presented as (literally) a common ground basis for solidarity amongst citizens of a particular community or the whole world, institutions and bodies that govern makes claims on space can summon ecological concern as “a claim to operate in the public interest as a vital factor of [their] legitimacy” (ibid). This will be discussed in Chapter 3 and 5. Brand argues “the willingness to accept the general premises of sustainable development seems to grow out of the practical dilemmas arising from specifically postmodern forms of sociality” (1999: 645).

Gunder’s Lacanian approach to planning practice provides several useful insights for this research. He points to the role of desire for an ideal in planning and actor’s (stakeholders, citizens, business representatives and politicians) social and environmental imaginaries. He also makes us aware of the political expectations and beliefs that circulate through policy-making and planning circles, which planners ignore at their own peril.
Gunder provides a historical reason for the legitimation crisis that led planners to adopt the sustainability discourse. What the Lacanian approach does not offer (at least as utilized in Gunder’s analysis of planning practice) is a means by which to explain historical emergence of the master signifier ‘sustainability’ prior to its adoption by the planning profession. Nor can it explain the political sequence and logic that transforms the verb ‘to sustain’ into master signifier ‘sustainability’. Moreover, the methodological requirements of a psychoanalytic analysis of the sustainability discourse in Surrey are beyond the scope of this project.

iii. Neo-Gramscian Discourse Theory

To address one of the primary objectives of this research, namely why and how policy issues facing the City of Surrey came to be problematized as ‘sustainability’ issues, we need an approach to discourse that can answer the question what is the background against which the need for the sustainability discourse emerged (Stavrakakis 2000: 100). A Neo-Gramscian or Laclauan approach to discourse is can help address the limitations of both Gunder and Hajer’s approaches to discourse analysis. It can take us further towards an understanding of how master signifiers come in to being, and why certain signifiers and not others achieve such a ‘master’ status. Such an approach to discourse (henceforth discourse theory) draws attention not only to the formation of discourses, but also to the contingent nature of the forces behind these formations, and the political alliances that form and dissolve in the process (Torfing 2005: 23). Discourse theory investigates how social practices are discursive, forming the identities of subjects and objects through the articulation of contingent signifying elements available in language and representation (Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000: 7).

In order to fully elaborate upon Laclau’s discourse theory, let us first clarify the meaning of some key terms, taken from linguistics. An articulation is “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.” Discourse is “the structured totality” resulting from this practice (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105). Discursive structures are not purely linguistic – they also involve sets of ideas, practices, and actions (Laclau 2005: 68; Howarth 2000: 102-3). In discourse theory words are not the primary unit of language, nor are words merely
arrangements of letters that directly reference a thing in the world. Instead, the primary unit of language is the sign, which consists of two parts: 1) the signifier, ‘phonic component’ of the sign, the ‘sound-image’ (“t-a-b-l-e”), and 2) the signified is the ‘ideational component’, the particular concept or mental image that comes to our minds when the signifier is uttered (we think of a four-legged, flat-topped piece of furniture) (Torfing 1999: 87). Together they represent a referent, which is a real world object (a piece of furniture one could sit down and eat at).

An important principle of linguistic analysis, which has bearing on our discursive analysis of sustainability, is that “in language there are only differences, with no positive terms” (Torfing 1999: 87, original emphases removed). That is, in this conception of language, systems of signification are in fact systems of difference (Laclau 1996: 37): the identity of one signifier within the discursive system is derived from its relational difference, or ‘differential value’ to all other signifiers in the system (Torfing 1999: 87). As Laclau explains, “each element of the system has an identity only so far as it is different from the others: difference = identity.” (1996: 38). For example, ‘socialism’ derives meaning only in relation to the meaning of ‘feudalism’, ‘capitalism’ etc. (Torfing 1999: 87), and ‘green’ derives meaning not just from some absolute characteristic, but from its relative difference to ‘blue’, ‘red’, and so forth. Therefore, elements of discourse maintain their particular identity via their relative difference to other terms in the discursive system. Since language is a system of differences and linguistic identities in the system are relational, “the totality of language is involved in each single act of signification” (Laclau 1996: 37). Every positive identity (A) is such because it is a negative of the other identities in the system (A ≠ B)4. This is important, for as we will see, it is the obliteration of this differential nature of signifier within a system of signification that enables the production of master signifiers.

For Laclau, the central object of discourse analysis is the operation of hegemony. In a definition consistent with Gramsci, I define hegemony as political, moral and social domination obtained through consent and/or ideological predominance. Hegemony is achieved in the discursive realm (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) when a particular identity comes to contingently represent the universal identity (Laclau 1996: 53). Or, put in discursive terms,

4 This is the syntagmatic structure, or combinatory, aspect of language. We also have the substitutive aspect of language, its paradigmatic structure, where C can be substitutable for A in the particular relationship: if A ≠ B and if C=A ∴ C ≠ B.
Hegemony is achieved when one identity comes to signify a set of identities beyond its own differential identity. Central to this conception of hegemony is the operation of both the nodal point and the empty signifier. Nodal points are “privileged signifiers” in a discourse: other signifiers in a signifying system come to acquire their contextual meaning in relation to the nodal point. For example, ‘freedom’, ‘choice’, and ‘right’ acquire different meanings when articulated around the nodal point of ‘pro-choice’ rather than ‘libertarianism’. Similarly, ‘climate change’ acts as a nodal point, giving ‘carbon’, ‘greenhouse’ and ‘heat’ particular meanings within an environmental discourse. Empty signifiers are nodal points that, through the building of a particular discourse, become emptied of their particular signification. That is, in the structure of the sign, the signifier becomes progressively detached from its signified. The empty signifier becomes increasingly detached from its signified by becoming increasingly attached to other signifieds in the system. So, since hegemonic is about the political operation of an identity beyond its own particular different identity, the presence and operation of the empty signifier is a necessary and constitutive moment in the hegemonic operation. These will be further elaborated upon below.

So how does the logic of hegemony operate? How does a particular difference in the signifying system come to represent the whole? First we will answer why one signifier comes to represent a universal whole. Recall that hegemony is domination through consent, and occurs within the discursive realm. It is literally the ‘contest of ideas’, in which a political ideology (and its associated discourse) come to be seen as common sense, not only by the particular social group that is its promoter and beneficiary, but by the wider social grouping. For example, a hegemonic notion of motherhood today is the “yummy mummy” – the woman who fulfils her role as child-bearer, yet also maintains a high degree of sexual attractiveness, physical fitness and also, ideally, a successful career. This notion is accepted not only by the men who stand to benefit from the combination of mother as child-bearer and child-rearer, and sexually attractive partner, and income-earner, but also others, including (crucially) the ‘hegemonized’ women themselves who consent to trying to attain such an over-determined notion of motherhood.

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5 If A≠B, and C≠B, as does D≠B, n…≠B, A comes to represent CDn…, so that A≠B condenses ACDn…≠B.

6 Empty signifier and master signifier, which I take to be equivalent, of not epistemologically distinct, will be considered functionally equivalent in the thesis.
But which ideas are subject to the contest of ideas? According to Laclau, the need to build discourses, and subsequently the operation of hegemony, arises because there is a constitutive need within any given social field for a social ideal (Laclau 1996: 40; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000: 8). This applies as the social ideals of a given category, like motherhood, but also to society itself – the social ideal of the social itself. Therefore hegemony is, in fact, a ‘contest of ideals’. The social ideal is the signified of society in its full form, and the discursive/hegemonic contest is which signifier will attach to this signified. For example, in medieval Christian Europe ‘divinity’ represented the social ideal, and the Roman Catholic church held hegemony over what was to be considered ‘divine’. As a contemporary example, in modern North America, various interests from cosmetics conglomerates to churches compete in their claims possess the means to fill the social ideal of happiness, which is a hegemonic notion of purpose of life in North American society (Kingwell 1999). In each hegemonic contest, various actors and institutions make claims, through platforms, policies or programs, of possessing the “panacea for a fissureless society” (Laclau 2005: 79).

But this social ideal always remains an impossible ideal – it is never possible for society to attain the ‘fullness’ represented by the ideal. Nonetheless, this ideal continues to operate as a discursive stratagem deployed by competing political practices, each claiming to ‘fill’ this lack of closure with their respective representations of the (impossible) social ideal (Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000:8, Griggs and Howarth 2002: 108). The notion of the social totality, the social ideal, while impossible, however, is also necessary. Laclau argues that the discursive formulation of a social ideal is a necessary component of the formation of the social itself: “without some kind of closure, no matter how precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity” (2005: 70). So the social ideal is necessary for the construction of the social in the first place, but it is also impossible. How is this so?

In Laclau’s view (and others coming from a Marxist or post-Marxist perspective), the closure, or totalization, of the social remains impossible because society is cut by fundamental antagonisms such as class and difference (Laclau 2000: 43-54, Butler, Laclau & Zizek 2000). Even though society is marked with antagonisms from within, however, the construction of the social ideal is posited so that the blockage to social unity is from without. This positing of a blockage to social fullness is necessary, stresses Laclau, because “there is
no totalization without exclusion” (Laclau 1996: 78) – that is, a given social realm is delimited by its limits, and as such, by what is beyond those limits (Laclau 1996: 38). In other words, the impossible ideal of social fullness requires, constitutively, an exclusion, and externalized threat. This external threat is constructed by the construction of a dichotomic frontier, where the discursive field is divided into two poles, the interior and exterior of a discourse. The exterior, the excluded element, is a “threatening Otherness” that is expelled from the interior totality in order to stabilize the disparate interior elements of the discourse (Laclau 2005: 70; Torfing 2005: 15). For example, the means by which a society attains its own cohesion can occur through the demonization of one segment of the population (Laclau 2005: 70). Zizek provides the examples of the figure of the Jew in formation of the fascist German identity, and the black single welfare mother in the Reaganist conception of the ideal society (Zizek 2006: 151). In each case, the Jew or the single black mother is posited as the obstacle in the way of society achieving its desired state, they represent the ‘notorious crime’, posited as blocking the fullness of society (Laclau 2000: 55).

The same logic applies to the sustainability discourse. Moore (2007) observes that the concept of sustainability only makes sense in conditions of ‘unsustainability.’ Thus, the disparate elements that constitute the sustainability discourse are united by a discursive exterior: the state of unsustainability. Society is unable to achieve its fulfilled state of sustainability due to this ‘unsustainable’ blockage. As such, the political project of sustainability is to fill this lack of society or humanity’s ability to sustain itself. The logic of hegemony at work in the sustainability discourse is illustrated well if we replace the word ‘order’ with the word ‘sustainability’ (and ‘disorder’ with ‘unsustainability’) in the following passage:

‘Order’ as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function (Laclau 1996: 44).

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7 Society A is defined by what is posited to not be society A, i.e., society B. Therefore, society B defines society A.
Therefore in a state of unsustainability, sustainability becomes the empty signifier of that which is absent, since “the empty signifier arises from the need to name an object which is both impossible and necessary” (Laclau 2005: 72).

First let us add that, not only is the social ideal impossible practically, it is, crucially, impossible symbolically. How is this so? Because the impossible social ideal is constitutively unreachable (due to fundamental antagonisms), it constitutes an element external to the social system. That is, it is impossible not only in practical terms, it is also impossible to represent it directly. Were it to be represented directly, it would then be one more difference in the system: “if the limits could be signified in direct way, they would be internal to signification and, ergo, would not be limits at all” (Laclau 1996: 37). As a result, this social fullness cannot be directly represented, however, it is always showing itself through the presence of its absence (Laclau 1996: 53): an identity within the system takes up, indirectly, the representation of the impossible universal. A particular signifier in the discourse, however imperfectly, “assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality” (Laclau 2005: 70). That signifier of absent fullness is the empty signifier, and its construction will be detailed below.

Now we are in a position to answer the second question: how does a particular difference in the signifying system come to represent the whole? Here we must turn to one more concept in order to fully explain Laclau’s discourse theory. While linguistically hegemony can be viewed as a discursive contest, politically it can be viewed in a homologous manner as a contest of ‘demands’ – that is, hegemony can be viewed as a contest of which items are on the political agenda and on whose terms. The name Laclau gives these items is ‘social demands’. For our purposes, and in order to reduce confusion when discussing ‘social sustainability’ in later chapters, we will simply call these ‘demands.’ In the English language the meaning of the word demand is ambiguous: it can mean either a request or a claim (Laclau 2005: 73). Laclau uses the term because it does mean both of these things. Demands are requests put forth by social actors to sources of social power (Laclau 2005: 73). If these requests go unanswered, they are subject to become political claims against the given social power. For example, residents may make a request to the local council to protect a tract of land containing rare bird species. If the local council ignores the requests, it might find that the request eventually evolves into a claim against their power. Perhaps a competing power
will use the land preservation demand as a platform piece against the existing council in a later election.

There are two ways in which the local council and/or constituents can construct the town’s politics. In the first manner, the local council can assert of the particularity of the demand by addressing it as an isolated policy issue. In this case the only links between the preservation demand and other particular demands (such as for a library renovation, upgrading of wastewater treatment) are of an isolated, differential nature (Laclau 2005: 78). This is called the logic of difference, and it is maintained when a system of power is able to address political demands differentially. In our example, however, the council has ignored the request for preservation. The frustrated constituents may continue to demand attention to the issue as an isolated political issue and therefore also maintain the logic of difference. What may happen though, as suggested above, is that the request may transform into a claim.

Competitors running against the current council in the next election may make the preservation issue part of their platform. Similarly, the ignorance of the request for preservation may rally more citizens in support of the claim: for example, other citizens who are frustrated that council is doing nothing to save a historical building in the town centre from demolition, or yet another group who have unsuccessfully lobbied council to upgrade the municipal wastewater treatment system, may join forces with the pro-preservation citizens. In this way, the land preservation issue becomes attached to other political demands that are related to it in their common dissatisfaction with the current council. This is the second way of constructing the land tract case and it is called the logic of equivalence. This logic works to build a discourse by establishing unity between disparate demands through the positing of an external threat (Clohesy 2005: 183). In this way the social field begins to become simplified – it becomes the local council versus the ‘chain’ of constituent demands they are failing to address.

The construction of a logic of equivalence, or a chain of equivalences, which stresses “what all particularities have, equivalentially, in common”, can only occur through a “partial surrender of particularity” (Laclau 2005: 78). That is, the chain of equivalences involves emphasizing what the various demands against the council have in common (which may really only be that they are all against the council), at least to some degree at the expense of how they differ. The logic of equivalence operates as a double movement: it consists first “in
the dissolution of the particular identities of subjects within a discourse,” and secondly “by the creation of a purely negative identity that is seen to threaten them” (Laclau 1996: 39). The various citizens of the town, who may have been fractured, split or non-aligned prior to the dissatisfaction with the council have now all overcome their particular differences in a coalition against the council which is seen to threaten the social ideal of the town. But each particular demand is now somewhat weakened in its demand as a distinct claim.

Thus, we have seen that on the one hand, the hegemonic operation involves the positing of a general antagonism (the ‘general crime’) (Laclau 2000: 54), the out of touch local council who fails at every turn to address citizen demands; it also involves a general victim, the good citizens of the town who endeavour to preserve the town, to maintain its complete and full character (Laclau 2000: 55). The construction of a chain of equivalences, and with it the construction of a ‘general victim’, constitutes the construction of a popular identity (a popular identity can only arise out a plurality of demands) (Laclau 2005: 95). And, as we have seen, when the popular identity comes to be seen as common sense, and the identity of the populus as such, hegemony is achieved.

We still have not answered our question: how does a particular difference in the signifying system come to represent the whole? That is, out of the plurality of demands now formed against the council, how is an identity in particular formed within the coalition? The negative identity (against council) will not constitute a popular identity, therefore a positive identity that represents the chain of equivalences must be located. We have seen that the logic of equivalence reduces the particularity of demands in favour of their universality qua the equivalential bond. Now one particular demand in the chain must take up the representative role of signalling the positive identity of the whole chain: “the discursive crystallization of the moment of fullness/emptiness can take place only if a partial content takes up the representation of a universality” (Laclau 2005: 106). In our example, in the chain of frustrated demands – demand for habitat preservation, need for wastewater treatment upgrade, desire for architectural preservation, and perhaps others such as the worry that Wal-Mart might open up a store in town – one demand must take up the role of condensing and representing them all. So, perhaps, the original request about the preservation of the tract of land containing the birds becomes the centrepiece of a discourse against the council. When citizens in the town refer to the growing dissatisfaction with the
council, they may begin to talk about the need for the ‘preservation of our town’, and the
chain of frustrated demands may become framed as various ways in which the town’s natural
and cultural assets need preservation.

The representation of universality requires that a particularity. But in order for this
particularity to represent the universal, it must become emptied of its particular contents.
(Howarth 2000: 107). Thus the answer to our question – how does a particular difference in
the signifying system come to represent the whole? – is, by its transformation into an empty
signifier. Recall that elements of discourse maintain their particularity in the system through
their difference to other signifier in the equivalential chain. A particular is able to represent
the universal only by losing some of its differential relation to other signifiers in the system.
In the loss of its differential relation, via the privileging of its equivalence to the other chains
over its difference, it becomes emptied of its particular contents (Laclau 1996: 39). In linguistic
terms, the signifier ‘preservation’ becomes progressively emptied of the signified of habitat
protection, in favour of becoming attached to more signifieds tendentially related to the
signifier, such as architectural heritage, clean water, etc. It is only if the differential nature of
the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifier empties itself of its attachment to a
particular signified in order to condense an equivalence under the ‘heading’ of one privileged
signifier, and that it can assume the role of representing the system as a coherent unity (ibid.).
In that way, the body of the empty signifier is split between the particular which it originally
represented (and remains) and “the more universal signification of which it is the bearer”
(Laclau 2005: 70). Thus, the empty signifier operates as a synecdoche – it is a part
representing the whole (ibid. 72).

So we have seen that in a chain of equivalences, each demand in the discourse has a
particular identity as it is different from the others in the chain (otherwise they would be one
and the same demand), but on the other hand, all of these particular demands belong to one
side of a dichotomic frontier, which has divided the social field into two camps (Laclau 1996:
38). Therefore, not only the empty signifier, but each demand in the chain of equivalences is
constitutively split: “on the one hand, each difference expresses itself as difference; on the
other hand, each of them cancels itself as such by entering into a relation of equivalence with
all the other differences of the system” (ibid.). This means that the identity of any one of the
equivalent social demands is always split between its particular concrete aims and its

But is the empty signifier truly emptied in the fullest sense, devoid of all meaning? No. The emptying of the privileged signifier entails only a “partial surrender of particularity,” whereby rather than signifying nothing, it embodies (through its own particularity) that “unachievable fullness” of the social ideal (Laclau 2005: 78, 71). We are left with a paradox: “what constitutes the condition of possibility of a signifying system – its limits – is also what constitutes its condition of impossibility” (ibid).

This dichomotic frontier in the system of signification has an important effect: The result is a constitutive and irreducible tension between difference and equivalence in each demand in the discourse. The tension is mirrored in the irreducible tension of the particularity/universality of the empty signifier pinning the demands together:

…the demands which the popular identity crystallizes is internally split: on the one hand, it remains a particular demand; on the other, its own particularity comes to signify something quite different from itself: the total chain of equivalential demands…But this more universal signification is necessarily transmitted to the other links of the chain, which are thus also split between the particularism of their own demands and the popular signification imparted by their inscription in the chain (Laclau 2005: 95).

Therefore, every universality is constitutively contaminated by particularity (since universality can only be represented by a particularity), and also because the one difference representing the whole does not cease to be a particular difference (Laclau 2005: 70). Obversely, every particularity is contaminated by the universal dimension in its associations with other signifiers in the chain of equivalences (Laclau 2000: 304).

This last point leads us to ask: how far can a chain of equivalences extend? Could the entire town unite against the council, rejecting its mandate in toto? Perhaps, at least temporarily. A better example might be the ‘war against the family’ (Gairdner 1992). At first glance of this discourse, the enemy of the social ideal of the nuclear procreational family is anything that would ‘undermine’ it as such: divorce, infidelity, abortion, etc. But in the discourse, further attacks on the family are posited: ‘counter-culture’ which undermines the pristine state of the children, and also feminism and homosexuality. The discourse of the
‘war against the family’ eventually calls up the ‘knowledge class’, taxes, Unitarians and even Plato as enemies in the ‘general crime’ against the family. As Laclau explains:

I can be relatively certain about who the enemy is when, in limited struggles, I am fighting against the local council, those responsible for the health system, or the university authorities. But the popular struggle involves equivalence between all those partial struggles, and in that case the global enemy to be identified becomes much less obvious. The consequence is that the internal political frontier will become much less determinate, and the equivalences intervening in that determination can operate in many different directions (2005: 86).

The obverse is true of the ‘general victim’: “The longer the chain of equivalences is, the less concrete this ‘something equally present’ will be’ (Laclau 1996: 42). While in its original intention the ‘war against the family’ denoted threats to the hegemony of the heterosexual procreational unit (husband, wife, children), the unfolding of the discourse evolves such that ‘the family’ comes to mean society (qua the social ideal) as such. Thus “the more extended the equivalential chain, the less [the privileged] signifiers will be attached to their original particularistic demands. That is to say, the function of representing the relative ‘universality’ of the chain will prevail over that of expressing the particular claim which is the material bearer of the function” (Laclau 2005: 96). Thus, as more demands are attached to the signifier ‘family’, it becomes extensionally fuller, but intensionally poorer (Laclau 2005: 96). This can occur to the point “that very symbolic framework that starts to disintegrate” (Laclau 2005: 86). In the case of sustainability, if (as is arguably the case) ‘sustainability’ originally referred to the conservation of natural resources, the extension of the chain of equivalences under the discourse heading of ‘sustainability’ may eventually undermine the potency of a political claim for resource conservation, as the demand for sustainability is radiated out to demands for sustainable schools, sustainable crime rates and sustainable tax rates.

Thus, the inscription into a chain of equivalences represents a “mixed blessing” for any demand: “[o]n the one hand, that inscription undoubtedly gives the demand a corporeality which it would not otherwise have, it ceases to be a fleeting, transient occurrence… On the other hand… the equivalential chain has strategic laws of movement of its own, and nothing guarantees that these laws would not lead to scarify, or at least substantially compromise, the…individual democratic demands” (Laclau 2005: 88-9). Laclau
and Mouffe stress that, in discursive hegemony, only “‘partial closures’ and ‘partial fixations’ of meaning” are possible. The capacity for a nodal point to temporarily fix the meaning of other discursive elements (floating signifiers) is possible due to the “openness of the social” (1985: 113), whereby there always exists an over-abundance of signifieds and where every signified is polysemic. It is this lack of closure of the discursive field that renders meaning contestable, negotiable, antagonistic, and indeed possible. Since equivalences can weaken, but “cannot domesticate differences” (Laclau 2005: 79), the particularity of the demands in a chain can and will remain, and as such are subject to become partially inscribed in competing political claims. This is apparent in sustainability in particular, where its contestable meaning has received an extraordinary amount of ink. Although the Brundtland definition is by far the most commonly cited or paraphrased definition of sustainability, there exist hundreds of definitions of sustainability, which variously cast sustainability as a radical, conservative, humanistic or bio-centric ideology.

In the sustainability discourse, we see a large number of demands brought into equivalence, not because their concrete objectives are substantively related but because they are all seen as equivalent in confrontation with a state of ‘unsustainability’ (Laclau 1996:40). That is in an equivalential relation of the sustainability discourse, the demands that constitute the spheres of social, economic and environmental sustainability do not necessarily share anything positive, “just the fact that they all remain unfilled” (Laclau 2005: 96) This is how, in the case of Surrey’s Sustainability Charter, increased commercial tax revenue, crime prevention through environmental design, local food production and staff cultural sensitivity programs can all be gathered into one seemingly coherent policy document. They share no positive content, but instead an “opposition to a common enemy” – “the fact that they all remain unfilled” (Laclau 2005: 96)

Laclau further explains that “[t]he presence of empty signifiers… is the very condition of hegemony” (1996: 43). This process is only possible in the social field, in which multiple actors and groups each attempt to construct their own sets of demands and equivalences in relation to a particular signifier (“Our organization defines sustainability as…”, “A Made in Surrey definition of sustainability is…”). In other words, “‘hegemonic projects’ will attempt to weave together different elements of discourse in an effort to dominate or structure a field of meaning, thus fixing the identities of objects and practices in
a particular way” (Griggs and Howarth 2000: 102). Hegemony is achieved when a particular actor or group of actors is able to stabilize the system of meaning associated with an empty signifier (Howarth 2000: 110; from Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In the case of the sustainability discourse, the World Commission on Environment and Development (a.k.a. Brundltland Commission) has arguably done just that.

The question remains, as far as our interest in sustainability is concerned, how one signifier rather than another, within a chain of demands, comes to take the privileged position at the one representing them all? Put differently, why is ‘sustainability’ the emptied signifier in this particular discourse, rather than ‘justice,’ ‘ecodevelopment’ or ‘liveability’? Laclau’s short answer is that not every signifier “is equally capable of transforming its own contents into a nodal point that becomes an empty signifier” (Laclau 1996: 43). This brings us to the affective dimension of naming. According the Laclau, “the unity of the equivalential ensemble…depends entirely on the social productivity of a name” (2005: 106, emphasis removed). This means that in the chain of equivalential demands, one demand in particular, for reasons that can be discovered through historical examination, is likely to be the empty signifier of the discourse. Further, in the act of naming the discourse (which occurs when one nodal point becomes an empty signifier), the discourse gains a unity over and above what it had as a simple chain of equivalent demands against an antagonistic force. Put in Lacanian terms, “the unity of the object is a retroactive effect of naming it” (Laclau 2005: 108). According to Laclau, this has two consequences. First, the name of the discourse, “once it has become the signifier of what is heterogenous and excessive in a particular society, will have an irresistible attraction over any demand which is lived as unfulfilled” (ibid). That is, the more a particular discourse is in circulation, the more it is likely to attract more equivalential demands to it. Second, the name of the discourse, despite must be an empty signifier, and “is ultimately unable to determine what kind of demands enter into the equivalential chain” (ibid). Recall, only partial fixations of meaning are possible, and therefore the discourse is subject to slippages in meaning. Thus in the last instance, any empty signifier of a discourse is always already overdetermined: its ‘empty’ character is in fact the signalling of its overflowing of possible meanings (Laclau 2005: 110, 115).

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8 Therefore sustainability cannot really be co-opted from its ecological roots, as some environmentalists claim. Or at the very least, it can never be ‘re-co-opted’.
The long answer to our last question – how does one signifier rather than another, within a chain of demands, come to take the privileged position as the one representing them all? – requires “the study of a particular conjuncture” of historical political, social and economic forces that led to the emergence of the sustainability discourse (Laclau 1996: 43). Chapter 3 represents the attempt to historicize the discourse of sustainability, with an eye to the events and actors that contributed to its emergence as the empty signifier of a discourse. This involves viewing the development of the discourse as the building of a chain of equivalences that quilts once disparate social demands, and seeing these demands as a product of important historical moments.

iv. Neo-Gramscian Discourse Theory and Policy Studies

Scholars on the sociology of knowledge recognized that institutional structures both constrain and enable the management and production of knowledge and action (Hajer 1995: 48; Berger and Luckman 1984, Giddens 1979, 1984). Similarly, policy scholars note that policy-makers and planners work with insufficient resources and knowledge, often confined by entrenched political pressures and short timeframes (Griggs and Howarth 2002, Owens and Cowell 2002). Such policy environments can lead politicians and policy-makers “into haphazard, almost trial and error, negotiations with changing coalitions of interest groups, as they seek to push through marginal changes from the status quo while maximizing levels of agreement” (Griggs and Howarth 2002: 98). Consequently, our analysis of sustainability must pay attention to ways in which actors and institutions are constrained by and subject to conjunctural and structural forces.

Along these lines, Griggs and Howarth (2002) use discourse analysis to examine policy decisions are in institutional settings. They claim that neo-Gramscian discourse analysis, based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe, offers useful resources for examining policy change and the relationship between ideas and interests, individual agents and social structures (2002: 97). The key question which discourse theory can answer with respect to policy-making is how and why certain ideas (such as sustainability in urban planning) come to dominate the policy arena. For Griggs and Howarth, the “question centres on the way in which certain signifiers emerge and are taken up by social actors such as politicians and decision-makers, and how they come to hegemonise a field of meaning at a particular point
in time” (2002: 103). They argue that the task of discourse analysis of policy-making is to explain the logic of hegemony - that is, “the process by which groups convert ‘floating signifiers’ into ‘empty signifiers’ that temporarily fix meaning” (2000: 108).

If various signifiers are ‘floating’ and thus ‘up for grabs’ by any particular group, “the achievement of hegemony by a group pursuing its interests involves the construction of empty signifiers that enables the group to cover over its internal differences” through a chain of equivalences (2000: 103). Here we find important links between Griggs and Howarth and Hajer’s work on discourse coalitions based on multi-interpretable story-lines: agreement upon policies can be achieved by actors with divergent interests, and such agreement is facilitated by story-lines and words that are multi-interpretable, enabling each actor to think they agree on a key word, when in fact, their conception of the contents of key word may vary greatly.

Griggs and Howarth present three conditions for the emergence and functioning of empty signifiers in a policy arena. These are: 1) the availability of potential signifiers, which competing interests can articulate, 2) the credibility of the potential signifiers as means of representation of policy issues, and 3) the presence of strategically placed agents who are able to fix ‘floating ideas’ into empty signifiers (2002: 103). They argue that for policy change to occur, “potential and credible signifiers have to be transformed into empty signifiers by the actions of strategically placed agents.” In the analysis of the case of Surrey in Chapter 4 we can look for these three conditions to assess the degree to which sustainability has hegemonized policy-making and planning discourses in Surrey, as well as to assess why and how sustainability discourse was adopted by actors in Surrey.

Using theoretical insights from a neo-Gramscian ‘strategic relational approach’ (SRA) to urban policy (Jessop, 1997a, Jessop et al. 1999, Jones 1997, MacLeod and Goodwin 1999a, 1999b, McGuirk 2004), enables us to underscore the crucial role that discursive formations play a major part in articulating support amongst dominant urban policy interests, as well as securing the broad consent of subordinate social interests (McGuirk 2004: 1023, see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This approach draws on an integral notion of the state as “a complex ensemble of institutions, organisations and forces” (Jessop 1997a: 52), composed of “all institutions which enable the dominant social groups to exercise power” (McGuirk 2004: 1022), whether formally public or private. This perspective allows us to capture the roles and
linkage between both state and non-state actors in shaping urban sustainability discourses (McGuirk 2004: 1022, see also Kipfer and Keil 2002).

An SRA approach to urban policy and governance also allows us to view the local state as “both structurally and strategically selective” (Jessop 1990). It gives us the capacity to see that, at given conjunctures, the local state is more or less permeable to the representations of some political agents and agendas than others (McGuirk 2004: 1024). Further, those discourses which enable the unification of interests, and which can be rendered compatible with other discursive formations are more likely to succeed as hegemonic discursive projects (Hajer 1989, 1995, Jessop 1997a, McGuirk 2004: 1023). This understanding of local policy and governance offers powerful analytical traction for viewing the discourse of sustainability as a “concrete conjuncture …in which identities and relations are temporarily fixed” (McGuirk 2004: 1024, see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). That is, a discursive approach to the analysis of sustainability will enable us to discover the capacity of sustainability to be employed to selectively unify a wide range of political demands, economic and governance dilemmas and external pressure under a unified discourse of synergy and consensus.
CHAPTER 3: OUR COMMON HISTORY: SUSTAINABILITY AND ITS IMAGINARIES

“The Earth is one but the world is not.” - World Commission on Environment and Development

In this chapter I trace the history of the concept of sustainability, using the notion of chains of equivalences, in order to explain its development from a primarily environmental paradigm concerned with resource scarcity, to one of the most seductive, seemingly apropos discourses on the human condition and its future prospects. This chapter, taking a cue from Frederic Jameson’s injunction – “Always historicize!” – is an attempt to reveal the key historical events, actors and conjunctural forces that brought about and shaped the sustainability discourse. In attending to such a history, we can understand how sustainability came to operate as a politically important (if not necessary) empty signifier in contemporary politics, which can accumulate, anchor, neutralize and dissipate a nearly endless list of unfulfilled political demands from political actors of every stripe and type. It is only through a geopolitical lens on the environmental and developmental politics of the late twentieth-century that we “can really appreciate why sustainability has become such an important principle.

In this chapter, I explain sustainability history as an expanding chain of equivalences. This enables us to see how a popular and powerful discourse has emerged and extended around the concept, and to understand how various actors, often with widely differing political commitments, can come to ‘consensus’ on the value of sustainability. This will lead us through the key events and the discursive configurations that determined the particular shape of the sustainability discourse, in its standard, hegemonic form, and will lead us to consider some of its component parts (notions such as development, needs, social sustainability) more closely.
This chapter does not represent a comprehensive or complete account of the origins and contours of sustainability, sustainable development, or development (for which see Adams 2001, Lele 1991, Dresner 2002, Elliot 1999, Kirkby et al. 1995, Morris 2002, Redclift 1987, among others), but highlights some of the main epistemologies, ideologies and events that helped crystallize sustainability emerge into the discourse it is today.  

I. The Roots of the Pillars: The emergence of sustainability

How is it that sustainability emerged as the nodal point of a powerful and popular discourse? If we think of the popular conception of sustainability, it speaks of environmental, economic and social sustainability, but the environment is often the primary focus. How did this occur? How did the environment seem to take priority? What about the word sustainability? Why is this word, and not ‘capacity’, ‘resilience’, ‘justice’ or ‘balance,’ the centre of a discourse concerned with the interactions between human and ecological systems? Laclau argues that within the chain of equivalential signifiers composing a discourse, there is no predetermined privileged signifier; that is, there is no pre-given reason that ‘sustainability’ should operate as the quilting point of the discourse. Rather, “different particular struggles are so many bodies which can indifferently incarnate the opposition of all of them to the repressive power” (1996: 42). At the same time, however, he argues, “not any struggle is equally capable of transforming its own contents in a nodal point that becomes an empty signifier” (ibid. 43). This might appear a contradiction – no one signifier is predestined to take up a universalizing place in a discourse, yet not every signifier is capable of taking up the role of the universal. In fact, Laclau is only denying the autonomous agency of the signifier in its capacity to “determine, out of itself, the laws of movement of society” (ibid., emphasis added). He instead insists that only through the study of specific historical moments as particular conjunctures, can one understand how a particular demand comes to hegemonize the discursive field, becoming the universal signifier of the absent impossible ideal (ibid. 43). In regards to sustainability, this is precisely what this chapter endeavours to do.

Hence, the lack of emphasis on contributions of green or radical thinkers to the development of the sustainability discourse. The history of sustainability offered here tends to emphasize the development of the concept as an institutional discourse. See Whitehead 2007 (17-22), Redclift 1987, McManus 1996, Dobson 1995, and Pepper 1986 for more radical interpretations of sustainability.
So, how does Laclau suggest an empty signifier emerges? Under what conditions do chains of equivalences form? Laclau argues: “if [a] situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from the others), and an equivalential relation is established between them” (2005: 73). Through a sketch of the history of sustainability we can account for its emergence as the result of both an accumulation of unfulfilled demands related to environmental problems and debates about ‘development,’ as well as the inability of nation-states and governments to address these demands. The discourse of sustainability, through which these previously separate problems are linked through the establishment of an equivalential relationship, represents the social-political response to the accumulation of these unfulfilled demands.

Laclau contends that in order for a discourse emerging from a chain of equivalences to be coherent, actors must “attribute to some of the equivalential components a role of anchorage” (ibid. 75). The signifier ‘sustainability’ takes the role of anchorage. Thus, a study of the history of sustainability as an expanding chain of equivalences will show us how ‘sustainability’ came to be an empty signifier capable of absorbing a seemingly limitless amount of social demands. At the same time, however, we can trace a specific lineage of thought that lead to the particular hegemonic form of the sustainability discourse, what Adams (2001) labels ‘mainstream sustainable development’, an interpretation of sustainability that seems to consistently prioritize certain goals.

i. What’s in a Chain? A provisional definition of sustainability

Up to this point, our analysis of sustainability has centred on its ambiguous and/or sliding meaning, and consequently its status as an empty signifier. So while we cannot, (according to our line of reasoning) give a definitive definition of sustainability, it behoves us to describe the etymology and history of the word, the contexts and events within which sustainability developed, and the contents which typically fill it today (Whitehead 2007: 9). In this way we can understand the development of the discourse of sustainability as an expanding chain of equivalences. This enables us not only to understand the conjunctural forces that co-created the discourse of sustainability, but also to reveal the particularisms (especially ecological) that persist in the hegemonic conception of the concept – the ideas
that make sustainability full but empty (to recall, Laclau argues that every universal empty signifier remains ‘contaminated’ by the particulars of its origins (2005: 304)).

The word sustainability is derived from the Latin *sus tenere*, meaning “to uphold” (Redclift 1993), which does not, of course, imply any specific subject or object to be upheld. In its broadest sense, it is usually used to suggest ‘to maintain’ or to enable continuation of some object or state (Whitehead 2007: 9). The word sustainable is an adjective, which means that in common discourse it is used to qualify or add meaning to nouns, names or phrases (Whitehead 2007: 9), for example, ‘sustainable cities’, ‘sustainable services’, etc. That being said, ‘sustainability’ is used to describe a state in and of itself. People will argue “We must try to achieve sustainability”, in which case the word is used as a noun, and the notion of sustainability is granted ontological status as a real or possible “state of affairs”. The following sections of this chapter detail the movement of the concept from these roots to the standard, hegemonic form in which it is generally understood today – Adams’ ‘mainstream sustainable development’. First let’s consider this standard, mainstream form of sustainability in order to provide some context for the historical account of its development.

The origins of sustainability discourse can be traced to the concept of ‘sustainable yield’ from forest management (Morris 2002; Redclift 1987: 17–22), i.e., the rate of harvest that maintains a constant, or sustained, stock of wood fibre over time (Whitehead 2007: 15). The concept was later adopted in ecological and wildlife biology to describe the management of game and fish stocks. From wildlife biology those concerned with ‘limits to growth’ – who first elaborated the ‘proto-ideological’ elements of the sustainability discourse as we know it – borrowed key epistemologies and concepts, especially the notions of carrying capacity\(^\text{10}\) and sustained yield. Both of these biological concepts are based on an underlying logic of resource scarcity, and were thus readily applicable to resource economics, and economics more generally.

At its most basic one can argue that the underlying logic of sustainability is concern for a (high-level, abstracted) mismatch: a mismatch between “human demands” on finite natural systems and the state and resiliency of those systems (Williams & Millington 2004).

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\(^{10}\) Carrying capacity is a measure of the population size of a species that can be sustained indefinitely in a given environment. Its application to human populations, although frequent in environmental literature, is wrought with accounting, ethical and political problems (Sayre 2008).
Beyond this basic premise of sustainability there lies a seemingly infinite number of definitions of sustainability. Many writings on the topic address this fact with greater or lesser degrees of concern; some devote a great deal of ink to listing their favourites, or doggedly categorizing them according to a typology (the most common being classifying sustainability types as ‘strong’ or ‘weak’, with ‘strong’ sustainability accepting fewer environmental trade-offs) (Williams & Millington 2004).

But while some lament or simply note the multi-interpretability and indeterminacy of the term (Springett 2005, Fowke and Prasad 1996, Williams and Millington 2004, Eden 2000, O’Riordan and Voisey 1997, Pezzoli 1997, Roseland 2005), Adams (2001: 54) argues that sustainability is characterized by a generally accepted hegemonic formula – ‘mainstream sustainable development’ (MSD). As the label ‘mainstream’ implies, there are many other ‘alternative’ definitions of sustainability circulating. But most only further qualify or constrain MSD (adding more weight to or more precisely defining one or more element of MSD, such as ecology, or intra-generational equity). The MSD understanding of sustainability is implicitly or explicitly present in the majority of popular definitions of sustainability supplied by governments, academia, institutions and so forth. This formula generally contains the following elements:

1) an objective of meeting the needs of a given population,

2) in three categories of concern - ‘social’, ‘economic’ and ‘environmental,’ with

3) an emphasis on futurity and the ability to continue meeting needs indefinitely.

This mainstream conception has a direct lineage to the World Commission on Environment and Development definition, from their seminal publication Our Common Future, which is widely recognized as the ‘industry standard’ definition of sustainability.
The conceptual centrepiece of MSD is the second element – what Davidson calls the “tri-partite” sustainability model (2009: 607) (needs and futurity are further elaborated below in the discussion of social sustainability). This is variously called ‘the Three E’s’ (environment, economy, equity), ‘SEE’ (society, economy, environment), or the ‘triple bottom-line’ – "people, planet, profit" – the latter being favoured by management scholars and governments to transform sustainability into an accounting procedure (Elkington 1994). Mainstream understandings of sustainability (including in most academic and policy settings) view it as composed of these three constitutive elements, which are usually described as ‘spheres’, ‘circles’, ‘legs’ or ‘pillars’.

In most accounts, the tripartite trope is accepted as functionally correct (Rydin et al. 2003, Whitehead 2003, Mercer & Jotkowitz 2000, Campbell 1996) yet rarely justified or explained. But, as Davidson argues, “distinctions between these ontological categories are far from clear” (2009: 614). This raises questions about possible problems with reifying ‘economy’, ‘society’ and ‘environment’ as distinct and separable categories, since as David Harvey contends, “all socio-political projects are ecological projects and vice versa” (1996: 174). Some ‘strong’ sustainability models, such as those from ecological economics employ a ‘one pillar’ model (Littig and Greissler 2005), which, while maintaining the three s categories as a heuristic device, place the three sustainability ‘rings’ concentrically, with the economy
ring placed inside the social ring, which is in turn placed inside the ecological ring, to represent how these categories operate in situ, and to demonstrate the direction of energy and material flows.

The mainstream interpretation of sustainability, as it has been presented features a concern for needs, environmental, social and economic concern, and a regard to futurity. But if all these components are present in most accounts of sustainability, how can it be called empty? Despite the presence of specification of three pillars of MSD, together they are sufficiently empty to absorb a large range of political perspectives and demands, thus affording the broad ‘fragile consensus’ of sustainability (Redclift 2005). Later sections will explore the culturally dependent definition of needs, and the openness of a discourse that prioritizes future, rather than present conditions. Both of these conditions enable sustainability to remain free of partisan interests and ideological particularisms. Later sections will also explore the consequences of a totalizing discourse that is ‘for’ everything; it claims concern for the social, the economic and the environmental, but what in the world is not at least one of those things?

ii. The Astronaut’s Perspective


“Nature changed in the 1970s… with decolonisation and the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s coupled with the oil shock of 1973, the utilitarian presumptions that undergirded so much of the relationship to nature under capitalism hit their limits. Capitalist actors could no longer be clear that ‘natural resources’ would be everywhere and eternally available to them. The very grounds of capitalism’s global ambitions – environmental as well as spatial – had been altered.”

Hajer (1995: 73) notes that during this time the environment was quite suddenly politicized in the Western World; acid rain, nuclear power and air pollution loomed as

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11 Proto-ideological elements are floating signifiers that have yet to be discursively articulated into a discourse/ideology, and which may also have been previously articulated in other discourses (Stavrakakis 1997, see also Zizek 1989: 87, Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 113).
threats to Western civilization, destabilizing notions of endless progress, limitless prosperity and the triumph of modernity (see also Cotgrove and Duff 1980; Van Liere and Dunlap 1980; Dunlap 1992; Harrison 1996). It would seem that the environmental anxiety ushered in by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 had by the 1970s earned a permanent place in the Western imaginary of nature. No less, during the economic crises and oil crises between 1973 and 1982, the notion of scarcity, and more specifically resource scarcity, was at the forefront of political consciousness and concern.

These world events, in tandem with several seminal publications and international conferences, contributed to the rise of sustainability discourse. Two discursive strands in particular, lay ground for the rationale and contents of sustainability. The *Limits to Growth* (*LTG*) discourse warned of the environmental consequences of scarcity and unchecked economic and population growth; on the other, the international environmentalist discourse (as promulgated by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) highlighted the environmental consequences of human ‘mismanagement’, especially in conditions of poverty. In each discourse, ‘the environment’ and ‘humanity’ were in conflict (or ‘mismatched’ to recall Williams & Millington). They both posited that the integrity of the environment (or the global aggregate resource stock) was threatened, which had negative consequences for human economies and livelihoods. Crucially, in each case, the environment was given an historically unprecedented categorical priority. Or, in discourse theoretical terms, ‘the environment’ became established as the nodal point of the discourse, simultaneously an element in danger, and the element that posed a danger. This is not to say that either discourse was biocentric, but rather, we might say, biofocal – whereby human problems were anthropocentrically refracted or externalized onto a ‘separate’ medium, namely the ecological realm. As such, the ‘environment’ became a political actor, or at least something to be acted for. The result was historically unprecedented: “[g]lobal environmental problems thus define[d] the hard core of the ‘world *problematique*’, and consequently also the central development problem of world society” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 73).

This new privileged position of the environment is attributable to scientific developments in the 1960s that fundamentally changed the way in which we view the Earth. The *Limits To Growth*, international environmentalist, and sustainability discourses rested on a

Many authors note how, as a result of the astronaut’s perspective, a global scale conception of environmental problems is now widely accepted as the most appropriate if not conceptually necessary view of environmental problems (Buttel, Hawkins and Power 1990, Escobar 1999, Milton 1996, Yearley 1997, Ratner 2004). Peet and Watts see the contemporary discursive construction of environmental problems as “articulated explicitly in global terms” (1999: 2, also Milton 1996, Sachs 1993). It was also during this time that ecological research began a shift from the study of isolated ecosystems to the study of the interconnections between ecosystems, meta-ecological processes and the ‘biosphere’ (Milton 1996, Sachs 1993).

Here we must note that the ‘global’ served as an important link between science and the environment (Yearley 1997: 233). Via the scientific conception of a global totality, rooted in space exploration and global ecology, that environmentalists came to define the entire planet as their object and scale of concern (Milton 1996, Sachs 1997: 77), to be monitored, mapped and managed (Benton 1994, de Paiva Duarte 2001). With the conception of a singular ‘environmental problematique,’ one problem matched a single set of policy-centred solutions that call for “globally coordinated, multilateral political responses” (Buttel, Hawkins and Power 1990: 58). As a result, science and politics become “co-structured” (Buttel and Taylor 1994: 240). The “magnitude and globalizing scope” of the environmental

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12 It should be noted that both discourses, of course, have an older common origin, the Western conservationist view of the environment, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. In this conception of nature, humans and nature are seen as separate, and the goal of conservation is the benevolent protection of nature from undesirable human uses. For a treatment of the older origins of the concept of sustainability see Lumley and Armstrong (2004).
risks and hazards created by modern society, such as greenhouse gas emissions, nuclear capabilities and invasive species, are certainly ‘objectively’ globalized environmental problems (de Paiva Duarte 2001: 98). But at the same time, it is crucial to recognize that the story-lines and imaginaries about the environment that developed in the late 1960s and 1970s also ‘subjectively’ globalized the environment – rendering these new environmental problems intelligible as a singular ‘environmental problematique’ (Robertson 1992, Hajer 1995).

From a discourse analytical approach, global systems ecology a emerging in the late 1960s introduced three discursive moments that laid the ground for the eventual position of sustainability as an empty signifier. First, the astronaut’s perspective homogenized, flattened and compressed the spatially and ecologically heterogenous category of ‘environment’ into one massive, interconnected Whole, a ‘Clementsian super-organism’ (Adams 2001: 40). As viewing the environment became in an aggregated, totalized way became dominant, particular, local, and regional environmental problems become mere parts in a grand whole. Viewing the earth as a Whole obscures the nature of particular ecologies, and privileges the equivalence of various environments and environmental problems. In effect, the astronaut’s view established a chain of equivalences between the world’s extant ecologies. The Amazonian rainforest, the Gobi desert and the Indian Ocean all become equivalent units of one super-ecosystem, just as soil erosion in Nepal, pesticide use in Iowa, and acid rain in the United Kingdom were all become equivalent parts of a singular phenomenon of human impact upon this super-ecosystem.

Second, in making equivalent instances of human ecological degradation, ‘society’ was correspondingly homogenized. As environmental problems became ‘progressively de-contextualized,’ they become distanced from their socio-politically and spatially mediated causes. The result is, that “environmental discourses … which are conducted at high levels of abstraction and geographical aggregation, are often only loosely connected with cultural choices and political decisions on the ground” (Redclift 2005: 219). Indeed, it is arguably only through such spatial and social de-contextualization that environmental problems can be considered ‘environmental’ as such, rather than ‘socio-environmental’. The result is an emerging global environmental subject: a humanity that must act in and upon the environment in accordance with its identity as human, above and beyond class, nationality,
gender, or other forms of social difference. The astronaut’s perspective, as Becker and Jahn aptly put, means “the ecological dimension… is repeatedly and prematurely interpreted as a species interest of mankind in joint survival” (1998: 74). Or, as Kay Milton observes: “[w]hatever the details of its history, the identification of the human environment with the entire globe can be seen as a combination of two emerging lines of thought: the idea that the Earth is a single ecosystem and the idea that humanity is a single moral community” (1996: 176). The astronaut’s perspective – which forms the earth is a single global ecosystem – also turns humanity into a single global politico-system (Sachs 1997: 77).

The third discursive movement follows from the first two: when the ‘environment’ and ‘society’ are considered in their own right as singular, homogenous categories, they become mutually exclusive categories. “The importance of systems ecology should not be underestimated. It was only the detour via models of global ecological problems that permitted ‘environment’ and ‘society’ to be related within an ecological conceptual framework,” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 73) – that is as separable and discrete categories, which could then be reunited as distinct forms in sustainability’s chain of equivalences.

This is the discursive move that enables the trope of the tri-partite model of sustainability. In other words, the de-contextualizing/re-linking the socio-political from the ecological is crucial to understanding sustainability as a chain of equivalences. Once the categories ‘social’, ‘economy’ and ‘environment’ are teased apart as separate categories, one can arrange them as equivalent, and internally homogenous. As an examination of the sustainability discourse in Surrey will reveal, this discursive move makes “sustainability” liable to preclude any antagonistic, political dimension of each respective category.

III. We Have a Problematique: The Limits to Growth

The astronaut’s perspective afforded discursive space to ‘global systems theory’, a cybernetic approach to world problems that undergirded both the influential work of MIT researchers in Meadows et al.’s Limits to Growth (1972), as well as Goldsmith et al.’s Blueprint for Survival (1972), and Shumacher’s Small is Beautiful (1973). Several academics posit Limits to Growth (LTG) as ground zero of sustainability discourse (Wheeler 2004: 19, Pezzoli 1997: 550, Keil 2007), since it was the first to problematize the long-term prospects for global human population in light of resource scarcity. At the time of its publication LTG was
enormously influential, published as for the ‘invisible college’ of the Club of Rome, composed of scientists, businessmen, and high-ranking civil servants, and headed by the charismatic Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei (Pezzoli 1997: 550). LTG, along with Blueprint and Small is Beautiful helped to “create widespread credibility for the claim that the environmental crisis was serious and needed to be addressed” (Hajer 1995: 79).

Using aggregate global data and modelling based on cybernetic systems theory (in vogue at the time) (Hajer 1995: 81), LTG posited dire scenarios of resource scarcity and human misery in which population growth and economic growth co-acted “in a calamitous dynamic” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 69). LTG’s scenarios were produced from the computerized ‘World Model’ intended to take in to account “all aspects of reality”. It sent an alarming message of impending shortages and collapse, caused by surpassing an abstract benchmark of an ecologically imposed global limit to growth (Becker and Jahn 1998: 71). It predicted that this limit would be reached through a combination of “accelerating industrialization, rapid human population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of non-renewable resources, and a deteriorating environment” (Meadows et al. 1972: 21).

The report identified economic growth as the centre of what authors called the world ‘problematique’ (Keil 2007: 44), demanding a corresponding “growth-limiting resolutique” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 71) based on efficiency, technology and a rational moral ‘choice’ of sustainability (Meadows et al. 1972, 1992). LTG argued that environmental problems were resource scarcity problems, stemming from greedy economic growth in the industrial world, and dire poverty in the developed world (Meadows et al. 1972: 23; Becker and Jahn 1998: 71).

The conceptual approach of LTG is crucial in the formation of sustainability discourse, reinforcing the astronaut’s perspective: environmental destruction (qua scarcity problems) is to be solved (equilibrated) via the “development of underdeveloped nations”, and the “conservation of the environment” from the industrialization of developed nations (Becker and Jahn 1998:71). The problems of developed and developing nations are equivalent aspects of a single totalized ecological problem, and development and conservation are “differing contributions” to one aggregated eco-economic problematique (Becker and Jahn 1998:74). This means environmental and economic development policy should be dealt with simultaneously, “appearing as attempts to solve distribution and
redistribution problems on a global scale” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 74). Development in underprivileged parts of the world is now the official business of an ecologically mandated cybernetic decision-making system, to determine who gets what in a global calculus that prioritizes efficient, optimal resource use. This is the utilitarian epistemology of Gifford Pinchot extended writ large.

With *LTG*, growth is seen as potentially exacerbating (rather than solving) scarcity, remediable through conservation. Scarcity is the link between economic and environmental disequilibrium: thus “the strategy for dealing with two key issues of development and environment must be conceived as a joint one” (Meadows *et al.* 1972: 192). In *LTG* the economy and the environment, as ‘rings’ on the sustainability Venn diagram, are now linked as two equivalential demands, particular in their own right, but to be addressed simultaneously against the condition of scarcity.

*Limits to Growth* resonated with an increasingly environmentally aware public: “[t]his combination of apocalyptic message, wrapped up in the cybernetic discourse that was well respected, and uttered by actors who could not immediately be discredited, helps to explain why the message of environmental doom that was presented in *Limits to Growth* could have had such an unprecedented impacts on elite opinions” (Hajer 1995: 81). While the apocalyptic tone of *LTG* aligned with the “general ideological climate” of the time (*ibid.* 80), warning of an impending ‘overshoot’ in population and resource demands, it was not all gloom. The authors insisted (as they still do in the twenty- and thirty year editions) that it is "possible to alter these growth trends and to establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future" (Meadows *et al.* 1972: 24). *LTG*’s promoters sought change through a ‘choice’ for sustainability in the form of “global cognitive change” (Meadows *et al.* 1972: 24; Hajer 1995: 80) and “the increased application of techniques of scientific management” and “technological improvements” (Hajer 1995: 82, 83). This call for “radical reform” of decision-making processes mostly demonstrated the authors’ expertise lay in cybernetic theory, rather than political science or politics.

Naïve or not, though, *LTG* exposed a “power-deficit in international politics” (Hajer 1995: 81) - existing power structures did not seem capable of adequately responding to

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13 In this way, conservation can be seen as ‘always already’ a remedial approach, leaving the underlying causes and logics that require it in the first place fundamentally intact.
emerging environmental problems (systemic or anomalistic), nor did the international political structure seem able to deliver development in ways it had set out to after 1945. Moreover, the course of development on a world scale seemed to be causing environmental damage whilst failing to improve the lives of many. During the rest of the decade, as sections below will, this policy vacuum was filled by new actors who prompted the integration of the environment into questions of development (as least in the developing world).

Indeed, it may be LTG’s political program of ‘choosing’ to be sustainable based on scientific information and moral rectitude was not naïve, but prescient – their implicit call for an enlightened elite eco-managerial technocracy has, over the remainder of the century, been partially answered. Today, an eco-managerial cadre – made up of ENGOS, quasi-governmental organizations, policy institutes, funding bodies, as well as the environment and development authorities of states and supra-national organizations – exert tremendous political force in international politics, shaping land-use decisions, population policies, national economic plans and consumer habits (think of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Greenpeace or the Global Environmental Facility). The response to LTG was arguably the beginning of the basis for the creation and validation many of these organizations and agencies, and a “catalyst” for the political alliances formed between them.

Global systems theory also marked the linguistic and conceptual integration of various political actors’ modes of articulating ‘nature’ and the environment. Activists, industrialists and governments alike began “to conceptualize the environmental problem according to a specific set of concepts and categories” (Hajer 1995: 82). As a case in point, Goldsmith et al.’s Blueprint for Survival, emanating from a social agenda quite distinct from LTG, not only used LTG data, but also similar language and categories (Hajer 1995: 89), marking the merging of environmental thinking between different groups based on “cross-borrowed concepts, phrases and ideas” (Hajer 1995 89). Additionally, Limits to Growth had presented environmental problems within the frame of economics and resource management. The language and epistemology of LTG shaped the imaginary of global environmental crisis that still fuels much, if not most, environmental practice, and set the language and content of much subsequent environmentalism.

Despite the alliances initiated by LTG and the political acceptance of its predictions, it did not take off as a policy discourse. Today we see no “Regional Strategies on the Limits
to Growth” or “Scarcity Charters” in the policy landscape. Although taken seriously for its authoritative scientific approach to global environmental problems, it also met with serious criticism on a number of fronts. Critics attacked its neo-Malthusian underpinnings as well as several of its methodological flaws, and many studies attempted to confirm or refute its findings (Pezzoli 1997, Hajer 1995). Two criticisms in particular, however, demonstrate LTG’s limited capacity to anchor a broad political discourse based on ‘limits’.

First, LTG offers no simple reconciliation between economic growth and resource scarcity problems. In predicting impending limits to resources, Meadows et al. seemed to place environmental destruction firmly in opposition to, and as a result of, economic growth. This is perhaps the main reason its recommendations were ignored by governments and supra-national institutions, argue Taylor and Buttel: “the limits to growth… was in substantial measure delegitimated almost from the start through corporate veto. Implementation of a limits-to-growth world view would have severely constrained capital accumulation, would have virtually required a nationally planned economy and sharply increased state intervention, and would have threatened those whose interests were tied to growth” (1992: 244).

Secondly, while the growth-limiting resolutique prescribed by LTG was unappealing to those interests tied to the growth machine in the developed world, it was also unappealing to development advocates in the global South who saw economic growth as the means to their poverty alleviation. To them, LTG insinuated limiting economic development in the third world, “an attempt by representatives of an international elite to help create a climate in which further redistribution of wealth and power would be blocked and new forms of global control would become acceptable” (Hajer 1995: 83; also Becker and Jahn 1998; Pepper 1986). Representatives of developing countries contended that the problem was not “material limits to growth, but socio-economic barriers to development” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 72), and as such rejected the imposition of ‘limits’ on development. The international consensus against a growth-limiting resolutique left the forces of capitalist growth, population increase and resource use intact (Keil 2007:44; also Becker and Jahn 1998).

Third, many environmentalists opposed LTG, as its thinking seemed “to be a product of the system that they thought was the very core of the problem” (Hajer 1995: 88), failing to question consumerism and industrialization, and instead opting for technological
fixes overseen by expert management. Benton notes that the environmental management perspective of *LTG* “tended to radically undertheorize the social, legal and political processes of environmental regulation themselves,” thus failing to satisfy more radical environmentalists (1994: 38).

Finally, *LTG* made a connection between the economy and the environment, but not a positive equivalence. Although its proposed solutions lay firmly within the Western capitalist system, it nonetheless problematized economic growth without offering a pro-growth solution. It thus failed to garner the support of a critical mass and failed as an idea in the Gramscian ‘war of position’, unable to facilitate alliances between various groups with a discursive and material stake in the management of world resources.

**IV. Limits to No Growth**

If the *Limits to Growth* discourse stressed what should not be done, the international environmentalist discourse, marked a shift to emphasizing “what should and can be done,” and the formation of a positive equivalential link between environment and economy, and thus ushered in the notion of ‘win-win’ sustainability as it is known today. The international environmentalist discourse discursively linked older ideas of conservation and development (which has a qualitatively different and broader connotation than *LTG*’s cruder sounding ‘growth,’ see below) around notions of rational environmental planning and global solidarity in ways that ‘scarcity’ and ‘limits’ could not. While *LTG* may have laid the groundwork in forming the first ‘proto-ideological’ links in a chain of equivalences between environmental policy and development policy, in the international environmentalist discourse the empty signifier of sustainability was gestating. The international environmentalist discourse ushered in a new way of conceiving environment and development – namely, as complementary, re-orientating the ‘economic’ in-line with the ‘environmental’ (Mitcham 1995: 315) – and the name for this new way of thinking was “sustainable development.”

The first attempts to create what Adams (1990: 32) has described as an “international environmentalism” were meetings convened in Paris in 1968, with the Intergovernmental Conference of Experts on the Scientific Basis for Rational Use and Conservation of the Biosphere, and in Stockholm in 1972, at the UN Conference on the Human Environment. These gatherings were the first attempts on the international political
scene to link environment and development, and were convened in part in response to southern countries’ concerns that global conservation would constrain their development (Adams 2001: 78). Conservation proponents at Stockholm identified “the need to resolve conflicts between environment and development” but beyond generalized suggestions for ‘rational planning’ or ‘integrated development’, they failed to formulate a program (Adams 2001: 78).

Tracing the origins of the international environmentalist discourse earlier, O’Riordan (1993:48) argues that it “all began with a series of African-based conferences in the mid-1960s.” These conferences, concerned with food production on lands next to proposed conservation parks, were the result of conservation groups’ “recognition of the need to make conservation more ‘relevant’ to the needs of the emerging Third World,” and as such “progressively repackaged” conservation to be amenable to development (Adams 2001: 33). In 1969, the member-states of the Organization of African Unity signed a convention, under the auspices of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which recognized that “conservation must be based on prevention and cure to ‘…achieve the highest sustainable quality of life’” (McCormick in McManus 1996: 50, emphasis added). The IUCN, based in Switzerland, campaigned for environmental protection in both developed and developing countries from 1948, and its 1972 Yearbook contains one of the first instances of the word "sustainable" in an environmental context (Kidd 1992: 13).

In 1980, the IUCN, along with by the World Wildlife Fund, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (born of the Stockholm conference), the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) penned the World Conservation Strategy (WCS), the overall aim of which was “achieving sustainable development through the conservation of living resources" (IUCN et al. 1980) by finding “ways to further nature conservation on a global scale” (Adams 2001: 60; see also Lele 1991: 610; Hajer 1995: 97). WCS was a short strategic document aimed at policy makers, conservationists, and development practitioners. It called for improved conservation efficiency and the need the integration conservation and development (IUCN et al. 1980).

According to Hajer, the WCS and its subsequent policy take-up was one of the key environmental moments in the late 1970s and early 1980s, leading to the re-positioning of
the environmental discourse in ecological modernizationist positive-sum (‘win-win’) game terms, characteristic of sustainable development (Whitehead 2007: 16). WCS marked the emergence of coalitional environmental politics “oriented towards policy-making and explicitly arguing for a strategy of sustainable development...based on efficient resource utilization and considerate environmental planning” (Hajer 1995: 96,97). Thus, unlike the antagonistic politics of much environmental activism at the time (as exemplified by the anti-nuclear power movement), WCS marked a new environmental discourse-coalition made up of moderate forces such as quasi- and non-governmental organizations, supra-national organizations, and policy institutes, many newly emergent (Hajer 1995: 97).

The discourse of survival typical of early 1970s, through which “paradoxically, both technocratic experts and radical social movements framed the environmental problematique” (Hajer 1995: 86) had failed to rally critical support from the middle ground of governments and the public, not to mention the global South (Hajer 1995: 97). The totalkritik of capitalist, industrial society, which characterized much environmentalism in the 1960s began to fade and environmentalists now took the role of pragmatic solutions-driven problem-solver (ibid. 95), changing their “political strategies and organizational structure” to become “less radical, more practical, and ... much more policy-oriented” (ibid. 93). Environmentalists realized that “for environmental policies to survive they needed to work with the grain of the time”, that is, “as non-contradictory to economic policy” (Hajer 1995: 98, 94).

The Stockholm meeting, UNESCO’s Man and The Biosphere Program and other similar efforts, along with the World Conservation Strategy, not only made possible the political equivalence between the environmental and the economic. They also indicated an important shift within Western environmentalism, which has a bearing on the ways in which sustainability is conceived in policy-making circles today (Hajer 1995: 95, Harrison 1996: 61): the emergence of rational, pragmatic, environmentalism qua ecological managerialism. Besides the mass demonstrations of environmental movements of the 1970s, “rather less widely reported developments took place inside the newly institutionalized environmental expert organizations. In the relatively concealed sphere of secondary policy-making institutes

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such as the OECD, the IUCN, or the UNEP – new vocabularies for environmental policy-making were being devised” (Hajer 1995: 90).

WCS was equally, if not more, ‘environmentally’ focused than Limits, but it offered the possibility that economic growth was not at odds with conservation. This was crucial departure from LTG, which had brought environment and development into conversation as antinomies, and thus non-equivalent. In contrast, WCS considered conservation and development "necessary complement[s]", both "equally necessary for our survival" (IUCN et al. 1980). It argued that conservation and development need not be at odds, and further, according to Sir Peter Scott, former chairman of the Wold Wildlife Fund, WCS suggested for the first time that development should be seen as “a major means of achieving conservation, rather than an obstruction to it” (Allen 1980: 7 in Adams 2001: 60). Economic growth was not the ultimate problem, but a means to achieve both development and conservation. “For the World Conservation Strategy recognition of the “limits to growth” is, as it were, the precondition to further and continuing growth” (Mitcham 1995: 316). That is, ecological limits and conservation concerns were to be incorporated as factors into the calculus of further growth and development, which necessary for more effective global conservation. WCS called for international trade, wholesale economic liberalization and accelerated economic growth (IUCN et al. 1980: section 20, para. 4).

According to Whitehead, WCS was an important roadmark in the evolution of sustainability discourse “because it made the radical assertion that economic development was not only mutually compatible with nature conservation”, but that economic development was a necessary prerequisite to effective conservation achieved (2007: 15). The definition of conservation in the WCS satisfied all those in favour of further accumulation: “the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations” (IUCN et al. 1980, section 1, paragraph 4). The definition exposed its Western conservation heritage with its utilitarian, techno-optimistic language, and its wording was a clear pre-cursor to the WCED definition. The WCS contended that “[c]onservation, like development, is for people” (IUCN et al. 1980 section 1, paragraph 5), although it failed to specify what people. The resulted is what Adams calls “a significant repackaging of conservation” (2001: 68) in favour of baldy anthropocentric use values.
But perhaps more importantly, it produced a blandly populist social flattening commensurate with the astronaut’s perspective, which belied its effort to elevate the concerns of people living next to conservation areas, and posed development and conservation as almost equivalential: “development and conservation operate in the same global context, and the underlying problems that must be overcome if either is to be successful are identical” (ibid. section 20, paragraph 1). As Adams puts it “[w]ithin the WCS, development and conservation are defined in such a way that their compatibility becomes inevitable” (2001: 67). In this way, WCS made the first non-antagonistic equivalential link between the economy and the environment qua conservation and development.

However, WCS unequivocally prioritized environmental conservation over the economic and political demands of developing world conservation subjects (Adams 1990; Mitcham 1995). It was criticized for not recognizing “the economic and political processes which had created unsustainable practices in sensitive environmental areas in the first place (Whitehead 2007: 17, also Redclift 1987: 21). Not surprisingly, it did not win the support of developing world representatives, much the same as at Stockholm in 1972, where “environmentalists had presented development as a threat to the environment, while Third World developmentalists… had responded by criticizing environmentalists as a threat to development” (Mitcham 1995: 325). WCS was criticized for having an “anti-poverty” profile (Langhelle 1999); while it listed conservation priority issues as those affecting both the global South and North, including loss of agricultural and grazing land, soil and watershed degradation, overexploitation of wildlife, it contended that these problems were all "much more acute in developing countries" (IUCN et al. 1980). WCS identified “[t]he conduct of poor people… as a principal cause of environmental damage” without taking into account the underlying complexities of the “environment-and-development problem” (Soussan, 1992). Furthermore, it called for population control policies in all countries, applying concepts from wildlife management directly to people (such as ‘carrying capacity’) “without discussion of the political, social, cultural or economic dimensions of resource use” (Adams 2001: 60).

In the end, despite the fact that the IUCN and its co-authors assured readers that "conservation is entirely compatible with the growing demand for "people-centered" development" (IUCN et al. 1980), it was “was not enough to prevent the impression that the
report was heavily dominated by environmentalist concerns” (Langhelle 1999: 132). It entirely avoided questions of equity and the political aspects of conservation and development in general (Adams 2001: 69), leading geographer Michael Redclift to comment: “[it] does not even begin to examine the social and political changes that would be necessary to meet conservation goals” (1984: 50).

Beginning with the conferences in Paris and Stockholm and culminating in the World Conservation Strategy, the international environmentalist discourse initiated a chain of equivalences through which the ‘environment’ became a nodal point around which sustainability discourse’s ‘proto-ideological’ elements began to form. It took the economic and environmental links that the astronaut’s perspective had pieced off and formed, but linked them as compatible, not antagonistic. For the first time economic and environment stability, health, … sustainability were posited as, if not mutually interdependent, closely intertwined. In any case, it marked the beginning of a process by which “[t]he initially separate fields of international environmental policy and development policy were discursively linked and placed in symbolic relation to political power” (Becker and Jahn 1998: 72).

The priority of WCS was unmistakably environmental conservation, although it had made considerable overtures to the importance of development and livelihoods for third world subjects of conservation. While the international environmentalist discourse presented development and conservation as parts of the same problem, it was clear that development was a means to achieve conservation, rather than a goal in and of itself. It would take (at least discursively) reversing these priorities to finally gain the support of representatives of developing countries, marking the arrival of the discourse of ‘sustainable development’.

V. Sustainability Arrives

It is widely accepted that The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) of the United Nations Environment Program (also known as the Brundtland Commission) marked the consolidation of the notion of sustainability (McManus 1996: 53, Hajer 1995, Redclift 1987, 2005, Mitlin 1992, Wheeler 2004). The Brundtland Commission’s report, Our Common Future, “functioned as the catalyst for change in environmental policy” (Hajer 1995: 11). It was able to achieve what LTG and WCS had not–
both widespread political acceptance and political longevity. Our Common Future (OCF) was able to successfully discursively address a range of demands on the international political scene, resulting in a powerful discourse with a weak but stable consensus on the Common Good vis-à-vis environment and development.

The Brundtland Commission conducted its background empirical work between 1984 and 1987, a period including the Chernobyl nuclear explosion, the Sahelian famine and the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal. These socio-environmental disasters were not, however, like those described by the LTG prophecy of “global doom” caused by natural resource shortages and over-population. Instead, these events represented emerging global environmental issues (Hajer 1995: 89), of a ‘risk society’ kind (Beck 1992), such as nuclear threat, global warming and pollution. Indeed, these disasters, such as acid rain, oil spills and other emblematic environmental problems of the 1970s and 1980s were not so much about scarcity and shortage, but excess, surplus and menacing externalities (too much technology, too much capital, too much oil, too many CFCs, too many side effects). Adding to these new (and considerably more complex) socio-environmental problems, the late twentieth century project of global development in the form of global economic expansion had been stalled due to the debt crisis of the late 1970s. Western countries were faced with the realization that, “development as it was known after 1945 was not delivering the goods” (Keil 2007: 45; also McManus 1996: 52; Sachs 1993).

Further, worries over international security continued as the Cold War carried on through the 1980s and military threats continued to loom. As suggested above, militarization nuclear proliferation presented a considerable new form of environmental risk, just as the environmental crisis represented “the newest security threat in Western geopolitics” (Whitehead 2007: 22). For this reason, Hajer argues OCF should to be read as part of the debates and commissions within the UN about environment and development within the context of calls for multilateralism in the face of threats to military security (1995: 99; also Adams 2001: 73) 15.

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Certainly credit is due the Brundtland Commission for popularizing sustainable development as a new and synthesized way of understanding environmental and development problems. But the world events that preceded and surrounded the work of WCED demands an examination of what this widespread popularization and acceptance of sustainability signalled in terms of politics at the time:

the historically situated discourse of sustainable development which owes much to Brundtland, can only be understood in the larger contexts of growing ecological awareness, increasing ecological threats to capitalist accumulation, widening North-South disparities and agendas, the rise of global neo-liberalism and the increasing opposition to economic growth in some advanced capitalist countries (McManus 1996: 51).

To this list Adams adds: pressure by environmentalists on international aid donors, media coverage, and “renewed concern” about the environment (especially in light of ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect) (2001: 3). Thus, the signifier ‘sustainable development’ was presented to a world willing and ready to accept it as a means of addressing and promising a way out of many of these problems – simultaneously.

The breadth (if not depth) of acceptance of the validity of sustainable development can be read as the ability of the signifier ‘sustainable development’ to address all these events and concerns in a (discursively, at least) non-antagonistic manner. It was able to act as a blanket dampening political fires that had been smouldering between various factions in world politics for decades (North versus South, capitalist versus no-growth, conservationist versus developmentalist, etc.). As a policy document, Our Common Future had something for everyone and, therefore, “[t]he display of development agencies and environmental groups dancing to the same ‘sustainable development’ tune in the 1990s is remarkable, but not entirely accidental” (Adams 2001: 3).

WCED (re-)introduced the concept of sustainability to the world as a means of reconciling resource depletion with economic growth in a way LTG could not have. It made environmental conservation amenable to the concerns of developing nations more successfully that WCS, by making conservation a means to development rather than the reverse. The concept of sustainable development was seen “to move the debate beyond ‘limits to growth’” and to “mark the departure from the old forms of conflict between development and conservation” (Owens and Cowell 2002: 2), to create “the blueprint for the
‘world resolutique’ that had been elusive to the authors of the Club of Rome” (Keil 2007: 45) as well as the authors of the WCS.

The Commission, headed by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, was charged to “find strategies, encourage co-operation, define shared perceptions and aspirational goals for the world community” (Langhelle 1999: 131), and to develop “long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development…. [in ways] which concern for the environment may be translated into greater co-operation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economic and social development” (WCED 1987: ix). This was certainly no small task: to balance environmental protection with the economic needs and demands of developing countries, as well as the economic and social desires of industrialized nations, under a set of shared goals – in other words, to craft a policy document intended to unite a world divided along any and every conceivable line of social difference and division.

In fact, the language in OCF emphasized consensus, cooperation, and goal-sharing to such an extent that these can seem more like the primary goal of sustainable development rather than sustainability or development in and of themselves. Broad support for the notion of sustainable development was achieved by linking political goals in a non-antagonistic manner, such those previously seen as unrelated or contradictory were now (at least discursively) compatible. From a discourse theoretical perspective, this was achieved via the multi-interpretability of the words ‘sustainability’ and ‘development,’ as well as ‘needs,’ a core concept in Brundtland’s definition of sustainable development.

The Brundtland Report, like LTG and WCS before it, linked poverty, population growth and environmental degradation (WCED 1987, xii), but it differed from its predecessors in several key respects. OCF linked development and environmental concerns more closely; basing its argument for sustainable development around development, rather than around conservation. It proposed economic growth as the solution to, rather than cause of, environmental problems. Lastly, it called (although far from forcefully) for equity and distributional with regards to North-South disparities (Langhelle 1999: 131). These three key differences are what enabled WCED to achieve a broad consensus from the international political community as well as an overwhelming proportion of world civil society.
The first key difference between *OCF* and earlier discourses was that it better integrated conservation and development than *WCS*, drawing links between the two more explicitly, and reciprocally (Adams 2001: 71). According to Adams, “Brundtland achieved this …far more expertly and effectively, largely because of its origins in the UN General Assembly and not out in the wildwoods of UNEP and IUCN” (2001: 70). In other words, unlike *LTG* and *WCS*, the argument that conservation and development could be linked together for the common good sounded more credible coming from the United Nations, itself the primary institution of a global common good.

Next, and crucially, the Commission reversed the priorities of the *WCS*, calling first and foremost for development, with conservation as a *developmental* goal (McManus 1996: 48, 50). Brundtland thus attended to the socio-political dimensions of environmental problems, which *WCS* had brushed over, by “attempt[ing] to locate the debate about the environment within the economic and political context of international development” (Adams 2001: 79). Langhelle (1999: 132) reads WCED and its more development-oriented approach to the environment as a “reaction/compensation” for the anti-development critiques that had prevented widespread acceptance of the earlier *World Conservation Strategy*. In this sense, a pro-development stance can be read as a necessary condition for consensus, due to “the growing skepticism in developing countries toward the environmental concerns of the West” (Langhelle 1999: 131). As Adams explains (2001: 71):

> Whereas the WCS started from the premise of the need to conserve ecosystems and sought to demonstrate why this made good economic sense … Our Common Future starts with people and goes on to discuss what kind of environmental policies are required to achieve certain socio-economic goals. The answers (perhaps unsurprisingly) are remarkably similar. The premises, however, do differ, and of the two, Our Common Future was by far the more effective document in its ability to address and engage government policy-makers.

One of the (much discussed and debated) centrepieces of *OCF* was its call for “reviving growth”\(^\text{16}\), at the top of the list of the “critical objectives” of sustainable

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\(^\text{16}\) The others being: "(2) changing the quality of growth; (3) meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, and sanitation; (4) ensuring a sustainable level of population; (5) conserving and enhancing the resource base; (6) reorienting technology and managing risk; (7) merging environment and economics in decision making; and (8) reorienting international economic relations" (WCED 1987: 49).
development listed (Adams 2001: 72). The Commission called for a “five-to-ten-fold expansion of world industrial output... sometime in the next century” (WCED, 1987: 49, 213), arguing from that environmental pressure in the Third World was the result of poverty, and that economic growth would relieve such pressure (Adams 2001: 72). Langhelle (1999: 141), explains this thesis as “a political necessity” for the WCED:

…To prevent a North–South confrontation, it was necessary for the WCED to link economic development and environmental questions in a positive way. If poverty is a major cause of environmental problems, and economic growth contributes to the reduction of poverty, economic growth will also be good for the environment, and thereby contribute indirectly to the solving of environmental problems... Economic growth, in this view, implies that you actually can have your cake and eat it too, so that sustainable development becomes consistent with the ambitions of developing countries for growth and progress.

Thus, Brundtland’s prescription for economic growth must be viewed as a political necessity from both ‘poles’ of the debate. Gaining developing nations’ support was important in several respects: ecologically, developing nations are home to most of the world’s biodiversity ‘hotspots’ and treasured tropical environments; and, since Brundtland argued from that environmental destruction was poverty-induced and magnified by population, the population and resource use policies of the poor and populous South were a key piece of the environmental resolutique. But perhaps most importantly, developing nations’ governments would only accept a global program for conservation and development if it offered them assurances of a bigger piece of the global economic pie, either by increasing the size of the pie or their share in it. Brundtland aimed for both.

But a growth prescription was equally necessary in order to satisfy governments and elites of already advantaged industrialized nations. The Brundtland Commission was comprised of many high-level Western government officials, including prime ministers, senators, cabinet ministers, as well as senior economists, academics, CEOs and attorneys (WCED 1987: xii, 353-5). This gave the Report credibility “beyond the “alarmist” reports of the Limits to Growth researchers” (Wheeler 2004: 23). As such, many of the commissioners were not environmentalists, but rather “real, experienced, elderly elitist politicians” who “had to go back home and defend before their colleagues and governments whatever they wrote in their reports” (Timberlake 1992: 2, in McManus 1996: 51). For this reason, argues
McManus, Brundtland emphasized ‘sustainable development’ not ‘sustainability’ (1996: 52) (See below for an extended consideration of the differences between the two).

The rise of neoliberalism as the new economic and development orthodoxy was another key component to shape the context of the Brundtland Commission’s work (McManus 1996: 51). This “new social order” was already apparent in the prescriptions of *WCS* and by the 1980s the World Bank and International Monetary Fund had already taken up this worldview (McManus 1996, Adams 2001). Given the ascendency of neoliberalism, “the politically experienced commissioners realised that ‘no growth’ or ‘limits to growth’ approaches would be unacceptable” (McManus 1996: 52). As such, *OCF* highlighted the primacy of economic measures in achieving sustainability, emphasizing policy directions that resulted in ‘win-win’ economic/environmental decisions (Redclift 2005). Far from confronting neoliberalism, sustainable development “cut across previous intellectual and political boundaries” (Lele 1991: 612) and “retook the initiative from both neo-liberalism and the declining appeal of actually existing socialism” (McManus 1996: 51).

Brundtland’s positive-sum game answered many of the possible objections governments might raise to environmental regulation (Hajer 1995: 101), and “managed to unify many concerns in a way that enabled further accumulation” (McManus 1996: 52). Brundtland’s stance – that economic growth was not a threat to, but rather constitutive of, environmental ‘sustainability’ – differentiated *OCF* from earlier environment-development discourses, engendered the closest thing to a ‘world resolutique’ the world had seen yet. The Brundtland Report’s vision of sustainable development made it more appealing than previous proto-sustainability discourses, since its strategy to meet environmental objectives was predicated on continued economic growth (WCED 1987; Adams 2001: 72, Keil 2007: 45). Much like the international environmentalist discourse, ecology now became the way to more effective and sustainable economic growth (Tijmes and Luiff 1995: 332).

Much attention has been given to WCED’s call for “a new era of economic growth” (WCED 1987: 1; Adams 2001: 72; Langhelle 1999; Verburg and Wiegel 1997; Reid 1995), sparking as it did a debate about the compatability of ecological sustainability and business-as-usual growth. But Brundtland’s proposed growth prescription was not an argument for conventional growth; the Commission acknowledged the ‘double-sided’ nature of economic growth – that growth did not automatically entail redistribution or ‘trickle-down’, and that
growth often entailed increases in material and energy throughput. As a result, Brundtland’s call for a new, reformed growth – sustainable, efficient, egalitarian, and attentive to social development (Adams 2001; Langhelle 1999; Tijmes and Luiff 1995). Economic growth as proposed by the Commission was to “reflect the broad principles of sustainability” (WCED 1987: 44) and was conditional on two important conditions. First, the content of growth must become “more equitable in its impact” (Langhelle 1999: 136, WCED 1987: 52), suggesting intra-generational equity in the form of redistributive growth. The specifics of how this might be achieved were not specified. Second, growth in industrialized nations must shift towards reduced material- and energy-intensity and improved efficiency, along with innovations in technology in order to help to “sustain and expand the environmental resource base” (Tijmes and Luiff 1995: 331; also WCED 1987: 51; Langhelle 1999: 136); in other words, techno-optimist ecological modernization. But this condition ultimately “only point[ed] towards a more economical use of scarce resources, with no limitation put on needs and desires” (Tijmes and Luiff 1995: 332). There were, in WCED’s calculus, no ‘limits to growth’ after all.

Critical political agreement was secured with inclusion of these caveats, as they helped to overcome barriers to consensus the Commission faced in formulating a common future for an entire planet. The first condition, concerned with quantitative distribution of growth, secured support from the developing world, otherwise been sceptical of a development plan that did not favour significant growth. The second proposed a change in the quality of economic growth, securing support from environmentalists who may have otherwise objected to WCED’s growth prescriptions. The extent to the second condition is achievable is the subject of much important debate (for which see Rees 2003, Langhelle 1999, Verburg and Wiegel 1997, Jacobs 1995, Wackernagel and Rees 1996, as well as the ecological modernization literature, such as Spaargaren, Mol & Buttel 2000, Mol & Sonnenfeld 2000). It is the first condition, however, that has important implications for a discourse theoretical approach to sustainability. As I argue below, it is the inclusion of ‘social’ demands quote a intra-generational equity that marks the point at which ‘sustainability’ includes enough chains of equivalences to become an empty signifier.

The idea that economic growth is “absolutely essential to relieve the great poverty that is deepening in much of the developing world,” (WCED 1987) rests on two claims: 1)
economic growth is amenable to social equity and ecological health, and 2) WCED’s formula for sustainability was possible with the extant constellation of actors and institutions. Once economic growth was postulated as the route to sustainable salvation, a number of key political demands begin to seem amenable (in discursive theoretical terms, a number of demands become equivalent). For WCED made a remarkable discursive move: it postulated that the interests of ‘growth machine’ actors, industrialized nations, the aspirations of developing nations, and the conservation and ecological modernization goals of environmentalists could be, must be, reconcilable. If Rostow’s classic exponential curve of economic ‘take-off’ was to eventuate in economic collapse, crashing under the weight of its own ecological consequences, while Daly’s ‘no-growth’ steady-state economy was ecologically safe, but politically unpopular (Wackernagel and Rees 1996), the Brundtland Commission proposed something in the middle – “continued more moderate growth… that does not eventuate in catastrophe” (Mitcham 1995: 317).

And economic growth that does not eventuate in catastrophe could be considered the closest thing to a commonly desired common future. After all, as Zizek remarks, at the turn of the twenty-first century, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (1994: 1). Sustainable development thus formulated made it possible to imagine that the world could be ‘saved’ without too much change or uncomfortable sacrifices. The Brundtland Commission’s conception of sustainable development was more readily acceptable to existing institutional actors because it “demanded debate about methods and priorities of development”, but in no way challenged the “dominant capitalist industrialising model” which undergirded both the problems and solutions WCED had identified (Adams 2001: 102).

It allowed the privileged to assure themselves that no ecosystems or traditional cultures were harmed in the making of their economy. Sonny Ramphal, one of the WCED commissioners, criticized environmentalists as being “more concerned about panda bears than human beings” (1997: 78). Commissioner Brundtland’s vision of sustainable development made it possible to care about panda bears, the developing world and the bottom line all at the same time. But it also allowed those who were not benefiting from the world’s socio-economic arrangements to hope that sustainable development would
accelerate the ‘trickle-down’ effect of economic growth. Similarly, it gave many environmentalists a sense of optimism that the environment had finally received its due.

There were few nay-sayers to Brundtland’s environment-development thesis, save some hard line environmentalists (who arguably ‘won back’ the sustainability agenda at the 1992 UNCED Rio Conference, the five year follow-up to Brundtland), radical eco-developmentalists, like Sachs, and nitpicking academics17. The vast middle ground of policy-makers, representatives of NGOs and ENGOs, not to mention the general public, however, saw their interests in Brundtland’s formulation of sustainability. That these interests differed quite widely from each other was clouded by the Commission’s lofty goal “to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature” (WCED 1987: 65) in a future beyond traditional political divisions (Adams 2001: 70). Sustainable development for the Brundtland Commission relied upon three key, “multi-interpretable” and ultimately indeterminate concepts – sustainability, development, and needs, which all facilitated discursive, if not operational consensus. Proponents of sustainability agreed on the positive value of these terms, but there was no consensus on their specific contents and definition (Redclift 2005). Consensus on specifics was, in fact, neither necessary, desirable or even possible for achieving consensus.

VI. Consensus ‘Lite’: The Rio Declaration and ‘Mainstream Sustainable Development’

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, or the Rio Conference, Rio Summit, Earth Summit), held at Rio de Janeiro, was the next major event in the history of the sustainability discourse, convened by the UN as a five-year follow-up after the Brundtland Report. Well attended by the international political community and non-governmental organizations, it is a prime example of international policy-making as ‘muddling-through’ (Lindblom 1959), indicative of the tenuousness of ‘actually existing consensus’ in UN policy-making processes.

17 Academics and environmentalists arguing from an ecological economics perspective emphasized the negative environmental effects of continued economic growth in the North, dubious of the possibility of de-linking economic growth from energy and resource use (Rees 2003, 1999; Pimentel et al. 2000).
The ‘Rio machine’ (Adams 2001: 80) produced a number of important conventions and documents: such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, Forest Principle, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and Agenda 21, which Adams calls “a bloated document over 600 pages long, a compendium of environmental thinking and a balancing act between different interests” (2001: 99). The other major output was a list of twenty-seven principles of sustainable development comprising the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, “a bland declaration that provides something for everybody” (Holmberg et al. 1993:7). Rio seemed to have confirmed broad consensus on the value of sustainable development mainstream, but little beyond. It was a confirmation of faith in sustainable development as a solution to many of the world’s problems, but it’s sprawling, messy outputs evidenced the range of interests involved, and the lack of deep consensus on the politics and actions requisite to solve such problems. The experience of Rio revealed the practical implications of international policy based on an empty signifier and the limited extent to which totalizing discourses are capable of achieving deep, actionable consensus.

One major outcome of the Rio Summit was the environmental lobby’s apparent recapture of the particularly environmental focus of sustainability. The most important documents to come out of Rio were obviously environmental in focus (Biological Diversity Convention, Forest Principles, UNCCC), rather than human development focused (Redclift and Woodgate 1997), which reflected the agendas of industrialised Northern countries. To Adams, the Rio Summit reflected a view of sustainability - global environmental change (GEC) – in which “the chief issue of sustainable development is seen to be the global environment”, mitigable “by the conventional weapons of technological innovation and the market” (2001: 103). As such, Rio confirmed mainstream sustainable development as reformist, not radical, discourse:

Mainstream sustainable development does not challenge the dominant capitalist industrialising model, but it does demand debate about methods and priorities. Thus Our Common Future focuses on better planning techniques, more careful use of state capital and more careful use of economic appraisal to reduce development that causes ecological disruption. Agenda 21 addresses the question of retooling the wealth-producing industrial plant of the world economy and changing the priorities of its management team. It does not suggest that its fundamental business, its methods or its products need to be radically re-imagined (Adams 2001: 103).
The view of sustainable development as the GEC solution was not shared by all at Rio. There were sharp differences as to what constituted the key problems of sustainable development and who was responsible for finding solutions. While GEC was the top priority for representatives of industrialised countries, non-industrialised countries fought to place North-South disparities, poverty and its attendant problems on the agenda. In many ways, Rio 1992 was Stockholm 1972 revisited, for “there was fear on the part of Third World countries that their attempts to industrialise would be stifled by restrictive international agreements on atmospheric emissions” (Adams 2001: 83).18

The way Brundtland defined and sketched sustainability had appealed to “a wide range of interests,” enabling “various groups to interpret the term to suit their own agendas… past[ing] over potential conflicts between the environment and economy” (McManus 1996: 53). But five years later, Rio demonstrated conflicts continued beneath the veneer. Nonetheless, its political longevity and steady popularity, showed few lost faith in the ability of sustainability to address the world’s needs, environmental priorities and developmental aspirations.

The next section takes a closer look at the terms ‘development’ and ‘needs’, ‘equity’ and ‘social’ in order to understand sustainability in its ‘mainstream’ form, which is both empty, yet ideologically ‘filled’ (or in Laclauian terms, universalized, yet contaminated by the particularisms of its historical origins). In any case, the Brundtland Report helped the term ‘sustainable development’ pass “into policy discourse, if not everyday language” (Redclift 2005: 212), and for the last twenty years, Our Common Future has provided the language and general philosophical and policy program that have mainstreamed sustainable development. Today one can scarcely talk about environmental issues without talking about sustainability, about development in a politically acceptable manner without talking about how it might be made sustainable.

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18 The 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg further illuminated the North-South divide that persists between those who prioritize ‘development’ and those who prioritize ‘environment’, with many pressing to take back the sustainable development agenda in favour of development goals.
VII. Sustain-ability or Sustain-able development?

Thus far, we have been tracing the history of sustainability, and in doing so have also come to be detailing the history of sustainable development, making little or no differentiation between the two. At this juncture, we need to pause in order to examine whether and in what ways they might need to be analytically distinguished from each other. Does sustainability refer simply to ecological stocks, while sustainable development adds social and economic considerations? Or does sustainability refer to a state or condition, while sustainable development refers to the process reaching it? In order to adequately consider possible differences between these terms – what they mean, and what their political consequences may be – we must first examine the concept of development.

i. The Development of Development

While a history of the concept of development is not possible here (see Adams 2001, Watts and Cowen & Shenton in Crush 1995, Sachs 1993) we must consider some of its broad historical underpinnings to understand what it contributes to the discourse of sustainability. Adams (2001: 6) notes that development has “a complex pedigree and etymology,” perhaps more complex (or at least older) than that of sustainability. Watts calls development as is it used today as “fundamentally modernist in its genesis and character,” strongly associated with “beliefs in progress, forward movement, the unfettered power of technology and so on” (1995:45). But Watts also argues that the common understanding of development today is much narrower than in the past, and that a genealogical understanding of its meaning is necessary to reveal older connotations that still pervade contemporary understandings of the concept (ibid.). In any case, if development “has been called the central organizing concept of our time” (Cowens and Shenton 1995: 25), it is worth investigating its origins to discover what connotations, if any, are implied by sustainable development.

The word ‘develop’ entered the English language in the mid-seventeenth century, as the English version of disvelop, to unfold or unroll (Williams 1983: 102). By the mid nineteenth century the word was most closely associated with biology and emerging thinking on natural evolution (Williams 1983: 102, Adams 2001: 7). As a result, Watts observes,
“[d]evelopment has as a consequence rarely broken free from organicist notions of growth and from a close affinity with teleological views of history, science and progress in the West” (1995: 46).

Cowens & Shenton, detailing the lineage of ‘development,’ trace the contribution of Saint-Simonian philosophy, which held a naturalized conception of progress, one that viewed humanity as “a collective entity that had grown from generation to generation according to its own law of 'progressive development’” (1995: 30). This incessant progress, however, could be chaotic, dirty, and harsh, bringing with it upheaval and misery (think, for example of the outset of the Industrial Revolution, which was characterized by pollution, poor living conditions). The necessary counterpart to progress, therefore was order, which brought with it “progressive amelioration of the moral physical, and intellectual condition of the human race” (ibid). To the Saint-Simonians, development was the process of reconciling progress with order (Cowens and Shenton 1995: 32).

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth century, development came to be used to describe economic change (Williams 1983: 103). Built upon Enlightenment rationality, and “profoundly encoded Western preconceptions about civilisation” (Adams 2001: 7), development involved societies passing through discrete evolutionary stages. According to Williams “implicit in this notion ... was the idea of 'progressive development’” (1983: 102-3, italics in original); that is, the idea that progress could be regarded as "a discoverable general movement of history," in "development to higher forms" (Williams 1983: 244). The economic sense of development was advanced by European mercantilism and colonialism (Adams 2001: 6) and by the turn of the twentieth century “the central thesis of developmentalism as a linear theory of progress rooted in Western capitalist hegemony was cast in stone” (Watts 1995: 46).

The most significant conceptual change in “development” came after 1945, when in 1949 speech, US President Harry Truman referred to ‘underdeveloped areas’ of the southern hemisphere (Williams 1983: 103; also Sachs 1993, Adams 2001: 7). The idea of underdevelopment connected both the passage of economies and societies through predictable 'stages of development' with the idea of insufficient development (exploitation) of resources (Williams 1983: 103). Since the idea of development was a linear progression towards a developed state (Adams 2001: 7), the underdeveloped society was its obverse –
that which had yet to achieve modernization and, with it, the synthesis of order and progress. This conception permitted the non-developed/underdeveloped place to be seen as a “needy and legitimate target for action” (Adams 2001: 7), one whom agents of development could render their services of capital, expertise and management. Development is “the process that recreates the industrial world: industrialised, urbanised, democratic and capitalist” (Adams 2001: 6). As Levi-Strauss observes, it is coded for the reproduction of Western culture and economies, thus “cultures … appear to us to be in more active development when moving in the same direction as our own, and stationary when they are following another line…” (1958: 25).

The projects and policies initiated in the post-World War II “era of development” (Allen and Thomas 2000) demonstrated a high degree of uniformity (Adams 2001: 7); ‘development’ came to mean “the projects and policies, the infrastructure, flows of capital and transfers of technology” that made emulation of the industrialized world possible (Adams 2001: 6). Development was the effort to escape from the “sorry condition” (Adams 2001: 7) of rurality, tradition, and subsistence, down a path towards monetarization, commodification, electrification, and urbanization. Furthermore, development could “be measured in terms of the growth of the economy, or some economic abstraction such as per capita gross domestic product (Adams 2001: 6).

But can development be measured in GDP per capita? Is development linear economic growth toward a Fukuyaman end-point, or does it imply something more? One is tempted to say that development does mean something qualitatively more than growth. After all, international development agencies such as the World Bank are rarely concerned with economic expansion alone. Much development work undertaken around the world is also aimed at social amelioration via improvements in health care, education, food security and so forth. The United Nations Development Programme’s “Human Development Index” measures a nation’s degree of development by not only GDP, but also life expectancy and education.

While the degree of development achieved by a country is largely understood as a function of economic growth, there is usually an understanding of development being “growth plus some other stuff” (or an implicit assumption that economic growth is the requisite precursor that that other stuff). This is why Cowens and Shenton stress the
importance of examining development’s older origins; otherwise, they contend, “we lose the crucial sense in which it emerged…as a counterpoint to ‘progress’” that was thought to bring with it “the social disorder of rapid urbanization, poverty and unemployment” (1995: 27). It is as if economic growth means progress (the exciting, uncertain, but profitable Bulls and Bears of fortune), while ‘all that other stuff’ means development (the taming, domestication, and distribution of growth’s exploits). The Saint-Simonian notion of development as the tamed counterpoint to the tiger of progress persists in contemporary understandings of development.

As does, the understanding of development as ‘progressive’: societies’ natural progression through discrete stages of development. In fact, tacit acceptance of this stage model leads to a problematic conflation of ‘development’ as a descriptive term, “to describe what happens in the world as societies, environments and economies change” and development as normative ideal, to describe how that change ought to happen (Adams 2001: 6). In most treatments of the concept, it is not clear whether development is an immanent process (a general movement of societies) or an intentional practice (a means and a goal). As a result, "the distinction between development as an action and development as a goal of action is conflated" (Cowens and Shenton 1995: 26).

So what does development mean today? Many note that development is a “slippery value word” (Howard 1978: 18), bearing a “heavy ethical burden” (Adams 2001: 6) – an “ambiguous and elusive concept, prey to prejudice and preconception” (Adams 2001: 6), a “semantic, political and indeed moral minefield” (Goulet 1971). Cowens & Shenton observe that, “development defies definition, although not for want of definitions on offer” (1995: 26). It has been called ‘a Trojan Horse of a word’ (Frank 1987: 231), suggesting it is a term which is sufficiently empty to be filled at will by different users with their own meanings and intentions and in given policies and practice (Adams 2001: 6).

The characterizations of development above sound remarkably like those of sustainability. Is vagueness and contention the end point of any investigation into meaning? No, but it draws attention to the fact that many important words at our disposal in politics – freedom, community, justice – share this characteristic fluidity or fungibility. Have we encountered another Laclauian empty signifier, another Lacanian master signifier? Perhaps. While development is worthy of a discourse analysis of its own, for our purposes it suffices
that its meaning is far from precise: it is indeterminate, yet far from neutral, containing strong codings of the Western Enlightenment ideals of progress. These codings carry into the discourse of sustainability whenever we speak of sustainable development.

ii. Development avec Sustainability

Now that we have considered the history and meaning(s) of development, we can consider the term ‘sustainable development’ and its relation to ‘sustainability’. If development seems to share the same ‘empty/full’ characteristic of sustainability, does it add anything meaningful to the word sustainability? Can sustainable development be considered some sort of double empty signifier?

The history of sustainable development has already been explained, through the history of its constituent parts. The history of sustainability is the history of sustainable development. That is, the rise of the sustainability discourse in international, national and municipal policy circuits has by and large occurred through sustainable development discourse. As I will argue in the Chapter 4, sustainability is understood by most actors as sustainable development. When asked to define sustainability, most respondents provide a definition along the lines of Brundtland’s definition of sustainable development. As such, they are functionally equivalent. The underlying interest of this thesis is a concern with the practices and interventions (material and ideological) undertaken by actors in the name of sustainability. We are interested in the discourse of sustainability because ultimately, it “is inextricably linked to sets of material relationships, to certain kinds of specific activities and to the exercise of power” (Crush 1995: 6). Therefore, if actors (or at least the overwhelming majority) use ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ interchangeably, part and parcel of one discourse, in order to undertake or justify interventions in the world, the analytical distinction is not discursively important. Were actors articulating different sets of practices for each concept, we would need to distinguish them more carefully.

In this thesis, sustainability and sustainable development are considered functionally equivalent, with the following qualifications: a) sustainable development is often used when process is implied (means), while sustainability is used to refer to the goal of that process; b) sustainable development carries the codings of development (progress of history, triumph of modernism and industrialism) which may or may not be explicitly recognized by the user of
the term; and c) sustainable development is often used to refer to urbanization and urban development, i.e. the expansion of human settlements. This is especially the case in Surrey, as we will see in Chapter 4.

VIII. Sustainability Emptied: on Equity and the Social

Our exploration of the history of sustainability discourse thus far demonstrates that it emerged out of equivalential links made between ‘the environment’ and ‘the economy’ or, ‘environment’ and ‘development.’ Yet, as discussed earlier in the chapter, everyone familiar with the term knows it is typically formulated as consisting of three constitutive tropes: environment, economy and a third, variously ‘equity’ or ‘social’. In this section I consider this third element in the trinity: the ‘social’. I argue that sustainability’s status as an empty signifier is solidified by the inclusion ‘social sustainability,’ which functions to greater and lesser degrees as the ‘remainder’ category for many sustainability demands. This section takes us through an examination of the typical contents of the ‘social’ pillar, the ways ‘social sustainability’ differs from ‘equity’, and how and why the social is the ‘weakest’ of the three pillars.

What happens to a sustainability discourse when its constituent categories shift over time, as they did, from environment plus economy, to environmental plus development, to environment plus economy plus ‘social’? what are the contents of the category ‘social’? Coming from opposite political poles, both Margaret Thatcher (“Society does not exist”) and Ernesto Laclau (“Society is not a valid object of discourse”) would say “nothing” A social constructionist, on the other hand, would argue that everything is included in the social category, including the ‘economic’ and ‘environment’ pillars of the sustainability trinity. Analysis of sustainability using discourse theory suggests that the social constructionists and Laclau (and Thatcher?) are correct: the category ‘social’ is so broad that it can refer to nearly any political demand, according to how a given it. More so than economic and environmental sustainability, which can in theory be delineated and calculated through energy, material and monetary flows, ‘social sustainability’ lacks consistency as a category.

A review of academic and policy understandings of social sustainability (Connelly et al. 2007) reveals that the category ‘social sustainability’ has three common meanings senses: 1) as the fulfilment of needs, 2) a condition of equity or redistribution, and 3) the container
of demands that remain beyond economic and environmental sustainability (or laundry list). All of these ‘kinds’ of sustainability entail the ‘social’ as a remainder category in some way: as the conceptual remainder after economy/environment, or as the remainder of development after the economy is subtracted. In addition, all of them invoke social sustainability as a ‘wish fulfilment,’ a container for additional hopes for sustainability not strictly related to the environment or economy. All three senses of social sustainability stem from part of Our Common Future, and each will be considered in turn.

Whereas Limits To Growth and World Conservation Strategy were concerned with the interactions between economic and environmental spheres, Our Common Future was concerned with the links between the environment and development more broadly. For WCED, development is “a progressive transformation of economy and society,” (emphasis added, 1987: 43), i.e. the ‘social’ is part of sustainable development. WCED treats social development and economic development as always-already separate in their analysis (1987: 38, 43), thus setting up the tri-partite model of sustainability. However, the differences between social development and economic development are never described, and social sustainability is not defined, leaving the reader to insert their own ideas about the possible differences between the two. In OCF, social sustainability is the surplus of sustainability demands remaining after the demand for economic growth are subtracted (development – economic growth = social sustainability). When WCED differentiates between ‘development’ and “mere economic ‘growth’” (1987: 44), we are left to decide what development means after economic growth.

i. Social Sustainability as Need Fulfilment

The satisfaction of ‘needs’, therefore, is the first way in which social sustainability is typically articulated in the MSD discourse. Indeed, from this perspective the satisfaction of human needs is the major objective of development, giving social sustainability considerable conceptual weight (WCED 1987: 43, Langhelle 1999). The concept of needs is integral to the WCED’s conceptualization of sustainable development, however, is poorly defined (Reid 1995; Langhelle 1999). As a result, there are important criticisms, as well as lively debates, about the proviso of needs satisfaction in sustainability, central, as it is, to the Brundtland definition (see Littig & Greisller 2005, Nussbaum and Sen, 2002, Langhelle 1999, Verburg
and Wiegel 1997, Redclift 1993, Beckerman 1994, Doyal & Gough 1991). These debates tend to focus on the cultural and social construction of needs, the extent to which a common set of human needs can be universalized, and the degree to which future needs can be adequately accounted for. Suffice it for our purposes here that there is no generally agreed upon conception of human needs, or means to satisfy those needs (even such basic needs as water and shelter are subject to the convolutions of geographical, political and social variance). Since the “analytical content” of needs is left undefined, so is the definition of sustainable development, which is based upon needs (Verburg & Wiegel 1997).

Recall WCED’s widely cited definition of sustainable development: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 43). Far less often quoted are the paragraphs that follow the definition, which qualify it. In these paragraphs, Brundtland et al. argue that peoples’ ability to meet their needs is subject to technological and organizational constraints. Next, they contend need satisfaction should focus on “in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given” (1987: 43).

An interesting consequence of the socio-cultural variance/ambiguity of needs, in light of the lack of delineation of the differences between the economic and social spheres of sustainability in OCF. To what extent is need satisfaction a function of social sustainability, and to what extent is it a function of economic sustainability? Littig and Greissler (2005: 68) place need satisfaction clearly within the realm of social, rather than economic, sustainability. This begs the question: what is the point of the economy if it doesn’t satisfy needs?

Davidson identifies “two oscillating conceptualizations” of social sustainability: the social institutions and mores necessary for ecological sustainability and driven by ecological requirements – what we will call eco-social sustainability – and social concerns “largely…independent of ecological concerns” – what we will call ‘social as social’ sustainability (2009: 608)\(^{19}\). Needs-centred definitions of social sustainability tend to be of the eco-social type, which give the ecological dimension overriding priority. The eco-social

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\(^{19}\) Littig & Greissler see choosing between the two as the ‘dilemma’ of social sustainability (2005: 69). If we see this dilemma as Hajer (1995) would, the fact that actors need not choose between the two, or need not explicitly reference in which sense they mean social sustainability, means that two actors who each take a different view of the term can come to discursive consensus on the value of social sustainability, while differing radically in their operational understanding of the term.
approach is interested in the ‘social’ to the extent as to “how can societies regulate and change their processes and structures so as to ensure the chances for development of future generations” (Littig & Greissler 2005: 69). In this approach the ‘social’ is an undifferentiated, functionalist category and the role of social systems is “to uphold both the functionality and the resilience of linked sub-systems, thus keeping the whole system stable” (Brandl, 2002: 13, as trans. by Littig & Greissler 2005). This approach (which largely overlaps with the astronaut’s perspective) tends to radically underacknowledge social difference and political antagonisms (Buttel and Taylor 1992). The ‘social as social’ conceptualization of social sustainability has problems of its own, and is associated with social sustainability as equity and social sustainability as laundry list.

ii. Social Sustainability as Equity

The second common meaning of ‘social sustainability’ refers to equity, i.e. the ‘fair’ distribution of economic welfare. Recall that in WCED’s supplement to its definition of sustainable development, the Commission takes the position that the needs of the world’s poor should take priority, thus implying that sustainable development to some extent concerned with equity. But OCF also refers to ensuring the capacity for needs satisfaction for future generations in its definition. Since, in the Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development, “the attention to the dimension of time is not counterbalanced by an equal attention to the dimension of space” (Sachs 1997: 74), the goal of inter-generational equity arguably takes precedence (intra-generational equity is not referenced in the definition itself, but in the supplement to the definition). Nonetheless, the Commission claims that need fulfilment “requires not only a new era of economic growth for nations in which the majority are poor, but an assurance that those poor will get their fair share of the resources required to sustain that growth” (WCED 1987: 8), thus implying an emphasis on intra-generational distributive justice for the poorest of the poor, at least as far as is needed to sustain growth in poor nations.

Recall that one of the primary prescriptions for sustainable development the Commission called for was economic growth, and that one of the rationales for this prescription was that poverty pollutes: reduction in poverty would reduce environmental destruction. Taken from this angle, the goal of poverty reduction is not in the interest of
intra-generational equity and justice per se, but rather economic redistribution insofar as to ensure social reproduction of the poor so that they might bolster national economic growth (and as such reduce environmental destruction). However, the Commission also argues that inequality also pollutes: “many problems of resource depletion and environmental stress arise from disparities in economic and political power” (1987: 46). Although it is difficult to tell whether their empirical research showed that disparity in and of itself, rather than observed poverty in absolute terms causes resource depletion, this would allow one to interpret intra-generational economic equity as a goal of sustainable development for itself.

In its observations of global disparities in economic well-being, political tensions and environmental problems, the Commission comments: “the search for common interest would be less difficult if all development and environment problems had solutions that would leave everybody better off” (ibid, 48). This recognition of the trade-offs and power struggles that constitute development and environment problems is a tacit recognition of the uneven development inherent to capitalism systems: that is, it seems to recognize that markets are better at efficiency than equity. WCED’s policy prescription postulates economic growth as the solution to development and environmental problems, yet it is recognized that such growth is unlikely to produce ‘socially sustainable’ results. Recognizing that there are “always winners and losers” due to “inequalities in access to resources,” (WCED 1987: 48) the report argues that after pursuit of ecological and economic sustainability, it is the role of social sustainability to act as a sort of compensatory Polanyian device, whose role in the sustainability trinity is to temper the often unfair efficiencies economic and environmental sustainability with measures to maintain the ‘common’ in the ‘common’ interest.

*Our Common Future* is at best vague about how that redistribution of resources or economic welfare in the name of intra- or inter-generational equity should happen, or what mechanisms or political incentives might be employed to those ends (Redclift 2005). It is unclear whether, according to WCED, inter- or intra-generational needs take priority in the last instance^{20}, and as a result, “far from taking us away from issues of distributive politics

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and political economy, a concern with sustainable development inevitably raises such issues more forcefully than ever” (Redclift and Woodgate 1997: 57).

Subsequent to the publication of OCF, some commentators argued that social sustainability has shifted in meaning (Redclift 2005, Springett 2005, among others; see Redclift 2005, 1987; Sachs 1997, and Dobson 1998, 1999 for an extended discussions of equity and sustainability). Redclift argues that while initial discussions of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ had been preoccupied with needs, “[a]s the sustainability debate became more mainstream in the 1980s, much of it was influenced by neo-classical economics, and an attempt was made to translate environmental choices into market preferences, following neo-liberal orthodoxy” (Redclift 2005: 218). Similarly through the 1990s the idea of implied concern for equity in the third sphere of sustainability gradually shifted towards a more general category of ‘social sustainability’, with most planning policies providing “at best, implicit rather than explicit regard towards equity issues” (Gunder 2006: 216, also Haughton 1999).

As a result, the socially transformative potential of sustainability’s third pillar seems to have been blunted (Redclift 2005, Springett 2005): whereas ‘equity’ can be interpreted as social justice, distributional obligations of the global North to the global South, and cultural self-determination of environmental relations, the more vague concept of ‘social sustainability’ often instead refers (at least in North American sustainability planning contexts) to ‘quality of life’, ‘liveability’ and the commodification of environmental amenities as ‘lifestyle’ choices. One can view Aygeman et al.’s calls for ‘just sustainability’ as an attempt to explicitly reassert equity into the notion social sustainability (Krueger & Aygeman 2005, Aygeman, Bullard & Evans 2003), however obliquely it may have been lain out in Our Common Future in the first place.

iii. Social Sustainability as Laundry List

We have considered how social sustainability can refer to equity and/or need satisfaction. Our Common Future and contemporary mainstream understandings of social sustainability also contain a number of other political demands that are most often placed under the social pillar. OCF lists a veritable ‘laundry list’ of sustainability goals that includes education, health (“for their own sake”), as well as “the protection of natural beauty” (1987:
Littig & Greissler (2005: 68) found that international and national sustainability documents they analyzed contained “a seemingly random choice of common socio-political indicators”, based largely around “a practical understanding of plausibility and current political agendas” (an observation that will be confirmed when examining the social sustainability in Surrey). Within the literature on social sustainability one finds any number of additional political demands as components of social sustainability, such as the “harmonious evolution of civil society” (Stren & Polese 2000: 16), “life-enhancing condition[s]” (McKenzie 2004: 12), material satisfaction (Smailes 1995), “the persistence of certain necessary and desired characteristics of people” (Hodge & Hardi 1997: 7), and so on.

As a result of the indeterminate nature of social sustainability, the social dimension of sustainability is often marginalized in policy situations (Wheeler 2004: 60, Pugh 1996, Dobson 1998, 1999), at it is viewed as the “weakest pillar” (Lehtonen 2005; also Davidson 2009, Littig & Greissler 2005). It has been largely neglected as wider debate has prioritised environmental (i.e. climate change) and economic (i.e. expanding industrial capitalism) issues (Davidson 2009: 608; Littig and Griessler 2005). Indeed, “the main focus often appears to be the tension between that of the market and the environment, with social equity being, at best, a distant third” (Gunder 2006: 215, see also Marcuse 1998).

The bulk of sustainability literature, still gives environmental factors primacy (Kenworthy, 2006; Mazza and Rydin, 1997; Connelly et al. 2007) and increased interest in urban sustainability has seen a lack of a concomitant increase in the emphasis placed upon social, socio-cultural and economic sustainability and equity. More specifically, it is those aspects of the environment which lend themselves more readily to quantification, measurement and rational system changes that are given particular emphasis, such as air quality, transportation, and waste management. Social sustainability is frequently viewed as being “inherently political and outside the technorational scientific approach” and/or “too hard to quantify” (Reclift 2005: 218).

In the municipal context, local governments often exhibit a greater commitment to environmental sustainability rather than social (or economic) sustainability because the environmental sector is an area where local governments have more freedom and greater influence (Evans 2005). In Canadian cities, municipal governments have limited mandate and control over many aspects of social services and programs. Parkinson & Roseland
(2002) note that many municipalities are engaged in practices that could be considered “social and economic development”, but that “these types of projects are rarely thought of as being sustainability-related and therefore, sustainability planning is still approached through an environmental lens” (Connelly et al. 2008: 9).

Many note that social sustainability is the least developed of the pillars, but this makes sense: it is the ‘least developed’ because it is broadest in potential signification. Social sustainability can refer to the fulfilment of human needs, equity, or it can refer to any number of demands that have little or nothing to do with the ecological basis of sustainability. Redclift observes that: “to Neo-Classical economists needs are preferences; to the New Right needs are dangerous; to Marxists needs are historical; to anthropologists needs are group specific; to radical democrats needs are discursive; and to phenomenologists they are socially constructed” (1993: 9, also Doyal and Gough 1991). We can replace ‘needs’ with ‘social sustainability’ more broadly and an important point emerges; social acts as the emptiest point of the empty signifier sustainability. As such, it is the point at which the largest number of ideological differences can be accommodated into the single discursive notion of sustainability.

Littig & Greissler observe that part of the difficulty in conceptualising social sustainability is “due to the fact that there is no clear differentiation between the analytical, normative, and political aspects thereof … this problem can already be found in the broad and multi-faceted connotation of the word 'social'” (2005: 69). For this reason, I consider social sustainability to be a ‘remainder category’: tremendous range of demands and social desires can be seen as needs (crime reduction, green space, etc.). This is possible because it is difficult, or impossible to delineate what constitutes the ‘social’. Clearly, as Littig and Greissler contend, “a clear theoretical concept of social sustainability is still missing” (2005: 68). But more so, it is crucial to recognize that it will never be found (and the same is essential to recognize of sustainability more broadly). In discourse theoretical terms, the ‘social pillar of sustainability is simultaneously the weakest (least well defined) and strongest (capacity to absorb most demands) equivalential link in the sustainability discourse. Social can include any number of social demands – thus the chain of equivalences can be greatly expanded. Social sustainability is, therefore, the emptiest part of the empty signifier, the
element of the discourse to which the greatest number of (often contradictory) demands can be attached.

Social sustainability also acts as a sort of Freudian wish-fulfillment; that is, social sustainability functions as that category that contains the political demands that would aim to resolve or eliminate conflict (Freud 1999). It is the container of the “motherhood and apple pie” demands such as health, well-being, quality of life, enrichment, justice and freedom. It offers a ‘moment of cure’ (Jameson 1981: 278) for the political, cultural, ecological and economic antagonisms that undercut, and give raison d’être to the notion of sustainability. As Davidson remarks, trying to define social sustainability leads us to ask the question “what society do we want to sustain?” (2009: 609). This is perhaps the broadest political question there is.

iv. How Many Bottom Lines? The Ultra-Emptied Signifier

In the above section I argued that social sustainability acts as a remainder category, one that often houses political demands that in a stricter, ‘strong’ sustainability sense, appear to have less or little to do with ecological sustainability. However, in the political, policy and academic landscape one can also find reference to any number of other sustainabilities each granted its own category, with some added as a fourth pillar to the sustainability model: cultural sustainability (Berkes and Folke 1988), fiscal sustainability (Gustafsson & Koku 2007), sustainable governance (Evans 2005), educational sustainability (Hallsmith 2003:4), sustainable quality of life (City of Surrey 2007a), spiritual sustainability (Parrotta & Agnoletti 2007, Narayanan, Marinova & Kenworthy 2006), just sustainability (Aygeman, Bullard & Evans 2003, Kreuger & Aygeman 2005), institutional sustainability (Pfahl 2005), as well as “the sustainability of political and social structures” (Tisdell 1988). This list of sustainabilities surely signals sustainability’s status as empty signifier: sustainability can mean not only the conservation of wild salmon stocks and the economic and social structures that support this conservation, but also the fiscal integrity of a telecommunications network, the upkeep of a residential ordinance for roof material choice (qua quality of life), or the perpetuation of a high school, religious sect or even racism (qua cultural sustainability).
IX. Everything and Nothing: The Value of Understanding Sustainability as a Chain of Equivalences

Seeing sustainability as a chain of equivalences helps us to understand its constitutive anatomy, as well as its capacity to fulfil a political function vis-à-vis political hegemony. Many self-identified environmentalists bemoan that the concept of sustainability has been watered-down or distorted from its original, true meaning. This is only partially true: we saw at the outset of the chapter that the term sustainability originally stemmed from the forestry concept of sustained yield, and was later associated with ecological sciences. In these instances ‘ecological sustainability’ was a referred to potentially measurable ecological parameter of perpetuity. In this early sense of the term, sustainability indeed referred only to ecological sustainability. But sustainability as it has been known since 1987, qua MSD, has always been ‘watered down’. The moment of the ‘watering down’ of the word sustainability is coincident with its precipitation as a discourse. As a result, there is no ‘true meaning’ of sustainability as a discourse, in the way it is understood today. Its true meaning is every way in which it has been discursive and materially operationalized in particular instances around the world. The ‘true meaning’ of sustainability will never be found, since an attempt to arrive at a concise definition via consensus of all users of the discourse would likely instead mean its dissolution as a discourse.

Adams observes that sustainability literature “is strewn with the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’, …but too seldom are any of them given a clear and consistent meaning” (2001: 5). But he goes on to recognize that “[f]ar from making the phrase useless, it is precisely because of its ability to host divergent ideas that sustainable development has proved so useful” (ibid. 20). The flexibility and ‘beguiling simplicity’ (O’Riordan 1993: 29) of the concept demarcates its discursive power. As a result, we can observe that is “the discourses surrounding it, rather than any shared substantive, or heuristic, value it may have” that endows the concept of sustainability with its power (Redclift 2005: 218). A discourse theoretical analysis of sustainability seems to confirm this.

According to Laclau, the production of the chain of equivalences involves a ‘double movement’: while on the one hand, “the more the chain of equivalences is extended, the less each concrete struggle will be able to remain closed in a differential self,” on the other “the
equivalent relation shows that these differential identities are simply indifferent bodies incarnating something equally present in all of them, the longer the chain of equivalences is, the less concrete this ‘something equally present’ will be” (1996: 42). That is, the longer the chain of equivalences, the less each particular demand is able to maintain its particularity, since, through its inscription in the chain of equivalences, it absorbs a portion of the universal dimension. Yet, obversely, the longer the chain of equivalences, the less each particularity carries with it this universal dimension.

The more political demands come to populate a given discourse, the less the name of that discourse (sustainability) will be something actually present in the particular demand. As a result, “the chain of equivalences which are unified” around a signifier “tend to empty to, and to blur its connection with the actual content with which it was originally associated. Thus, as a result of its very success, the hegemonic operation tends to break it links with the force which was its original promoter and beneficiary” (ibid. 45).

To recall a linguistic approach from Chapter 2, a system of signifiers is a system of differences. A signifier means something because it does not mean something else. In the case of sustainability, we have demonstrated that sustainability can mean almost *everything*. In this way, it loses its differential identity to other signifiers. This also signals its exact counter movement - the more discursive elements to which sustainability attaches - the more it means everything – the more it means *nothing*. We can use a monetary analogy. The more money that is printed, rather of creating more value (or *somethingness*) in each currency note, instead acts through inflation such that that each piece of currency is worth relatively less than before. The money will be *everywhere*, but it will be worth *nothing*.

To Adams “the Brundtland definition of sustainable development is a better slogan than it is a basis for theory. Words about sustainable development, whether in academic journals or the soundbites of politicians, very often prove to have no coherent theoretical core” (Adams 2001: 5). In the specific sense he intends, Adams is correct. But viewed in a different way, sustainability *is* a good basis for a theory. This chapter has demonstrated that sustainability is an excellent example of theory of hegemony as a political logic. The following chapter will serve to flush out this theoretical contention with empirical evidence.
CHAPTER 4: ‘MADE IN SURREY’: THE CHARTER FIX AND ITS (DIS)CONTENTS

“The future girls are the future” – graffitied surface, Vancouver, 2009

The previous chapter laid out the historical development of the sustainability discourse and concluded with a discussion of how, because of its capacity to absorb almost any demand, sustainability is an empty signifier *par excellence*, representing an unattainable social ideal that appeals to a wide array of actors. As Swyngedouw wryly notes: “I have not been able to find a single source that is against “sustainability”. Greenpeace is in favor, George Bush Jr. and Sr., the World Bank and its chairman…are, the Pope is, my son Arno is, the rubber tappers in the Brazilian Amazon forest are, Bill Gates is, the labor unions are” (2007: 20). These people have remarkably divergent political and ideological commitments – yet they able to agree on the value and merit of sustainability as a socio-political goal. As we saw, this is because in the course of its development as a mainstream discourse, sustainability has become progressively emptied of any particular content it may have once had, rendering its specific connotation and implications open to a wide range of often divergent interpretations.

But, in meaning (potentially) everything, does sustainability mean nothing? Does sustainability have so many different meanings that it is, in fact, meaningless? If this were the case, if sustainability did mean everything, everywhere, all the time, it would not be able to do the political work that it does because it would lack the discursive traction that enables the formation of discourse coalitions and would be subject to an endless play of differences. So our contention must be precise: while sustainability has the *potential* to quilt a nearly endless series of demands into equivalences - this is exactly what enables it to attract wide political support – in particular places, at particular times, and with particular constellations of actors, sustainability can act as a politically operative *somethingness*. This is what Lacan was
getting at when he called the master signifier a ‘quilting point’ or a ‘stopping point’ – it indeed does fix a series of signifiers and demands into a discourse.

This chapter presents the case study of sustainability discourses in the City of Surrey, Canada, in particular the *Surrey Sustainability Charter*, which serves as an example of how sustainability operates in urban politics: while it is capable of absorbing a large number of demands, various pressures placed upon the local government (citizens’ demands, internal and external economic and political forces, its own selective strategies, and so on) result in sustainability discourses acquiring a particularized meaning in a particular locale. The central aim of this thesis is to examine the political work that the discourse of sustainability performs, by looking at its construction and operation in a particular locale, and to seek to answer, by investigating the political dynamics that shape and are shaped by the sustainability discourse, *why* the discourse was taken up by the City of Surrey. This entails an examination of discourses and imaginaries operating and circulating in Surrey’s policy-making circles through the substantive contents of the *Charter* itself, along with the additional context provided by interviews with citizens, staff and politicians who were involved in its creation.

We will discover that sustainability in Surrey *does* mean something. The contents of the *Charter* speak directly to the city’s most pressing issues, its highest hopes, its responses to larger political and economic pressures, and the contradictions and antimonies that are wrought and bounded in its production. The adoption of the sustainability discourse in Surrey can be viewed as a totalizing accounting mechanism, a ‘job jar’ approach to policy that attempts to bring all policy and political concerns under the umbrella of three ‘pillars’ of sustainability. The City staff and politicians view sustainability as a way of streamlining policy, thinking holistically, removing bureaucratic silos and integrating a wider range of concerns into the purview of operations. But it is also a ‘taking into account’ of political expectations and differences of various actors outside the local government, those ‘stakeholders’ whose influence over local political agendas must be taken into account. It is also a reaction to the realities of the neo-liberal entrepreneurial city, which requires discursively managing the contradictions between interurban competitiveness and pro-growth agendas, and efforts to promote liveability, quality of life, and environmental and cultural amenities. In this way, sustainability can also be viewed as a means of promoting
Surrey as a progressive, cosmopolitan city, a contender in regional, national and international economics and politics.

I. Surrey: Growing and Pains

The city of Surrey in two words: growing and pains. Ask an average citizen in Metro Vancouver about the city and one is likely to elicit one of two responses. The first response is that Surrey is the biggest bedroom in Vancouver’s dowry of bedroom communities; it has plenty of room to grow, and it is one of the last places in the region one can find relatively affordable detached housing; because of this, Surrey is booming. The second possible response one is likely to elicit is a comment on Surrey’s poor image: it is crime infested, it is ugly, it is a suburban ‘hell-hole’, it is where the region’s white, and even brown, ‘trash’ call home. These discourses of the city, along with the issues that contribute to, or result from, these discourses turn out to have a significant bearing on the City’s sustainability discourse.

i. Growing the Suburbs

The first defining characteristic of the City of Surrey, its high rate of growth, consists of both spatial expansion and rapid population increase. Both from within and without, various actors define Surrey as a growth city – a cause for pride, concern, promotion or an uneasy mix of all. But the discourse of growth is not merely discursive - it is a material reality. Surrey’s 2006 Census population was 394,976 residents, with over 1,000 new residents moving to the city each month. By the end of 2008, it had reached an estimated population of over 461,000 (City of Surrey 2009a).

Located in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia, Canada, Surrey is the second largest city in the province as well as in the Metro Vancouver region, and it is the twelfth largest city in Canada in 2006 (Statistics Canada 2009a). Between the 2001 and 2006 Censuses, Surrey’s population grew by 13.6%, more than twice rate of growth for the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area (6.5%) (Statistics Canada 2009b). Other municipalities in the Vancouver CMA experienced higher rates of growth than Surrey – for instance, Port Moody grew by 15.5%, and Anmore by 32.8% - but Surrey experienced the highest amount of absolute growth. Surrey’s population grew by 47,156 during that period, absorbing 36.4%
of the total population increase the Vancouver CMA (during this time the City of Vancouver grew by 32,370 residents).

An understanding of Surrey’s rapid growth requires us to locate the city within a wider regional political, demographic and geographical context. The city occupies an area of 317.19 km² (31,719 hectares), which constitutes about 11.0% of the total land area of Metro Vancouver (2,877.36 km²), making it the largest city by area in the region, over twice the size of Vancouver. The city occupies land extending north to the Fraser River, south to the United States border, and is bounded on the west and east by the city of Delta and the municipality of Langley.

![Figure 2. Surrey in its regional context. (Eric Leinberger map, from Berelowitz 2005).](image)

Within these bounds is a sometimes nearly schizophrenic geographical and land-use matrix of low-density suburban developments, strip malls, acreages, rural land holdings and farms, industrial parks, major road and rail transportation networks, high-rises, mid-rises, turn-of-the-century town centres, golf courses, leisure parks, wetlands, forests, riverine, estuary and marine habitats. Also included in this mix is plenty of undeveloped land, slated for urban and suburban development.
The physical form of Surrey today is largely shaped by the provincially regulated Agricultural Land Reserve, a tract of provincially protected agricultural land occupying the middle third of the land area of the city, and by post-World War II suburban development. Residential development boomed in Surrey after the Second World War, especially in the 1960s and 70s and continues at a seemingly relentless pace into the present (Surrey Archives 2009). The result has been sustained rapid growth of population over the last fifty years (Table 1).
Table 1. Population counts and growth in Surrey (Surrey Archives 2009, City of Surrey 2010a). (*) projected figures. (**) author’s calculations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Increase in population from previous period (%)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>70 000</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>99 000</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>166 793</td>
<td>68.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>283 509</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>375 164</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>462 516</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021*</td>
<td>594 802</td>
<td>28.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2031*</td>
<td>679 149</td>
<td>14.3*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ii. Growing the City

Surrey, the second most populous city in the region, is also relatively quite young. In 2006, 56.4% of the housing stock in Surrey was built within the last twenty years, compared with 40.9% for Metro Vancouver, and 34.4% for the City of Vancouver (Statistics Canada 2007). Not just Surrey’s built landscape is new: although it was incorporated as a municipality in 1879, it was not designated a city until 1993, when its population was nearing 300,000 residents. In addition, or perhaps because of this, the city is still evolving a sense of itself as a city in its own right, rather than simply as a suburban bedroom community of Vancouver, and as a city proper, rather than a suburban municipality. One interviewee made the analogy between the City and a state of adolescence:

Stakeholder Respondent #1: What'll we do, you know? It's not a baby anymore. It’s a… I think it is a preteen and its not… it’s getting to the point of navel-gazing… its all about me…It’s like a young guy whose doing weightlifting and he’s really strong and he doesn’t know his own, own strength.

Surrey’s tremendous growth is to be understood as part of a phenomenon of strong regional growth. The entire Metro Vancouver region is under pressure to grow: the region
has job and education opportunities, and the city of Vancouver is consistently rated as one of the most ‘liveable’ cities in the world. Vancouver has been highly successful in marketing its real estate, which while expensive, has promised and delivered a high rate of return on investment. Real estate has been called “Vancouver’s true passion, its real blood sport” (Berelowitz 2005: 95). The topography of the region, however, has shaped growth pressure in a particular way: with the Pacific Ocean to the west, North Shore Mountains to the north, and the United States border to the south, urban expansion in the region occurs in one of two manners: ‘go up’ or ‘go east’. Older, ‘built-out’ cities such as Vancouver, New Westminster, Richmond and Burnaby ‘go up’, relying on infill, densification and brownfield developments to accommodate population increases, while Surrey, Langley City, Maple Ridge and other outer communities further along the Fraser River, such as Abbotsford and Mission, ‘go east’ expanding industrial and business parks and suburban developments in former rural land holdings eastward up the flat Fraser River Basin.

These outer communities, located in the southern and eastern part of the region, represent a Last Suburban Frontier in the Lower Mainland region. They are some of the few places in Metro Vancouver where single-family detached dwellings remain relatively affordable. In December 2009, the benchmark (indexed) housing price for a detached home in Vancouver West was $1,516,835, and $713,210 in Vancouver East (Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver 2009), while the benchmark price for the same in Surrey21 was $512,952 (Fraser Valley Real Estate Board 2010). Benchmark prices for attached homes during that period were $776,022 in Vancouver West, and $495,509 in Vancouver East, compared to $321,73922 for a townhouse in Surrey. Apartment benchmark prices were $494,174 in Vancouver West, $326,256 in Vancouver East and $232,594 in Surrey.

Relative affordability has greatly contributed to Surrey’s high rate of growth. The City is expected to reach a population of 594,802 by 2021, and 739,000 by 2041 (City of Surrey 2010a). It is expected to become the largest city in Metro Vancouver by 2020,

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21 This figure excludes South Surrey, a more elite district in Surrey. The Fraser Valley Real Estate Board combines South Surrey housing price numbers with White Rock, a high-income municipality directly east of South Surrey. Average benchmark prices in December 2009 for White Rock/South Surrey for detached, townhouse and apartment housing, respectively, are $729,432, $451,615, and $298,954.

22 North Surrey is listed separately from Surrey in townhouse figures. Benchmark price for townhouse in North Surrey was $288,842.
outstripping the population of Vancouver in the process (City of Surrey 2009a). The implications of becoming the largest city in the Metro Vancouver area, bigger than the city from which the region earns its namesake, are not lost on the city’s political and business communities. This impending landmark event is in the sights of actors both inside and outside the local government. These actors are actively shaping Surrey’s coming of age, as they increasingly begin to exert economic and political weight ‘South of the Fraser’.

iii. Growing a Reputation

Put bluntly, Surrey has an image problem. Discussions about Surrey, if not about its rapid rates population and urban growth, are more than likely about its status at the region’s locus of crime, gang activity, social dysfunction and decay, or the lesser counterpart to Vancouver, or its ‘suburban wasteland’ landscape.

A central component of Surrey’s image problem is public perception of crime and safety. For decades Surrey has been dubbed ‘Crime Central’ (Tsakumis 2008). It has held the dubious distinction of being the “Auto Theft Capital” of North America (Surrey Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2008), and in regional public and media discourses Surrey is discussed as a hotbed of marijuana grow-operations, street violence, gang activity, meth labs and meth users. There is a widespread perception across the region that Surrey, or at least large swaths of the northern end of the city are unsafe. One respondent described his family’s decision to leave one neighbourhood in northern Surrey because they did not feel safe:

Stakeholder Respondent #8: Yah and we left Guilford. It’s not liveable to our standards. It’s just going downhill. So we left… the neighbourhood. My wife, ah... running. Wasn’t comfortable running by herself anymore. One weekend there was three rapes in the park beside our house. I mean, like, these are just unacceptable things. And its not that that area was that much worse than everywhere else. [when you] just push problems around and don’t deal with them: that’s what you get.

Kennedy: And that’s an especially important issue given, I mean, Surrey kind of has –

Stakeholder Respondent #8: Stigma. Huge. Yep
Stakeholder and City of Surrey respondents alike, are quick to point out that the central issue with regards to crime isn’t so much crime itself, however, as its perception:

Stakeholder Respondent #18: There’s a whole, the whole safety issue, I think.

Kennedy: Just with regards to crime rates and such?

Stakeholder Respondent #18: Well, yes and people’s sort lev-lev of com-comfort. And sometimes it’s perceived.

Councillor Respondent #2: OK. That’s gonna be one of the critical issues. And, and I use the word perception of crime, because that’s what it is. Is not crime itself. It’s the perception of crime…. Ah... the perception of how safe I am within my community, my neighbourhood or somebody else’s community. Ah... so, so perception is certainly-the whole crime issue is certainly a priority.

When I asked one respondent why the perception of crime and safety in Surrey was so bad, he lay blame clearly:

Councillor Respondent #1: It’s the news media! … People shot in Surrey. Surrey, Surrey, Surrey, Surrey. You see in Vancouver, they distinguish the downtown Eastside from the rest of the city. So, the rest of the city has a perception of being crime-free. And if some crime happens outside of the Downtown Eastside, it says what community. So again, it’s very diffused. You don’t hear the name, number of times. But when it comes to Surrey, it’s crime in Surrey, Surrey, Surrey, Surrey. So you get the perception that Surrey has a problem. Well Surrey’s quote Downtown Eastside is one block long….And so the result, you have the perception that all of Surrey has crime, where in fact, most all of Surrey is crime free and has very, very little crime at all. And most people are extremely safe walking down the streets at night in Surrey.

Another respondent gave a similar response:

Stakeholder Respondent #16: We have – we don’t have any problems compared to Vancouver. We don’t have any problems compared to Vancouver.

In response to crime and safety issues, real and perceived, Mayor Dianne Watts introduced the *Surrey Crime Reduction Strategy* in 2007, a municipal policy that also involved the provincial and federal governments, and numerous other agencies. It represents the city’s
attempt to rid itself of its (real and perceived) crime issues. The strategy yielded results: auto-theft decreased by 50%, and identified marijuana grow operations were reduced by approximately 98% in 2007 alone (from 84 to 3). The strategy also included hiring 100 new police officers, and a Prolific Offender Target Team that resulted in the jailing of 216 ‘chronic offenders’ (Tsakumis 2008).

Surrey’s chronic crime and safety are not its only image issues. Another component of Surrey’s image problems, its perceived status as a ‘suburban wasteland,’ derives from its spatial form. The middle third of the land area of the city is agricultural land, and the upper and lower thirds of the city are a melange of acreages, strips commercial corridors, and old town centres, but mostly post-War low-density suburbs. This land use pattern, combined with the City’s history of being a laggard in regional growth management strategies has gained the city the title of the region’s “bad boy of suburban sprawl” (Shore 2007). This is part of a larger image problem in which Surrey is seen as a low- and working-class bedroom community23, a “second tier community on the fringes of Vancouver” (Dembicki 2008b).

Staff Respondent #4: This is really how I look at it – there is a strong desire to want to create a sense of place in Surrey…that its not a bedroom – that its not a collection of suburban subdivisions… with some nice farmland and a few nice beaches. They really want to create a great city. Not just bedrooms.

Surrey’s image problems – a combination of public perceptions of crime and safety, a lack of sense of place, and its perception as a dispersed collection of suburban and rural spaces – are all at stake in a larger game. The local government is in the midst of actively trying to reshape Surrey’s image, which is seen as crucial to Surrey’s success in its effort to become the second great city in the Metro Vancouver region. This involves trying to shake off old negative perceptions of the city by actively formulating and promoting new symbols, images and discourses:

Stakeholder Respondent #16: In the city …we believe the external crap [the negative views of Surrey].

…None of it’s true – anymore….  

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23 These perceptions of Surrey are largely associated with areas in North Surrey such as Whalley and Guildford. Residential areas in South Surrey, such as Morgan Creek and Crescent Park are relatively wealthy.
II. “Made in Surrey”: The *Surrey Sustainability Charter*

A brief look at Surrey and its primary challenges – high residential growth and poor civic image – reveal a portrait of a growing Canadian city trying to keep pace with rapid physical and demographic changes while attempting to craft new images and discourses about the city in light of such changes. Enter Surrey’s *Sustainability Charter*. As a high-level, wide-ranging policy document aimed at making the city environmentally, economically and socio-culturally sustainable, what solutions does the *Charter* offer to help Surrey with these challenges? What does the City of Surrey’s uptake of the sustainability discourse reveal about Surrey and what does it reveal about the discourse of sustainability itself? This section outlines the contents of the *Sustainability Charter*, enabling us to learn the specific “Made in Surrey” demands that populate the City’s sustainability discourse. The contents of the *Charter* reveal much about the governance and policy-making dilemmas faced by the local government, and about how the local government posits sustainability discourse as a policy solution to such challenges.

i. Charter Precursors

The Surrey *Sustainability Charter* is not Surrey’s first encounter with sustainability. The first ‘traces’ of sustainability in Surrey reach back into the preceding decade. This section outlines some of the policies that preceded the *Charter*, in a process of building institutionalization of the discourse

1996 Official Community Plan

Surrey’s Official Community Plan (OCP) is its primary policy document, which regulates planning and land-use policy in the city. Under the provincial *Local Government Act*, every community in British Columbia is required to develop an OCP. Once adopted, it functions as bylaw, with which all works and bylaws proposed by a city council are to be consistent. An OCP is intended as “a statement of objectives and policies to guide decisions on planning and land use management, within the area covered by the plan, respecting the purposes of local government” (*Local Government Act*, section 875). OCPs must include statements regarding proposed land use and density; transportation, water and wastewater infrastructure, environmentally sensitive areas, parks and open space, housing needs and
policies, public facilities, neighbourhood character, social policies, economic development, and the regulation of development. In a larger community such as Surrey, an OCP operates as an overarching vision and policy document, while other policies and regulations cover specific issues in more detail. Neighbourhood Concept Plans (NCPs), for example, detail the design, engineering and planning guidelines for the development and management of specific neighbourhoods. If, as in the case of Surrey, the local government area is within a ‘regional growth area’, the OCP must work towards the purpose and goals of the regional growth strategy. This means that policies contained in Surrey’s OCP are to be consistent with those of Metro Vancouver’s Regional Growth Strategy (formerly the Greater Vancouver Regional District’s Livable Region Strategic Plan).

Surrey’s OCP was first passed as bylaw in 1996. Subtitled “Strategy for a Sustainable City,” according to a 2006 Report to Council it “sets a strong policy context for the pursuit of sustainability” (City of Surrey 2006a). While sustainability is referred to several times in the OCP, however, it is never defined, qualified or quantified. Actions required to make the city sustainable were never outlined, creating “challenges for establishing the level of effort required to meet the intent of the sustainability policies” (City of Surrey 2006a). The OCP served to introduce sustainability into municipal discourse, but did not explicitly define sustainability, nor did it institutionalize sustainability as a planning principle.

Future Vision Surrey

A second important precursor to the Sustainability Charter was the 1996 Future Vision Surrey (FVS). FVS was a large-scale community visioning process conducted after the City’s incorporation. The process was spearheaded by then Mayor Bob Bose (who still serves as a councillor)\(^2\). FVS was the “largest consultative process in Surrey’s history,” intended to “serve as a living plan to guide [the] community well into the next century” (City of Surrey 1996). The Vision produced a series of goal statements in a number of areas: development, infrastructure, economic growth, government, parks and recreation, community enrichment, public safety, environment, community wellness and education.

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\(^2\) Cllr. Higginbotham and Judy Villeneuve, also councillors during the Sustainability Charter process were also signatories, as was Doug McCallum who became the Mayor in the fall of 1996.
The Vision Statement, the culmination of the FVS exercise, was released in January of 1996. However, that fall Mayor Bose lost the mayoral seat to councillor Doug McCallum. According to one councillor, Mayor Bose was unable to garner widespread support for FVS before leaving his mayoral post:

Councillor Respondent #5: And it was a huge, huge community issue. But I think ah..., and buy-in.

and I think, again, if it’s not bought into by council or if there’s something not… realistic [it goes] on the shelf… So, so buying into it is important. And that was I think the basis – I was were we started though. And I think Bob had - he did have to ability to um... maybe have it put down on paper. What he didn’t or wasn’t able to do was to really get a very strong buy-in on the rest of council. And that was unfortunate perhaps.

The newly elected Mayor McCallum was uninterested in promoting the FVS, and ended it up “on the shelf”. What the legacy of this community planning exercise was is a matter of debate. According to City staff respondents, the long-term goals of FVS were transferred into the OCP (City of Surrey 2001: 27):

Staff Respondent #12: … there was a real eye-opening exercise a number of years ago through the um... what was it –yah, Future, Future Surrey Vision?….um... and what that did was… really created a number of very um... if you look at them now, still very good policies that did become part of our Official Community Plan. Ah... Surrey was still a municipality that was so, you know, such a high growth…it wasn’t really um... the, the, the policies weren’t taken as seriously maybe, as they might have been but they are a fundamental part of our plan and our planning policies.

It appears that the high-level goals may be all that remained of FVS in the institutional memory of the City. Charged with developing the background for the Sustainability Charter process and attempting to research the history and contents of FVS, one City staff member was “amazed” when they were unable to locate any of the background and consultative materials and documents (Staff Respondent #4, personal communication, 2007). The only record of FVS the staff member found was a photocopy of the final vision statement, and two mounted plaques of the Vision statements located in two different locations at City Hall.

But there is a third copy of FVS that one environmental stakeholder respondent was aware of:
Stakeholder Respondent #4: well isn’t that interesting… there’s a copy of the one page summary sitting on the wall in a Surrey swimming pool right here, a half a mile away….But why, why has that? Its actually been institutionally suppressed. And that’s not all a bad thing because in a way it was not by any means a sustainability document. It was a, a ‘let’s build a beautiful, wonderful suburban paradise for ourselves’ document – with a few green attachments. So it really wasn’t thinking internationally, nationally, or in a planetary sense what we need to do…but it did have a lot of interesting ideas. And it did have ideas that could you know, be modified

This stakeholder respondent and several others see the legacy of FVS differently. Rather than seeing it as a failed policy procedure that nevertheless endured in spirit through the OCP, they saw the FVS as a failure in public participatory processes on the part of the City. Although this respondent recognized the shortcomings of FVS as a sustainability policy, they interpreted its shelving as a signal that the City did not value or take seriously the public input it had solicited. This disillusionment with public participatory processes in Surrey had repercussions for the faith many stakeholders had in the consultative processes of the Sustainability Charter.

Headwaters/East Clayton project

In the late 1990s the City of Surrey, in collaboration with representatives from the University of British Columbia School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, initiated a community development process for a new neighbourhood in a section of the city that had newly been designated as ‘urban’. The development scheme was planned under the East Clayton Neighbourhood Concept Plan.

This particular Neighbourhood Concept Plan was created through a series of charrettes – collaborative design solution sessions – which attempted to integrate concerns of a variety of stakeholders such as the fire department, sustainability experts, drainage engineers, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The East Clayton NCP was to be planned and executed around seven sustainability principles, “with the goal of introducing sustainability measures to new neighbourhood development through site design.” (Connelly et al. 2008). These principles included mixed-use integration of commercial and business zones in the neighbourhood, on-
site infiltration and drainage techniques, and neo-traditional design considerations such as rear lanes, higher densities, and work-live zoning.

While garnering substantial outside recognition, East Clayton is widely regarded by City staff and concerned citizens as, at best, a partially successful experiment in suburban development practices. There were significant problems with ‘innovative’ drainage features, exacerbated by site topology and soil. Developers resisted the original design guidelines calling for curbless streets, and installed curbs interfere with the proper functioning of the swales. Significant portions of land zoned as commercial and retail were amended to residential use, undermining mixed-use sustainability goals. The East Clayton development was also criticized for its failure to adhere to the GVRD Livable Region Strategic Plan, since it was not designated as a growth area.

These sustainability policy pre-cursors to the Charter demonstrate that the City had previous encounters with both the development and planning of broad-scale sustainability policies. The positive and negative outcomes of these encounters influenced the perception and reception of the Charter on the part of staff, politicians and community groups. If we recall from Chapter 1 Griggs and Howarth’s (2002: 103) conditions for the emergence and functioning of empty signifiers in a policy arena – the availability of potential signifiers, the credibility of the potential signifiers, and the presence of strategically placed agents who are able to fix empty signifiers, we can see that all of these conditions were already present in Surrey prior to its decision to undertake the Charter.

III. The Sustainability Charter

While previous sustainability planning exercises and policies dealt with sustainability as one feature of planning, the Surrey Sustainability Charter marks the institutionalization of sustainability as a policy paradigm within the city’s politics – it represents a policy explicitly about sustainability for Surrey. Indeed, the notion that the Charter was “Made in Surrey” is repeated not only in the Charter itself but also in discussion of it to the press, in stakeholder consultation forums, and during interviews conducted for this research. The Charter can be seen to represent the solidification (at least in print) of a “Made in Surrey” sustainability
discourse created by a discursive coalition made up of staff, politicians and various ‘stakeholders’. A closer look at the contents of the Charter, and actors’ views of these contents, allows us to answer some of the central questions of this research: in what way is the concept of sustainability seen by actors to be able to resolve policy issues? How, why, and with what substantive policy results did the Charter translate and create a local meaning of ‘sustainability’ for Surrey?

The Sustainability Charter is a policy document that represents Surrey’s commitment to sustainability, providing “a comprehensive lens through which [the City] will view all future initiative, programs and plans” (City of Surrey 2008: 3). The document contains a definition of sustainability, a vision statement, a suite of socio-cultural, economic and environmental goals, and an action framework for implementing the vision and goals (Figure 2). The document also contains 57 scope items which are to be maintained as a ‘living document,’ meaning that the City Council may amend scope items “as proposed actions and priorities evolve over time” (City of Surrey 2008: 32).
Planning for the Charter began in October 2006 (City of Surrey 2006a), with managers of several city departments recommending that Council undertake a sustainability charter and implementation strategy. The managers suggested that while the OCP had a “range of high level sustainability and environmental policies,” there were no associated targets or guidelines (City of Surrey 2006a). The Report suggested that a sustainability charter was a “[a] well-proven approach to achieving sustainability,... which elevates the role of sustainability within an organization to that of a fundamental principle,” outlining the “principles, functions and organizational structure that a municipality would apply to achieve sustainability” (Corporate Report R227: 6). Once Council granted approval for the Sustainability Charter, an interdepartmental steering committee, consisting of staff from Planning & Development, Engineering, and Parks, Recreation & Culture, began researching and preparing the three phase Charter process. Phase I consisted of background research and the development of a “Made of Surrey” definition and scope of sustainability, approved in May 2007 (Corporate Report R118, 28 May 2007). Phase II consisted of developing the goals, vision and implementation options (or the policy document itself), as well as
stakeholder consultation. This phase was originally to be completed in the Fall of 2007, but because the City was seeking more feedback from stakeholder groups, its release and Council approval was delayed until October 2008. Phase III, the development of the implementation strategy, is ongoing.

The *Charter* acts as the City’s “overarching policy document” and in the absence of other specific policies, general policy direction is to be taken from the *Charter* (City of Surrey 2008: 7). The following tables list the Vision and Goal items of the *Charter* (See Tables 2, 3).

Table 2. Vision items of the Surrey Sustainability Charter (City of Surrey 2008: 19-21).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision Items</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Be a model for the Protection and Conservation of the Natural Environment</td>
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<td>and Tree and Enhancement of Natural Areas and Biodiversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Lead the Way in Sustainable Community Design and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Be Home to the Region’s Second Downtown</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Embrace and Accessible and Diverse Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Institutionalize Triple Bottom Line Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Incorporate a Sustainable Agricultural Base and Local Food Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutrality and No Net Impact from Waste Generated by the Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Efficiently Move People and Goods, Not Just Vehicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Have a Full Range of Local Employment Opportunities and Green Businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Promote Active Living and Cultural Opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Have a Network of Accessible Health and Social Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Promote a Society Where All Residents Feel a Sense of Belonging</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Be a Safe Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Support Housing Options to Meet the Diverse Needs of Surrey’s Population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Goal items of the Surrey Sustainability Charter (City of Surrey 2008: 23-25).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-Cultural Goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“To promote a safe, caring, engaged, and liveable community, with a sense of place,</td>
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<tr>
<td>that is inclusive of all aspects of diversity and provides a range of education,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recreational, cultural and employment opportunities, affordable and appropriate</td>
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<tr>
<td>housing, transportation options and personal, health and social services that are</td>
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<tr>
<td>accessible</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Provide a range of accessible and affordable recreation, cultural and library</td>
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<tr>
<td>services that respond to the needs and interests of the City’s diverse population,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including children, youth, seniors, multicultural groups, families and those with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special needs;</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Promote the development of a range of affordable and appropriate housing to</td>
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<tr>
<td>meet the needs of households of varying incomes and household compositions and for</td>
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<tr>
<td>people with special needs;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Institutionalize the principles of Universal Design to remove barriers and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ensure accessibility throughout the City;</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Work with other orders of government to ensure there are sufficient, high quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>health and social services available in appropriate, accessible locations to</td>
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<tr>
<td>meet the needs of all residents including vulnerable populations;</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Create a City that is, and is perceived as being safe and secure;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Create neighbourhoods that have distinct identities, diverse populations, lively public spaces that promote social connections, and a range of accessible services and opportunities;
7. Design neighbourhoods that are friendly and responsive to the unique needs of children, youth, seniors and those with special needs;
8. Cultivate a community that is caring and compassionate, inclusive and respectful of all aspects of diversity, in which citizens are involved and connected, and have a shared sense of pride in the City;
9. Incorporate high quality design and beauty, including public art, in the public realm and the built environment;
10. Provide opportunities for meaningful community engagement in civic issues so that the City is responsible and accountable to the needs of the community;
11. Support and foster a broad range of accessible and life-long learning opportunities ranging from early childhood development programs and literacy initiatives, to world-class post-secondary educational opportunities;
12. Establish major arts and cultural facilities in central locations and a range of local cultural and entertainment opportunities at locations throughout the City;
13. Promote a variety of opportunities for community celebration and gathering through local and City-wide events and festivals, and through the establishment of a range of gathering places in neighbourhoods and at the and City-wide level (sic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Goals</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“To create a local economy that builds on Surrey’s natural advantages, and uses the land base and human resources efficiently to create a broad range of well located, accessible and environmentally friendly businesses that provide attractive local employment opportunities and a sustainable revenue base for the City.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Protect the integrity of the City’s agricultural land reserve (ALR) and industrial land base for food production, employment and agro-business services that support the local economy. Work with these sectors to find ways to enhance the productivity of ALR lands in Surrey;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Respect natural areas and minimize the impacts of economic activities on the environment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Promote environmentally friendly businesses and “green” building practices;</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Use employment land efficiently, in terms of compactness, employment densities and support for high value jobs;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Promote co-location or clustering of a range of appropriate business and personal services that support compact and complete employment areas while reducing the need for additional trips to access these services;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Locate economic activities where they can best be serviced by a sustainable transportation network that prioritizes the movement of people and goods over the movement of vehicles;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Develop a vibrant City Centre and municipal Town Centres as mixed-use areas with excellent transportation connections that create an attractive business environment. Concentrate office and retail employment that is not locationally-dependent in areas that are well serviced by public transportation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Encourage alternative employment arrangements such as low-impact home base businesses and telecommuting that build a sense of community and help reduce impacts of economic activity;</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Support local opportunities for technical training, advanced education, research and development;</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Strive for a balance of one local job for every employed resident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. in Surrey, and a range of high quality/high value local employment opportunities;
11. Strive for a balanced tax base that provides the revenue necessary to support the City’s sustainability goals;
12. Embrace Community Economic Development and develop gainful employment opportunities for people facing barriers to employment. Support local businesses that contribute to the social well-being of the community by hiring individuals facing barriers to employment or by other means;
13. Encourage a life-cycle approach to economic development, where businesses are encouraged to consider long-term as well as short-term impacts of their operations; and
14. Work towards a revenue base that balances commercial and residential property taxes.

Environmental Goals

“To demonstrate good stewardship of the land, water, air and built environment, protecting, preserving and enhancing Surrey’s areas and ecosystems for current and future generations while making nature accessible for all to enjoy.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Terrestrial Habitat and Life. Create a balance between the needs of Surrey’s human population and the protection of terrestrial ecosystems, considering:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Interconnecting Surrey and the areas outside Surrey through wildlife corridors, parks and natural areas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Protecting to the extent possible, existing urban forests and natural coverage, protecting tree and maximizing the city’s tree canopy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Maintaining ALR farmland and promoting food self-sufficiency and production without negatively affecting existing natural areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Water Quality/Aquatic Habitat and Life. Protect Surrey’s ground water and aquatic ecosystems for current and future generations, considering:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Groundwater;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Surface run-off;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Drinking water sources;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Creeks, streams, and river systems;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Sources of pollutants entering aquatic systems;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Natural riparian systems; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Native ocean and freshwater habitats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Air Quality. Preserve clean air for current and future generations, considering:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Local air quality;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Stability of the global atmosphere; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Air quality issues related to both human and ecosystem health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Built Environment. Establish a built environment that is balanced with the City’s role as a good steward of the environment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Minimize the impacts of development on the natural environment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Promote the use of native species and reducing the impact of invasive species;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Promote permeable surfaces where possible in new developments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Incorporate opportunities for natural areas and urban wildlife;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Protect unique and valuable land forms and habitats;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Reduce energy and resource consumption in the built environment;</td>
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IV. From Growth City to Balanced City

Given Surrey’s phenomenal pace of urban expansion and population growth, it is not surprising that growth and its associated challenges (infrastructure, transportation, affordable and appropriate housing needs), appear prominently in the vision and goals items of the Charter. While regional demographic, economic and geographical factors go a long way in explaining how growth has been consistently funnelled into Surrey for the last several decades, another important factor to be considered is the City’s history of actively pursuing residential development.

In 1996, Doug McCallum, a councillor at the time, beat three-time mayoral incumbent Bob Bose in the race for city mayor. McCallum headed the centre-right Surrey Electors Team (SET) slate, and served for three consecutive terms as mayor. Most interview respondents recall McCallum’s stance as unapologetically pro-development:

Stakeholder Respondent #8: I mean, the developers used to run the City. We know that.

City Hall during the McCallum years has been referred to as a “development permit stamping office,” and a “pro-sprawl axis” (Glavin 2005). SET had a strong presence on the both the Greater Vancouver Regional District (now Metro Vancouver) and TransLink (the regional public transportation authority) boards. Even so, McCallum’s council reportedly never embraced the GVRD's Livable Region Strategic Plan, the regional growth strategy with which Surrey’s OCP was supposed to align (Anonymous 2005b). According to one reporter, “of 560 development projects that were significant enough to require either rezoning or an amendment to Surrey’s official community plan over the past three years, McCallum ended up voting for all but four of them” (Glavin 2005). Bob Bose, his predecessor claimed "McCallum never saw a development he couldn't support" (Dembicki 2008b).
McCallum, SET, and its supporters seem to match well with what urban geographers have described as “growth machine” politics, in which “those who stand to gain directly as landowners, speculators, or investors form local growth coalitions with service providers (such as realtors, bankers, and local media) to promote overall growth” in tandem with local politicians, “who also view growth as a key function of local government” (Gill 2000: 1083). In 2005, his last year in office, McCallum, speaking to a group of ‘prominent’ Surrey builders claimed:

We're just starting, so we are nowhere near where we are going to be a few years from now. There is huge potential for significant growth. Surrey's growth rate will remain strong over the next 20 years (Simpson 2005).

Logan and Molotch (1987) suggest that growth politics have been supported widely by local governments, at least in the USA, under the belief that growth is a public good that will enhance the tax base and thus lead to improved quality of life in the community.

McCallum’s term in office ended in 2005 when he was ousted by Dianne Watts, a former SET councillor who left the slate to run against him as an independent. Watts first entered Surrey politics in 1996, was voted in as a SET councillor, serving for three terms under McCallum until 2003 (Dembicki 2008b). Although she ran as an independent, Watts’ campaign was endorsed by the centre-left Surrey Civic Coalition (SCC), who was concerned about McCallum’s support for industrial park development in the Campbell Heights, an environmentally (and politically) sensitive wetland area on the southeast side of the city (Dembicki 2008c).

The election of Watts in 2005 was to mark a change in tune from the outright pro-development, ‘growth machine’ stance of McCallum, to a civic platform based around political pragmatism. Her political goal, as she put it in her 2007 State of the City address, was “bringing together community, business and government around a common goal,” namely “doing the right thing… in regards to the development and growth of our City” (Watts 2007). Although Watts took the mayor’s chair from a SET mayor, six of the eight council seats on her new council went to SET councillors (Colley 2006). Watts’ political mandate, then, was not only bringing together community, business and government around a common goal, but also bringing the local government - SSC and SET councillors – together around a common agenda.
Watts’ stance towards growth and development is not the bald pro-growth clientelism of McCallum, but she is far from anti-development. Watts represents a force of moderation and compromise, in which the goal is not to unabashedly promote growth at any cost, nor to curb it in any way, but rather to facilitate growth and to mitigate some of its negative impacts. Some critics argue Watts “hasn't marked a significant departure from her predecessor,” that she has “kept [McCallum’s] legacy intact,” continuing an agenda of truck-dependant industrial growth and low-density suburban residential development, on greenfields and environmentally sensitive areas (Dembicki 2008b). With Watts in a second term in the mayor’s office as of 2008, the tide of development, though checked in some ways, goes on.

In contrast to the “growth machine” regime of McCallum, Watts’ approach appears to fit with what urban geographers have labelled “growth management” regimes. Defining characteristics of growth management are municipal development approaches that “tie new development to housing, transportation, and environmental needs, and engage the public in planning decisions” which attempt to “capture the benefits of growth while mitigating the consequences” (Gill 2000: 1096). The focus in growth management regimes is on balancing interests and mitigating the negative ‘externalities’ of growth rather than any attempt to halt or radically alter prospects for growth. Rather, the mindset is one of compromise, accommodation and mitigation. Interview respondents – stakeholders, staff and politicians - spoke in terms of ‘balancing’ and ‘managing’ growth as opposed to containing it:

Staff Respondent #9: Hmmm… well I would say ah… managing development while retaining a high quality of life…and …so that’s the – that’s the big issue….How do we manage that?

Councillor Respondent #5: Um... I believe the second issue is, is balancing the um... amenities parks, um... recreation, schools, with growth. And trying to ensure that [nothing] is lagging behind. So, so balancing growth. And, and dealing with the challenges that growth brings.

Stakeholder Respondent #18: Now, some of these things of course have changed since um... since the new mayor was elected and I guess the balance of power on, on City Council has
now changed. So I think they’re making a lot great effort ah... to bring in a more balanced approach to things.

Balance refers to trying to maintain service and amenity levels in the face of the increased demands brought by both population increases and (sub)urban expansion. But it also refers to ‘balancing expectations’ or conflicting political demands of constituents:

Staff Respondent #11: … There’s been such a good change in council. I can say that. Um... it’s still trying...to balance the expectations of different parties in developments… We still have the developers pushing. We still have the …greens pushing. Like, like you still have the wide divides.

City staff and councillors’ goal of striving for balance vis-à-vis growth can thus be read as attempting to capture the benefits of growth while minimizing negative (antagonistic) consequences, as well as a way of managing governance complexity:

Councillor Respondent #5: Again, I keep saying we’re not perfect because you know, sometimes we miss things. Sometimes you know, a roadway has to go through. Sometimes we um..., we simply have to um... mitigate or we have to deal with ... how do we make sure that the wildlife has a corridor that they can walk through without cutting them off. Um... And how do we ensure that we have emergency corridors so that you know, the -you know, ambulances and the - you know - fire trucks can get there. I mean [it] becomes a challenge. So we have to take a lot of things into consideration in building communities.

Few respondents interviewed indicated a desire to stop or significantly slow down development in Surrey;25 or at least few would have considered it as a realistic possibility.

Staff Respondent #8: There was some discussion about whether we should be questioning growth at all. Like are we within our limits and should we just stop, stop the train and do no more…. ah... so that came out. Not a lot. A few people wanted – not a lot – I’d say a few people – wanted us to have just a blanket statement saying ‘We’re big enough and we shouldn’t grow anymore because its not sustainable’. But um... yah the majority of stakeholders said well [laughs] this is the world we’re living in. it’s a – you can’t pull up the drawbridge.

25 The goal or at least sentiment of wanting to stop growth in Surrey was expressed by two stakeholder respondents.
Gill describes two of the reasons for the shift from growth machines to growth management regimes: first, the inclusion of the public through participative arenas in planning has become common practice, and second, global economic and political restructuring at the international and senior government level has made local economic development the primary site of local development decisions (Gill 2000: 1023). These circumstances have transformed municipal land-use and policy decisions, such that development and economic growth agendas are now moderated by the increased importance of social and environmental considerations (Gill 2000: 1023, also Molotch 1993).

How, then, should Watts’ growth management agenda to be read against the City’s decision to undertake a major sustainability policy process? How does a growth management approach to urban governance, which emphasizes the consideration and integration of social, transportation, and environmental needs in new development, map onto an urban sustainable development agenda, that emphasizes the consideration of economic, environmental, and social factors in regards to present and future needs? In the case of Surrey, the answer is: quite well. In her inaugural State of the City address, Watts announced the City’s plans to undertake a sustainability charter, explaining that the council “want[s] to ensure that every decision… will be centered around three core principles” of sustainability. The initial impetus for the Charter, in fact, came from the Mayor herself. As she describes it:

Mayor Watts: Initially it started with a conversation between myself and… [a] community member who happened to be an architect. And we were talking about sustainability um... generally and looking at some of the sites that um... were under development and really recognizing that a lot of pieces were missing in terms of, of that entire development site.

That the mayor, the top public official in the local government, initiated the Sustainability Charter is in keeping with other research that has found that urban sustainability discourses are often the result of promulgation of the idea by charismatic ‘champion’ figures inside ‘mainstream power structures’ (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 560, Connelly et al. 2008). For her, sustainability was about dealing with “missing pieces,” that were in her view, “significantly intertwined”:

Mayor Watts: Ah... now the Sustainability Charter for the city of Surrey of course deals with economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and socio-cultural sustainability. So, all three of those pieces are you know, significantly intertwined. And so we have to
look at, at everything that we do through that lens. So whether its you know, issuing contracts, doing the work we do as a city, ah... developing lands, all of those things. And - and that’s important to make sure they we’re, we’re addressing the issues that we need to address.

In this respect, sustainability is a “lens” that affords the City a perspective from which it can be “addressing the issues that [it] need[s] to address.” Far from tautological, this logic points to the utility of the sustainability discourse in enabling municipal governments to discursively “take into account” almost any (social, environmental, economic) issue on its political agenda. Further, it also enables taking into account the demands of citizens, business lobbies, or other outside interests:

Staff Respondent #12: You know… grassroots [organizations] are coming to council and saying ‘We need to think more sustainably.’ And our council’s um... ethic has, has become much more ‘We do need to take this into account’.

Due to the tendentially empty character of the signifier ‘sustainability,’ an almost limitless number of policy concerns and political demands can be absorbed by the local government’s agenda as “accounted for.” The sustainability discourse enables governments to bring within one accounting lens, within one discursive frame, potentially any environmental, economic, or social (read: any) issue. The end result is that this system of “taking into account” enables the City to say: “We got it all covered.”

Here we should recall a central contention in of Hajer’s environmental discourse analysis: that policy-making should be conceived of not only as a means of problem-solving, but also as means of the framing of problems such as to make them amenable to solution via policy-making. A sustainability policy is highly effective in this regard since its central operating premise is that it synergistically links environmental, social and economic policy concerns, regardless of their particular content; any policy problem is amenable to the discourse since its underlying premise is the accommodation of diverse demands. One staff member elaborated upon the main political concerns in the city, and how sustainability is able to contain them all

Staff Respondent #4: there’s also been a lot of ah... pressure in Surrey for environmental issues. A lot of ah... lot of press about ah... development …- and environmental impacts. Surrey has a lot of social issues. Ah... you know, you might remember when 135A street here was on you know, the front pages. Ah.....and they were trying to deal with the
issues, the folks down there. And then economically, you know, the city's trying to get more jobs here. So …it might have been they realized “Oh. Social, environmental, economic… these are all things we're trying to improve…our practices in.”

Crucial to the political efficacy of sustainability as an accounting mechanism is that all demands can be accommodated within the discourse as a sort of ‘job jar’ that makes it appear as though the demands are non-antagonistic.

Staff Respondent #4: I think of it as a job jar… and the trick was to tell people… don't think of it as the action plan. Think of it as…what we need to address to achieve sustainability….don't think of it as what problems do we have here now in two thousand and two and what do we need to get on. Ok? It’s very much what types of issues, whether it’s affordable housing… What do we really want to ensure we’re, we’re working towards?

A common approach to sustainability policies is to encourage discourse actors to conduct 'blue-sky' thinking, and to undertake visioning exercises of distant future time frames. Within such a timeframe, 50 years or more, any and all demands within the discourse are potentially, much more so than they might be in the here and now (City of Surrey 2008: 18). We can add to Hajer’s thesis that the political efficacy of policy-making as problem framing is thus enhanced by the use of techno-optimistic framing at long time scales (“By 2058 cars will be non-polluting and we wont have to make hard decisions about public transit and personal convenience.”, “By 2030, everyone in the city will accept our diverse cultural make-up.”).

When the sustainability discourse becomes a system of “taking into account,” it becomes a management tool not only for discursively compiling and accounting for various policy concerns and political interests, but it for rendering these interests and concerns (discursively) compatible. The Sustainability Charter is framed in such a way that suggests all goal and scope items are simultaneously attainable. The Charter presents no analytical or decision-making framework that would enable prioritization or trade-offs, nor does it even suggest that some goals might be antinomous (for instance, that goal for improved air and water quality might be adversely affected by the goal for increased tax revenue from business and increased connectivity to harbours and airports) (City of Surrey 2008: 25, 42). This accommodative structure is how and why the Sustainability Charter is to operate as the default (catch-all) policy when no other specific policy is in place (City of Surrey 2008: 7).
V. Entrepreneurial Surrey

In order to gain a better understanding of Surrey’s shift from a growth machine to growth management approach, we must further understand some of the larger dynamics that have precipitated such a shift, in particular political and economic restructuring at the national and global level. As early as the 1970s, global and national economic and political systems of the industrialized capitalist began to undergo a transformation away from the welfare state towards the political and economic practices of neoliberalism. More so a loose paradigm than a political program, neoliberalism is underpinned by the belief that “open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 2). According to Peck and Tickell, neoliberalism “combines a commitment to the extension of markets and logics of competitiveness with…aggressive forms of state downsizing, austerity financing, and public-service “reform?” (2002a: 381). Since market efficiency and ‘economic health’ are central tenets of the neoliberal philosophy, to which the state is seen as a ‘barrier’, the ideal role of the state is posited as “limited in its role in modern society apart from securing private property rights and contracts” (Albo 2002: 46).

Thus the first period of neoliberalism, the late 1970s and 1980s in the USA and the UK (Raco 2004: 328) and the mid 1980s to mid 1990s in Canada (Albo 2002: 46), was characterized by the transfer of some of the control of the economy from the public to the private sector (Prasad 2006). Peck and Tickell (2002a: 388) have characterized this period as “roll-back” neoliberalism, characterized by the reductions in the responsibilities of states, including but not limited to deregulation and privatization. It entailed the replacement of Keynesian welfare structures with “regulation that promote[s] international competitiveness and socio-technical innovation, the subordination of social policy to economic policy, the limitations of national scale policy-making, and new forms of partnerships and networks of reflexive self-organization” (Raco 2005: 327, see also Jessop 2002: 112-113).

Peck and Tickell also describe a second period of “roll-out” neoliberalism, characterized by a focus on “the purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberal state forms, modes of governance and regulatory relations” (2002b: 37, emphasis in original), which is argued to be a reaction to the negative economic consequences and social externalities
caused by the first period of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 388, Raco 2005: 328). Epitomized by the Third Way administrations of Clinton and Blair, this phase of neoliberalism is associated with “new modes of “social” and penal policy-making, concerned specifically with the aggressive reregulation, disciplining, and containment of those marginalized or dispossessed by the neoliberalization of the 1980s” (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 389). Neoliberal forms of economic management are “increasingly technocratic in form and therefore superficially “depoliticized””, while discourses around immigration, crime, urban and community revitalization, etc. reveal the roll out of a “deeply interventionist agenda” (ibid.)

Many scholars are careful to point out that neoliberalism is not a “monolithic ideology” or structured political program but is rather characterized by unevenness in its universalization (Albo 2002: 46, see also Raco 2005: 328, Brenner and Theodore 2002: 19-20, Jessop 2002: 113, Peck and Tickell 2002a: 384). According to Peck and Tickell (2002a: 387-8) neoliberal economic and political forms remain “variegated in character…according to criteria like the scale and scope of state intervention, forms of capital and labour market regulation, … patterns of political resistance and political incorporation, and so forth”). Many scholars highlight that “[t]he specific form and character of neoliberal regulation are dependent upon existing social relations and state practices” (Raco 2005: 328). Although neoliberal forms vary politically and geographically, they are not reducible to the internal characteristics of local institutions, since neoliberal regulation “also exists as an extra-local regime of rules and routines, pressures and penalties” (Peck and Tickell 2002b: 45). These factors become important in analyzing the case-specific ways in which neoliberal dynamics affect and intermingle in policy discourses in Surrey.

Geographers have argued that the ascendancy of neoliberalism within industrialized countries has led to changes in urban government and governance and a “new urban politics” (Cox 1995), the result of which has been, among other things, increased place competition between localities and the emergence and/or increasing prominence of new institutional forms and coalitions such a public-private partnerships, quasi-non-governmental organizations and privatized service provision bodies (Gill 2000: 1023, Cox and Mair 1988). Urban geographers writing from regime and growth machine theory, regulationist, and urban political theory perspectives have theorized extensively about the political and economic
effects on cities created in the wake of neoliberalism. According to Leitner et al. (2002: 2): “[c]ities are at the forefront of neoliberalization” since, as a result of senior government rollbacks, the local scale is increasingly viewed as the primary locus of achieving international competitiveness. As senior governments lay their hopes for future economic performance on their urban centres, the new urban politics and political and economic decisions more broadly, are being played out in the “entrepreneurial city” (Raco 2005, Kipfer and Keil 2002, Leitner et al. 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002a, Peck and Tickell 2002b, Jessop and Sum 2000), which is structured around “international competitiveness, socio-technical innovation, subordination of social policy to economic policy, and new forms of partnerships and networks” (Raco 2005, 327). In the context of roll-out neoliberalism, state strategies “are associated with an especially restless landscape of urban competition, [and] narrowly channeled and policy” (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 397).

The entrepreneurial city was first conceived and articulated by Harvey (1989) in his influential paper on the shift to entrepreneurialism from urban managerialism, which was focused on collective consumption, the public provision of infrastructure and services and land-use planning. Harvey’s entrepreneurial city thesis hangs on three related arguments (Harvey 1989: 6–8). First, there has been on-going restructuring of economic and political relations at national and the global scales, which has “entailed a fundamental change in the organisation of public policy in the US, Britain and other parts of the industrialised world” (McCann 2004: 1912). The result has been a normalization of the city as competitive city, and as Harvey observes: “[t]here seems to be a general consensus emerging throughout the advanced capitalist world that positive benefits are to be had by cities taking an entrepreneurial stance to economic development. What is remarkable, is that this consensus seems to hold across national boundaries and even across political parties and ideologies” (1989: 4).

Second, public policies are shifting away from the managerialist emphasis on the provision and maintenance of public goods. Instead, “urban entrepreneurialism is oriented towards the construction of spectacular sites or places that are hoped will stimulate further investment” as well as attract the coveted “creative class” or “knowledge workers” of the post-industrial ‘new economy’ (McCann 2004: 1912). Thus, urban policy has shifted its emphasis to speculation and the attraction of investment from outside capital and senior
governments. Such policies “promote and normalize a “growth first” approach to urban development…[where] social-welfarist concerns can only be addressed after growth, jobs and investment have been secured” (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 394).

Last, power at the local level is increasingly shifted towards private institutions, arms-length public institutions, non-governmental service providers and arrangements of coalitions and partnerships. Concomitantly, the role of the state is increasingly shifting to that of the ‘facilitator.’ While the locus of power has shifted, however, “risks associated with development are borne largely by the public sector at the local level” (McCann 2004: 1912), as cost overruns, private-public partnership failures, and collapses in financing schemes are ultimately paid for by local governments. While Harvey emphasized the location of risk in the entrepreneurial city, Jessop (1997, 1998; Jessop and Sum 2000) has “partially reformulated” Harvey’s thesis by placing the emphasis of changing loci of power on the role of innovation rather than risk. According to Jessop, urban entrepreneurship is largely defined in terms of innovation, which entails new intermixings of economic and ‘extra-economic’ factors to enhance urban competitiveness (Jessop and Sum, 2000: 2290). Thus:

the entrepreneurial city is one whose political energies are dictated by an overarching (imputed of material) imperative of intercity competition that treat cities as homogeneous units that compete with each other for investment and mobile segments of new urban middle classes through strategies of municipal state restructuring and policies of economic development, finance, taxation, land-use planning, urban design, “culture,” diversity management, and… policing (Kipfer and Keil 2002: 235. See also Leitner et al. 2002, Florida 2002).

This imperative, according to Peck and Tickell (2002a: 394):

license[s] an extrospective, reflexive, and aggressive posture on the part of local elites and states…Today, cities must actively – and responsively – scan the horizon for investment and promotion opportunities, monitoring “competitors” and emulating “best practices,” lest they be left behind in this intensifying competitive struggle for the kinds of resource (public and private) that neoliberalism has helped make (more) mobile.

The entrepreneurial city thus faces competitive pressure on three fronts: not only are they expected to attract outside capital investment, and the mobile upper- and middle-classes, there is also an increasing movement towards merit-based senior government funding, as “transnational government funds increasingly flow to cities on the basis of
economic potential and governance rather than manifest social need, and do so through allocation regimes that are competitively constituted” (Peck and Tickell 2000a: 395).

Entrepreneurial city scholars remind us that interurban competition and civic boosterism are not new, but that the rise of neoliberal policy has been instrumental in “reinforcing, extending, and normalizing” interurban tendencies towards entrepreneurial governance (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 394). Neither, as Raco observes, does “[t]he pursuit of economic growth per se... make an agenda “neoliberal” or necessarily undermine the capacities and well-being of local communities” (2005: 337, emphases in original). Rather an emphasis on growth becomes characteristically ‘neoliberal’ when the growth imperative trumps non-market cultural and political considerations, and the requisites for social reproduction (Raco 2005: 328).

Today, cities throughout the industrialized world are basing their policy choices and political stakes on an understanding of the urban system as “a primarily competitive complex and individual cities as fundamentally and naturally competitive entities, driven to vie with each other for first place” (McCann 2004: 1913). The question then becomes what is first place, what shape does it take, and how is it maintained? According to Peck and Tickell, the dynamics of neoliberal urban development involve regulatory undercutting and state downsizing that result in “races to the bottom” (2002a: 396). In the case of Surrey, the dynamics of the entrepreneurial city, especially in its discursive co-construction with sustainability, seems to evidence dynamics of neoliberal development that are, in fact, a combination of races to the bottom and races to the top. The remainder of this chapter will show that many of the features of the entrepreneurial city map well onto Surrey and its current planning and policy issues, not least of all, its Sustainability Charter. We will see that features of the entrepreneurial city simultaneously facilitate and undermine the policy goal of sustainability. The entrepreneurial city and the sustainable city, I will argue, are co-constructed and co-determined. But in the final analysis, the sustainable city should be viewed as a strategic discursive response to the imperative of the entrepreneurial city.

i. Balancing Responsibilities

In Canada, the period of the roll-back of the state, at the federal and provincial level, has led to the reduction of welfare services, the contraction of senior government
responsibilities, as well as the ‘downloading’ of such responsibilities to lower levels of government and private or non-profit service providers (Peck & Tickell 2002a: 340, Raco 2005, Purcell 2003, Ward 2000). Senior government downloading and the outlines of “new urban politics” emerged in interviews when respondents were asked to speak about the roles of municipal governments in sustainability planning and policy-making. One councillor began a description of the roles of various levels and agencies of government with respect to ‘building communities,’ emphasizing the cooperation between different levels of governments:

Councillor Respondent #3: But they all work and we do, we do our job. And all of them. And it’s not always our job, like social there’s a lot of federal and provincial — dollars, and, and, and cooperation and partnerships. Environmentally the same. A lot of um... cooperation between different governments.

Kennedy: I am correct in saying that as Surrey is trying to do the balancing act of sustainability it requires also – it requires communication with? -

Councillor Respondent #3: -cooperation - communication absolutely. And cooperation [with senior governments]. And working together. Yah.

The respondents’ description of these instances of inter-governmental cooperation included the example of policing duties: while laws are made at the federal and provincial level, they are carried out by police administrations at the local level. New urban politics tends to be cloaked in such language, extolling the positive benefits of partnerships not only between the public and private spheres, but also between levels of government. But the reality of senior government roll-backs and downloading of responsibilities is that, contrary to the picture painted by the respondent, everyone is not doing their job (or are not doing their former job, having changed their own job description). Twenty years ago, for example, Surrey’s Royal Canadian Mounted Police force received 30% of its funding from the federal government, as compared to 10% today (Watts 2009). The City has had to make up the difference. When the respondent moved from policing issues to the Canadian infrastructure deficit, the their tone changed quickly:

Councillor Respondent #3: …we need help from the federal government. We need infrastructure dollars, sewer, water, roads.
Thus, the language of partnerships and co-facilitation can in some ways mask the ways in which local governments need these partnerships in order to carry out their basic managerial functions. One city staff respondent explained the effect of senior government downloading of housing responsibilities on the City’s ability to address income disparities through local planning and policy:

Staff Respondent #7: …well a big one would be the income gap. Really, that’s federal government policy that’s gonna address that… so it’s kind of who owns the problem? The federal government has gotten out of housing since 1993. They’ve walked away from housing …a housing strategy. Um... so it’s kind of, I mean, what do we as a country think…you know, what we want to provide and what, what we want our society to be like? But the, the challenge is, is that where the rubber hits the road is in the municipality…

The answer to the question of ‘who owns the problem’ in the new urban politics is invariably the local scale. The local state is not only the state ‘closest to the people’ (and as such valorized in mainstream sustainability discourses through the principle of subsidiarity, most notably in WCED’s 1992 Local Agenda 21), it is also the level or scale at which any policy or politics (international, federal, provincial, local) is experienced and lived by people:

Councillor Respondent #2: But by the same token we have- because we’re local and accessible and elected we therefore have tremendous pressure from our citizens as to all of the federal and provincial issues that need to be addressed as well. And they’re off in Victoria and Ottawa and can never be found. And we’re the guys that are in the grocery stores and ah... and, and are accessible. So you get this, this sort of pressure on us.

Contrary to most City respondents who emphasized the limits of achieving sustainability through the local government, one staff member seemed to have confidence in Surrey’s ability to address sustainability. When asked if Surrey’s “Made in Surrey” approach to sustainability was to be taken literally, or whether it included an implicit acceptance that sustainability cannot be achieved by a city jurisdiction only, the respondent answered:

26 This is the principle that political power should be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralized unit of government.
Staff Respondent #4: I would argue that municipalities hold most of the cards...meaning...land-use and local transportation networks are almost exclusively under the jurisdiction of local government... We cannot dictate fuel efficiency of cars on the roads...um... we cannot where province is going to put its new hospital...experience has shown that they sometimes tend to buy the cheap land on the outskirts themselves. But we control land-use. It’s our exclusive domain. And uses. Land use density and uses is entirely ours. How we do our streets, whether we have reserved bike lanes and bus lanes...almost exclusively municipal. Sewer, infrastructure, water, ...like with basic infrastructure everyone uses...exclusively municipal.

I then asked the respondent about municipalities’ ability to finance such infrastructure, however:

Staff Respondent #4: Yah, there used to be provincial grants and federal grants for that, but there’s the ‘one taxpayer theory.’ ...Ultimately there’s one taxpayer who pays for the ultimate service. Now the problem is of course, the federal and provincial governments often download the responsibilities without money...without lowering their own budgets, which did lead to a greater tax burden on everyone. And there’s pressure at the local government as the most accessible government to hold the line. Which led to cutting corners across the country. And aging, decaying infrastructure, which – the infrastructure deficit. All that being said um... municipal government is the most accessible level of government.

Thus, the phenomenon of state roll-back is not so much that governing and coordination duties have been diminished, but that these duties have been partly `displaced' from the nation-state and provincial scale to new scales (municipalities and regions) and new forms (non-state actors and public-private partnerships) (Jessop 1994: 24), leaving local governments to either “hold the line” or “cut corners.” Urban geographers have noted this move “toward increasing the authority of sub-national scales of state power with respect to the national state” (Purcell 2003, also Jessop 1994, Peck and Tickell 1994; Swyngedouw 1996, Ward 2000), but have also noted such transfers of authority has not necessarily been passed with concomitant transfers of funds. Indeed, as Purcell (2003) notes, the current downloading of responsibilities from national or provincial scales to the local is not an altruistic attempt to grant more autonomy to local scale governance systems, nor is it an effort to encourage local participation in governance through subsidiarity and public access to lower levels of government. Localities are left with the after-effects of senior government
downloading, but taking on downloaded responsibilities can be costly, both financially and politically. A pertinent example in the Metro Vancouver region is the closing of the Riverview mental health facility in New Westminster by the B.C. government, which is seen to have shifted the responsibility to care for and house the mentally ill from the province to the region’s major centres, Vancouver and Surrey. The result has been increased pressure on municipalities to provide services and social housing:

Staff Respondent #4: If we, for example, said “Oh, darn,” you know, “province and federal government have gotten out of social housing. Now we have all these people on the streets. And they’re derelicts and they’re on drugs, and they’re breaking into cars and houses. Now we need more police. Well, I guess even though it’s not our responsibility, we’ll start building social housing at our cost.” As soon as you do that [the] federal, provincial government go “Ha, ha, suckers. They bought it. They took it over from us.” So no one’s gonna do it. … In terms of income, resources, ah... there’s a certain number of things we, we can do. Other things, you know, we can’t do. We won’t be competitive.

Municipalities who opt to “hold the line” rather than “cut corners” may find themselves left behind, as funds directed towards addressing ‘downloaded’ issues may require reductions in spending elsewhere in the municipal budget, or may require increases in municipal tax rates. The result, argue Peck & Tickell (2002a, 1994) is all too often a politics of ‘races to the bottom,’ where the pressure felt by municipalities to stay competitive keeps them out of the game of social service provision and environmental protection, and leaves downloaded responsibilities to non-governmental organizations, private charities or no one.

When asked about measures the City can take in achieving sustainability objectives that extend into provincial and federal jurisdiction, the respondent continued:

Staff Respondent #2: There are certain things we can’t do…but we can enable – our part. We can provide zoning for training centres. Work with SFU to give them places to put new, new facilities here. And we can work with senior levels of government to find good locations for alcohol and drug recovery houses….We have a role of pointing out the facts that all of these problems are being caused by a lack of housing and treatment centres and what not. And that’s under the jurisdiction of the province and the federal [government] and an exact little price for them, for not doing their job. What can we do? We can enable social housing. We can encourage it in new developments. And …We can bonus people for providing seniors housing. For you know, we can do that.
This response reveals an interesting strategy the City has deployed in the face of senior government downloading, which enables to discursively “hold the line” without materially “cutting corners.” Rather than fully take over responsibilities from senior governments, which would make them “suckers” in a roll-back game of ‘responsibility chicken’ – where each government holds out to see if the other will pick up the ball – the City adopts the role of “pointing out the facts,” acting like a watch dog in its own boundaries. If and when senior governments do initiate social housing initiatives or infrastructure projects, the municipal government acts as a facilitator by using its jurisdictional powers to “enable” through partnerships, concessions and other means, projects that might not otherwise proceed.

In speaking about provincial closures of mental health facilities and the subsequent increases in the population of homeless persons, one councillor explains how a novel approach to “enabling” and “pointing out the facts” came about:

Councillor Respondent #1:…[They] generally end up as homeless. And what does that become? It becomes a municipal problem…Why is that a municipal problem?… Because the province didn’t do their job. And so, lists of, of challenges and problems, but they all end up down at the municipal level if the senior levels of government don’t do it… And so this is sort of our attempt in, in coming out of the Plan for Social Well-Being. Ah... was to, to sit there and say: “Look. We are not responsible for social services in Surrey. But, there’s thing that we need to do as a corporation. There’s things that we need to do, because we can do certain things within our jurisdiction.” … The plan – the social plan that was created because in doing that we recognized, we have a problem…. and when we created the plan for the Social Well-Being we recognized, “Look, there’s some things, that, that we can do”…And so that same type of concept had now worked over into dealing with sustainability. Recognizing ah... that we have um... three levels of government. We have sort of the ah... short-term, the medium-term, the long-term. And we have these things that we can do corporately, we can influence because it’s our jurisdiction sand we have to lobby for. So we of came up with the Rubick’s cube kind of a concept. That says yah, there’s all these things and they’re all the pieces that really we have to work with.

Surrey’s Plan for Social Well-Being (PSWB, full name Action Plan for the Social Well-Being of Surrey Residents) is a social planning document that the City released in March 2006. The policy was created to “provide strategic direction for the City’s actions on social issues in
Surrey” in five priorities areas: Children and Youth, Community Development and Diversity, Crime and Public Safety, Housing and Homelessness, and Substance Abuse and Addictions (City of Surrey 2006b). The document was created in light of a recognition that: “[d]espite [a] limited mandate, municipal governments are on the ‘front-lines’ of numerous social service issues and concerns. … Indeed, one of the major goals behind the present project was to clarify the various roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders (including municipal and senior levels of government) in addressing social issues” (City of Surrey 2006b: 1). That is, the goal of the policy was to delineate who held what roles and responsibilities in the delivery of social services in Surrey. Issues to be addressed were inserted into “Social Responsibility Matrices” (City of Surrey 2006b: 101-156), which outlined the varying degrees of responsibility each of the three levels of government held for each issue, as well as pointing out scope of roles that could be taken on by “the Community service sector and other potential interests (i.e. private foundations, business community etc.)” (ibid.: 101). The plan delineates those items for which the City has primary mandate from those in which it has a “Limited, Secondary or No Direct Mandate or Legislative Authority”. In the latter instances, the City’s potential responses to policy gaps are categorized as Understanding, Advocating and Supporting (City of Surrey 2006b: 2).

What makes the Plan for Social Well-Being remarkable is that it is a municipal policy document structured around senior government downloading. While policies are most often created by organizations to formulate internal directives and to delineate the roles, responsibilities and actions of the organization, its members or bodies under its control, the PSWB is a policy document that formulates directives, roles and responsibilities for other organizations. It should be read as an effort to institutionally cope with gaps in the management of social welfare in the city by other organizations. It fulfils the role of “pointing out the facts,” demonstrating that the City is aware of the issues within its borders, but, in delineating roles and responsibilities not only to itself but other bodies, it prevents the City from being “suckered” into taking on downloaded responsibilities. In this way, the City of Surrey is discursively addressing social issues without implicating itself in material commitments. Here were we should recall a central feature of Hajer’s thesis - that policy-making bodies frame problems in such a way that they are the appropriate agent to cope with said problem (1995: 2) – and note a difference. In this case, the City has framed its
social issues in such a way as to position itself as the inappropriate agent for many of these issues.

The political efficacy of this policy strategy was not lost on the City when it drafted the Sustainability Charter. Based on the Responsibility Matrices developed in the Plan for Social Well-Being, a central conceptual component of the Charter is the Sustainability Cube© (Figure 3), a matrix that arranges sustainability goals along three axes: the three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental and socio-cultural), three time frames (short-, medium- and long-term), and three ‘spheres of influence’ (these spheres are, deriving from the PSWB, corporate/City operations, areas of municipal jurisdiction, and areas of municipal influence). In arranging sustainability actions along these axes, the Cube© acts a totalizing accounting mechanism, allowing the City to assume responsibility for sustainability where appropriate, and “point out the facts” for who else might be responsible in other instances.

Figure 5. The Sustainability Cube©: Surrey’s sustainability action framework (Source: City of Surrey 2008).

The Responsibility Matrices of the PSWB and the Sustainability Cube© serve to demonstrate the ways in which cities are left with the choice of taking on downloaded responsibilities at their peril, or ignoring them at their peril. The City of Surrey has chosen a
strategic middle path with their policies: the matrix strategy enables municipalities to be seen as having recognized problems, but by pointing out that these problems are not the responsibility of the local state, they can absolve responsibility when it is not financially feasible or politically savvy.

Municipal limits to taking on added responsibilities are not solely determined by financial constraints – municipalities are also in some instances prohibited from taken certain actions because many of their powers are prescribed (City of Surrey 2008: 15). Building codes, certain land use decisions, powers of taxation, and many other issues relevant to municipal sustainability programs are beyond the jurisdictional control of the municipality:

Councillor Respondent #2: … municipal governments are ah... very prescriptive in what we’re allowed to do…and in what we’re financed to do.

Stakeholder Respondent #1: So what can a city do within its – in its - within its jurisdiction? The building code is a provincial building code. The cities can determine form and structure and density and land use in its jurisdiction. But the building code is provincial.

Councillor Respondent #3: We don’t have, as I said, in, in some issues, we don’t have a whole lot of control over some of the other types of things like hospitals, like schools.

Municipalities face proscribed regulatory powers, but also legal restrictions in regards to how they raise revenues. Unlike senior levels of governments, Canadian municipalities are prohibited, through provincial legislation, from running deficits. Municipalities have limited means of raising funds for budgets, relying on property taxes for about half their revenues (Janigan 2002):

Councillor Respondent #5: so when we talk about cost-sharing. We only have one way to get taxes and that’s fee-for-service or property taxes.

Stakeholder Respondent #1: Sustainability at the city level is being impacted by decisions made at provincial and federal level, but most importantly the provincial level. About how
they’re allowed to raise revenues… to provide infrastructure that relate to all these other sustainability issues. Some of it’s so complex you just you know, you -…Well try to be a responsible developer… and you run into all sorts of issues.

On the one hand, municipalities face limited financing options, restrictions on raising revenue and legislation against running deficits, while on the other they stand “where the rubber hits the road,” at the political frontlines, where the effects of reduced support and responsibility from senior governments are visible and lived. Municipalities’ bottom line is: more responsibilities, with no more money, and limited means to get more money. Hedged in between these factors, not surprisingly, urban governance becomes a balancing act:

Councillor Respondent #5: Our bottom line is we have to balance our budget. How do we do that and look after the social ills, the environment…and keep it economically viable. And that’s a balancing act. . And that’s what sustainability is all about. Is bringing all of those three issues together.

ii. Balancing Taxes

Legally and financially hedged in, the local tax base has becomes a key leverage point for municipalities in their political and economic ‘balancing act.’ Since municipalities are limited in the ways they can raise funds, property taxes are the one of the most important means by which a city can make its financial ‘pie’ bigger. Increases in property tax rates enable cities to undertake increase or expand services. However, increased property taxes are perceived to undermine a city’s competitive edge, since lower taxation rates elsewhere might lure mobile residents and businesses to other cities:

Staff Respondent #5: …everybody wants to keep taxes low. They had zero increases [for] years in Surrey under the previous mayor, they kept taxes at the zero percent increase

Stakeholder Respondent #16: and just whatever happens, happens, because you want the tax revenue. You cannot - How do you provide? - because cities are given so few ways to raise revenue…. So they’re being hamstrung.
One of the major goals of City staff and politicians is therefore “balancing the tax base”: trying to increase revenues from taxes (increasing funds), while keeping rates of taxation low (remaining competitive). Surrey has lowered tax rates across all tax classes since Watts’ election as Mayor (see Table 5), and it has some of the lowest taxes in the region (see Table 6). In Surrey, the key leverage point trying in this strategy becomes trying to increase tax revenues from industrial and business sources – taxed at a much higher rate than residential uses – not by increasing tax rates on existing sources, but by attracting new businesses and industrial uses into the City.

Table 4. City of Surrey schedule of tax rates by property type (Source: City of Surrey 2009f).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property Type</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>6.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>16.39</td>
<td>15.68</td>
<td>17.97</td>
<td>20.86</td>
<td>21.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Industrial</td>
<td>16.58</td>
<td>16.26</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>21.75</td>
<td>22.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Industrial</td>
<td>21.91</td>
<td>23.58</td>
<td>29.30</td>
<td>31.11</td>
<td>31.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Local government tax rates in six major population centres in Greater Vancouver (Source: Invest British Columbia 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Residential</th>
<th>Major Industry</th>
<th>Light Industry</th>
<th>Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burnaby</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>52.98</td>
<td>18.98</td>
<td>18.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coquitlam</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>65.85</td>
<td>23.74</td>
<td>22.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langley (Tws)</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>21.03</td>
<td>18.28</td>
<td>17.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>19.94</td>
<td>19.34</td>
<td>17.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>22.76</td>
<td>16.41</td>
<td>16.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>39.83</td>
<td>20.40</td>
<td>20.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surrey currently holds about 20% of the region’s available industrial land (Cushfield & Wakefield LePage 2008: 65), the largest amount of any single city in the region (City of Surrey 2009e), as well as a large and increasing amount of the region’s office and commercial space (Cushfield & Wakefield LePage 2008: 68). But because Surrey has historically been a residential bedroom community, most of its tax revenue comes from residential sources. The
effort to ‘balance the tax base’ is part of the municipal strategy to correct this historical
imbalance. Surrey’s property tax revenues are approximately 72% residential and 28%
business, compared to other larger Metro Vancouver cities, whose residential and business
tax revenue ratios are as follows: Vancouver 47:53, Richmond 50:50, Burnaby 50:50 (City of
Surrey 2007b). The City’s goal is to increase the business share of property taxes to 40% of
tax base (City of Surrey 2001, Spencer 2008b). One staff respondent explains Surrey’s
taxation situation:

Staff Respondent #4: …in our case, like in many suburbs, our tax base is not… stellar… compared to
a Richmond, or a Burnaby or Vancouver. Um... businesses always pay four times,
four to five times as much as residential properties…If you have a lot of jobs,
meaning a lot of businesses, you get a very large ah... business tax base…there’s a
reason why Richmond is spending $10 million on the speedskating rink… and
we’re not…. Huge surpluses of businesses over residence. …Huge tax base. So all
these suburbs – now to do those bike paths or those sidewalks, have to pay for
them. And they’re fighting an uphill battle until they ‘get those local jobs’.

The City is in active pursuit of “get[t]ing those local jobs” in no small part because
“jobs mean a lot of businesses”, and thus business taxes:

Councillor Respondent #3: [W]e’re trying to say that we want to make sure that everyone who lives in
Surrey, has a job in Surrey. So we want to balance out the jobs… we’re always
trying to balance our tax base. And making sure that as people who need jobs, and
I believe that ah... that’s a big issue for us. Um... and you know, it, it’s really is um...
something we’re dealing with. We’re trying to open up Campbell Heights, put more
jobs out there. And um... so people don’t have to drive over bridges or through
tunnels or whatever.

The “bridges and tunnels” the councillor refers to transport residents ‘South of the Fraser’
northwards into the major employment areas such as Vancouver, Richmond and Burnaby
whose job to workforce ratios are, respectively, significantly 1.15, 1.36, and 1.20 (City of
Surrey 2007b). Surrey, in contrast has an estimated jobs to workforce ratio of 0.67 (145,000
jobs per 215,000 employable residents).

The goal of balancing the tax base is a central component of the City’s sustainability
discourse: it was one of the top important issues identified by City staff and councillors
interview respondents and is one of the central aims of its economic sustainability ‘pillar’ in
the Sustainability Charter (see Economic Goals 1, 4, 10, 11, and 14). In 2008, in an effort to increase the job force ratio and to attract industry and business to Surrey, the City developed an Employment Lands Strategy (ELS) (Cushfield & Wakefield LePage 2008), a policy that outlined how Surrey would achieve a one to one job to resident ratio, and a more balanced property tax base, through “a greater balance of jobs to labour force…through protection of its existing and valued employment lands, development and redevelopment of employment lands and a commitment to ongoing economic development” (ibid. ii, see also City of Surrey 2001). The ELS argued that increasing the industrial and business share of the tax base would contribute to Surrey’s sustainability, since increased local jobs would reduce commuting times and demands on the local transportation network. According to another city policy, the Economic Development Strategy, “the goal of increasing Surrey-based employment will give more Surrey residents the opportunity to work from their home community, which reduces the need for commuting (environmental benefit) and gives residents more time to spend in the community with their families (social benefit)” (VannStruth Consulting Group 2008), and more time to “participate in activities that enhance their quality of life” (Watts 2007). That is, an increased job to workforce ratio is argued to contribute to Surrey’s social sustainability, since having more jobs within the City could reduce worker commutes, thus decreasing traffic, pressure on transportation infrastructure, as well as enhance social life through decreased commuting times and by helping to produce ‘complete communities’ (where people can live, work and carry out daily life in one contained geographical area):

Staff Respondent #9: Then the next one I would mention and I haven’t really prioritized these but is you know, the economic sustainability of our community. So trying to complete a complete community with more opportunities for employment and economic development within the city of Surrey. [The job ratio] is not where we want it you know, where we want it to be. I mean, ultimately we like to have one job for every person. So people can live and work in their community. Which I think then, that puts less stress and pressure on your infrastructure cuz people aren’t commuting …

The ELS also argued a balanced work to job ratio would contribute to the ‘financial sustainability’ of the City, since greater tax revenues would provide the City with funds required to sustain operations. Recent provincial legislation, under the Capital Asset Management Program, requires that any bodies receiving capital funding from the province, including municipalities, develop accounting mechanisms to ensure it can maintain assets
during their lifecycle (Staff Respondent #12 2008, Cohn 2008). Complying with this program is part of a life-cycle approach to asset management meant to ensure that infrastructure, assets and programs can be ‘fiscally sustainable’ (i.e., they can be properly funded, serviced, maintained, etc.) over their lifetime. It is not surprise, then, that one of the City’s fourteen vision items in the Charter is to have an “asset management system that will ensure that facilities and infrastructure systems have sustaining funding sources to support ongoing operation and long-term maintenance” (City of Surrey 2008: 19):

Staff Respondent #9: Mhm. I think verifying...that sustainability is important to our council and ah... gives the message to staff that we have to start looking through that lens. So we shouldn’t be – whether it’s building a rec centre we don’t have the operating budgets to manage over the long run and being very clear about what types of resources we need um... and ensuring that we’re not over-extending ourselves.

In this interpretation, sustainability is not only about tree preservation, job creation and affordable housing but also about the ability of a city to sustain itself in the current constellation of interurban competition, state roll-back and prescribed municipal powers. Surrey’s effort to balance its live/work ratio and to operate through a fiscal sustainability lens serves as an excellent illustration the ability of the sustainability discourse to accommodate a wide range of policy concerns. Through the Sustainability Charter, the policy of the increasing job to worker ratio contributes not only to economic sustainability, but also social sustainability, environmental sustainability and fiscal sustainability. The result is an ecological modernizationist ‘win-win’ scenario in which social, environmental and economic benefits are achieved through business development strategies that, so it is hoped, increase Surrey’s competitiveness and its position in Metro Vancouver’s urban hierarchy. However, this ecological modernizationist “scenario of symbiosis” (McGuirk 2004: 1037), which geographers have noted as a “component of a competitive city modality of regulation” (Kipfer and Keil 2002: 240) may suffer from a few nagging political issues, which will be visited after examining some of Surrey’s other strategies to stay afloat in the competitive city complex.
iii. Open for Business

“It’s a big sign to the entrance to Surrey saying ‘we’re open for business.’” These were the words of Maureen Enser, executive director of the Urban Development Institute Pacific Region, upon Mayor Dianne Watts’ announcement of Surrey’s new Economic Investment Action Plan (IEAP) at her 2009 State of the City Address (Sinoski 2009). The EIAP and the ELS are two of several aggressively competitive economic plans initiated under Watts, along with the Economic Development Strategy and Liveability Accord. Since Watts’ election as Mayor, the City has made significant strides in trying to promote Surrey as a major contender in the regional economy. In the words of the Mayor (2009):

I want to make sure that from a business perspective, Surrey is top-of-mind when business leaders are looking to invest in this region and plan for the future. I want investors and decision makers across Canada to know that Surrey is one of the best places in the country in which to do business.

The Economic Investment Action Plan is a seven point economic strategy created to “stimulate the economy in Surrey while achieving City of Surrey business development and job creation objectives” (City of Surrey 2009h: 3). The plan includes capital spending programs, pre-servicing of greenfield business lands, streamlining of development approval processes, and the establishment of Economic Investment Zones. The two Investment Zones are the City Centre and the Bridgeview/South Westminster areas, the latter of which is located along the corridor of the future South Fraser Perimeter Road (a component of the politically divisive provincial Gateway Initiative). The Investment Zones feature a number of incentives such as the elimination of municipal property taxes for a three-year period, the deferral of the payment of development cost charges and a 50% reduction in building permit fees. Watts defined the strategy as a “new and innovative” approach to attracting investment and creating jobs and the in B.C. (Sinoski 2009).

In the fast growing metropolitan area of Metro Vancouver, “races to the bottom” appear most prominently in regards to urban growth and business development strategies, as both built-out and expanding communities attempt to capture their share of the region’s growth. In the words of Maureen Enser: “You can bet these municipalities who put out the welcome mat will get the business. Whoever’s first is going to reap the benefits.” But the
question becomes, what does first place look like, and what happens when a neighbouring city puts out a more welcoming mat?

Staff Respondent #4: every, every place I’ve been… Fraser Valley and really looked at the Capital Region district, there’s a – Whenever you’ve done a growth strategy, it’s always resulted in “Hey you know what? You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” because there’s a sense of competition you know – “If we don’t do the big box [store], they will.” Kay, if I, if I have my development standards too high, they’ll just go over there and then I won’t get enough revenue or I won’t enough population to support my wavepool… kay? So that is… endemic to the system we have right now. It’s competition. Some competition can be healthy…

I asked the respondent for examples of when competition is healthy – their response was:

Staff Respondent #4: Liveable community is one [example of positive competition]… If you really create liveable communities where people want to live and where businesses want to locate. Prestigious locations, you know, it’s actually a race to the top? … all too often though it’s a race to the bottom. Where’s it like oh we want development cuz we want that sports centre and we want that arts centre and we need people, and… if I had a nickel for every ah… every council who said, well we don’t want to do it, but if don’t build the big box, they will. Instead of having a meeting with the neighbouring councils and coming up in agreement that none of us will have it…. I would be rich!

The dynamics of interurban competition for development also play directly into respondents’ views of the prospects and viability of a “Made in Surrey” Sustainability Charter:

Stakeholder Respondent #16: … when you look at prices – prices will help determine what do you – and what arrangements cities are willing to cut to have land developed, and what partnerships they have for servicing for infrastructure. Every city - everybody is competing with each other. And so part of the sustaina – the question I have is the sustainability of Surrey dependent on a viable sustainability plan for the whole region? And my answer is no. If Surrey had to depend on the attitude towards sustainability in the region, it will never be sustainable as a community because it will always been seen as a bedroom community.

Stakeholder Respondent #17: … so decision-makers run up against this problem. Then they either try to get around it or they just give up, or they actually use it to justify not doing
anything. And this is the problem—how does Surrey make itself sustainable if Burnaby, Vancouver, White Rock and all the places around it aren’t? Like its, its almost impossible. It’s…almost as, in my view, as ambitious as saying…“We’re gonna have everybody in Surrey speak French tomorrow”…I mean it’s almost that difficult, because you are just one geographical area in the midst of all the, the other areas that…surround you.

In this stakeholder respondent’s view, interurban competition for development presents the biggest barrier to Surrey’s efforts to achieve sustainability, as attempts at achieving environmental sustainability are subject to being undermined by competitive “races to the bottom”:

Stakeholder Respondent #17: …it is the biggest limit. …just like one person cannot you know, can make the world a little bit more sustainable. But [there is a limit to] what they themselves they can do. One municipality has that exact same limitation on it. And it’s a huge limitation and…for us it’s you know, we wonder whether they see that. You know, when “Oh, well we’re gonna be leaders. We’re gonna be sus— you know, we’re gonna have a sustainability ah... charter in Surrey. And we’re gonna do all this”. Well…that means we’d have to do this and you know, maybe we drive the entire development community away from Surrey. Which in our view…might be a nice change for a few years, right? “Oh well, we’re not going to do that because that’s our, our, our reason to be here.” You know?

In the view of some respondents, “races to the bottom” result in approaches to planning in which environmental, social and sound land-use considerations come as extras to growth, when circumstances permit (Peck and Tickell 2002a, b):

Stakeholder Respondent #14: I quoted Dr. Elaine Gould who had stated, that “there is no balancing development with the environment.” That each time the environment loses and that the next time there is to be a balance there is less environment with which to do the balancing.

But for others, the dynamics of competition, in the form of city-branding, place promotion, and innovation, can enhance opportunities for sustainability, as city join races to the top to develop environmental amenities, active city centres and “liveable communities.” In these instances, regional interurban competition is argued to promote potentially virtuous outcomes.
iv. The Future Lives Here

One of the primary examples of the races to the top, in fact, is regional competition among municipalities to adopt ‘green’ and sustainability policies. This competition is perhaps stronger in the greater Vancouver region than anywhere else in Canada. Any study of sustainability or environmental practices and discourses in Surrey needs to take into account Surrey’s biggest, brightest and oft celebrated neighbour, Vancouver. Home to the David Suzuki Foundation, and the birthplace of GreenPeace, Vancouver has a long legacy as the centre of Canadian environmental activism. It is frequently heralded as one of the world’s most “liveable cities” cities in the world by various magazines, and was dubbed “Futureville” in a June 2006 Canadian Geographic cover article (the same time Vancouver was hosting the second UN World Urban Forum).

The City of Vancouver has a number of municipal environmental and sustainability policies and programs, such as “EcoDensity” an urban densification initiative, “One Day” an energy reduction program, and several others. In early 2009, Mayor Gregor Robertson announced his “Greenest City” initiative, which aims to make Vancouver the “greenest city in the world” by 2020. Other cities in the region such as Burnaby, Richmond and North Vancouver have, respectively, sustainability taskforces, sustainability offices, and sustainability visions. After Surrey announced its plans to create its Sustainability Charter, the Township of Langley also adopted a sustainability charter (Claxton 2008). There are also regional environmental and sustainability policies. Surrey is located within the Metro Vancouver Region (formerly Greater Vancouver Regional District), considered a high growth region under the Local Government Act, and as such falls under the purview of Metro Vancouver’s regional growth strategy. Metro Vancouver, whose motto is “Creating a Sustainable Region,” has a “Sustainable Region Initiative,” which outlines sustainability strategies at the regional level. According to one respondent, the Sustainable Region Initiative was one of the ways the sustainability discourse came to be circulated in Surrey:

Councillor Respondent #1: well, it’s, it’s really quite an, an evolutionary process. I mean, if you, you go back – you have to go back an awful lot of years in the GVRD somewhere about nine years ago… six to nine years ago. There’s the start of what was called the Sustainable Region Initiative…..And we started to um... have that word ‘sustainability bounced around and at that time we started to focus on the three
basics: ah... dealing with ah... economic, ah... social, and., and environmental sustainability. Um... and so ...this has been a developing and growing process.

And remaining competitive in such a ‘green’ region involves identifying with and adopting green or sustainable municipal policies:

Staff Respondent #2: I think people have to realize that sustainability is not for those Vancouverites….it’s for each and everyone of our communities.

In adopting the *Sustainability Charter*, Surrey is able to poise itself as one of a cadre of “progressive organizations and governments” concerned with “social issues, the future viability of [the] economy and the ability of the earth to sustain our society” (City of Surrey 2008: 7). With the *Charter*, Surrey was able to gain a competitive edge in the race to the top, since it represents “the first document of its kind in the Lower Mainland to comprehensively address the issues of socio-cultural, environmental and economic sustainability,” allowing Surrey to “position itself as a leader on the issue of sustainability” (Watts 2008). Indeed, according to the *Employment Lands Strategy*, the presence of a sustainability discourse in the City allows the city to “[d]evelop… a niche (i.e. leader in innovation and sustainability) [that] will help raise Surrey’s profile and distinguish itself as a leading competitor in Metro Vancouver” (Cushfield & Wakeman LePage 2008: 36). Or as Mayor Watts states in her opening message in the *Sustainability Charter*: “the Surrey Sustainability Charter establishes our city as a leader in sustainability policy and practice” (City of Surrey 2008: 3). Read this way, the uptake of a sustainability discourse becomes a race to the top, as cities vie for recognition and prestige for their green policies. Sustainability becomes not only about trying to integrate the complexities of economic, social and environmental consideration under one accounting lens but also becomes part and parcel of a city’s strategy of enhancing its image in order to attract investment, senior government funding and the mobile middle and upper classes.

Shaking off its old image and cultivating a new one is also part of the strategy to distinguish Surrey as a ‘leader’ in urban governance. In 2008, the City of Surrey unveiled a new motto – “The Future Lives Here,” along with a new city logo. The logo and the motto act as a call to anyone listening: Surrey is where the population of Metro Vancouver is

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27 The logo features an abstracted graphic of Bing Thom’s 2003 Central City building, located in Surrey’s City Centre area.
headed, in terms of work, home, play, and ‘best practices’ in urban management. According to the City’s statement on this new branding effort:

The City’s slogan: the future lives here, captures the energy, vibrancy and excitement of a forward thinking community. Surrey is considered a complete community with lots to offer and in many ways is a City of distinct communities – altogether offering a diversity of lifestyle choices. Surrey is quickly earning a leading reputation as a City that is progressive, innovative and futuristic (City of Surrey 2010c).

With the City expected to surpass Vancouver’s population in less than twenty years, the branding effort represents Surrey’s assertive attempt to step out of not only Vancouver’s shadow, but also the shadow of the City’s own former image. Through discursive strategies and economic incentives, Surrey is actively trying to shake the old image that is simply a large, problem-filled suburb, and instead, trying to position itself as opportunity-filled city, and as a city in its own right:

Over the last few years, people and businesses across the region are certainly looking at Surrey differently. We’ve evolved over the years from a bedroom community to a dynamic urban community strategically placed in the centre of one of fastest growing regions in Canada. We also have an enviable track record of growth, job creation, fiscal prudence and liveability. Notwithstanding the state of today’s economy, the fact is, people want to live here. They want to work and raise their families here and given the opportunity, they want to be closer to home. And by any measure, the future of this region really is South of the Fraser (Watts 2009).

Central to Surrey’s efforts to redefine itself as a major metropolitan core is the reconfiguration, both physical and discursive, of its City Centre\(^{28}\). According to Mayor Watts, with its central location and rapid growth, “Surrey’s City Centre is poised to be the primary business district for the South of the Fraser area and the Lower Mainland’s second Downtown Core.” The task of positioning Surrey City Centre as a second regional downtown is twofold: not only must the City Centre be discursively constructed and promoted as a regional downtown, it must also be physically transformed into a downtown. Like the rest of the city, the Surrey City Centre area is comprised primarily of low-rise residential and commercial development parcels, often set back from the streets, which are mainly wide arterial roads or residential collector streets. The City, therefore, has set itself the

\(^{28}\) The City Centre/Whalley area is not located in the physical centre of the City, but rather its northwest corner (see Figure 3).
task of literally creating a downtown (Staff Respondent #12 interview 2008) through changes to the density and form of the urban fabric. This is occurring mainly in the form of facilitating the construction of high-density residential and commercial developments, accomplished through density-bonusing schemes and cuts to Development Cost Charges (DCCs). As a result, the skyline of has begun to change. The most notable change is Bing Thom’s 2003 Central City tower, which houses a campus of Simon Fraser University, a shopping centre, and Class A office space. In addition, 19 high rises (constituting 4500 units) are currently in various stages of the approval process, and another 2500 units of mid and low rise buildings have been planned (City of Surrey 2009d). Part of the work of developing City Centre has been done through the Surrey City Development Corporation (SCDC), an arms-length subsidiary of the City which aims to “facilitate real estate developments” by assembling development land, undertaking public-private development schemes and using private sector approaches to “encourage private sector projects and produce long term financial returns to the City” (Surrey City Development Corporation 2010), thus “positioning the city as a partner rather than merely as a regulator of development” (Ransford 2009).

According to Watts, these developments are “just the tip of the iceberg” as the City has “limitless potential to create a visionary Downtown Core” (Watts 2008). The City also plans to move City Hall to the City Centre area, in order to “demonstrat[e]… faith in the future of our Downtown Core to investors, sending the message that not only is Surrey’s City Centre a good investment, but it is also the future of the region” (ibid). The plan to move City Hall indicates that the creation of a downtown for Surrey is not merely the physical construction of a dense assemblage of buildings resembling an urban core, but is also about creating and promoting the new symbols and associations of Surrey.

Part of creating a new image for the City Centre was, in fact, the naming of the area City Centre. This area of Surrey was formerly known as Whalley, a name associated with Surrey’s homeless population, its car theft and its general urban ‘blight.’ Whalley is, in essence, the condensation of the negative images of Surrey:

Staff Respondent #4: Three is probably image….which related to one, which is a sense of place….Why is it that with four hundred and fifty thousand people this the only building we can point to that’s iconic [points to Central City building]? We got some serious issues with that. And why when people think of Whalley the first
thing they think of is not this iconic building, but those three hundred homeless people down by 135A. So some serious issues they want to overcome, they want to be recognize as not just a big city but – yes, well people go there to sleep – they want to be seen as a great city.

Stakeholder Respondent #16: When they talk about anything good in the area, they use the ‘City Centre.’ When they talk about something negative, they talk about Whalley.

Thus, part of promoting Surrey’s City Centre as the region’s second great downtown means discursively dissociating it from Whalley (the region’s second not-so-great Downtown Eastside\(^{29}\) even though they occupy the same physical space. The Whalley Business Improvement Association, for instance, changed its name in 2006 to the Downtown Surrey Business Improvement Association.

Efforts at city-making and city branding have been viewed in the entrepreneurial city literature as part of a neoliberal “cocktail,” associated with “place promotion, Central-city makeovers, and local boosterism” (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 394). This aspect of the entrepreneurial city has been fully deployed in Surrey, and is part of the City’s strategy of “refiguring or redefining the urban hierarchy and/or altering the place of a given city within it” (Jessop 1998: 84–85).

v. An Urban Experiment

In an effort to redefine itself, the City has also pulled from the “cocktail” of local entrepreneurial strategies efforts to foster innovation: both in its own municipal operations and by encouraging innovations from the private and educational sectors. In a recent employee engagement process, innovation was established as one of Surrey’s “core values”, alongside community, integrity, service and teamwork. Through the engagement exercise, the City developed a corporate values statement: “An Innovative Team Serving the Community with Integrity” (City of Surrey 2009b). By valuing innovation, the City confirmed: “[w]e welcome change; we actively look for leading edge initiatives and welcome new approaches and innovative thinking; we are committed to continuous improvement” (ibid.) As one councilor explained:

\(^{29}\) This is the area of downtown Vancouver, which is known as the epicentre of Canada’s interlinked problems of homelessness, poverty, mental health issues and addiction.
Councillor Respondent #4: We’re distinguishing ourselves. We’re gonna bring that bar up a little higher….New culture, new feeling, new concept, new thought. And so it all ties in. Everything represents change and a higher benchmark.

As cities compete to attract investment, growth, jobs and workers, it is not – or so it is argued – enough to have a downtown redevelopment scheme or a plan for attracting business, or to adopt best practices. Cities are expected, or expect themselves, to be at the leading edge of developing new best practices, new innovations, and new combinations of economic and extra-economic techniques of city-making. Here we should recall Jessop’s partial reformulation of Harvey’s entrepreneurial city thesis: the increased focus on innovation in urban politics. Cities now compete to become leaders in ‘best practices’, to act as benevolent guides to industry and business, using innovation as a marketing device for place promotion (Jessop 1998: 84). One stakeholder explained the logic of interurban competition in a global context:

Stakeholder Respondent #7: I think we’re seeing, like, the world market changing. Where labour and all of manufacturing all these things are coming up on a world scale. And we’re not going to be competitive long-term in that area. So, we have to work on efficiency and intellect. Those are the only places we can be….You have to be adding value somewhere. Because I’m not willing to work for the rates other countries are willing to hire people for. So we have to have something else. And if we don’t…they’re gonna innovate. They’re gonna create. They’re going to create the big businesses that are going to make us successful…[Small businesses] just need to be allowed to be successful in their own way.

Kennedy: So, seeing small businesses as incubators for innovation?

Stakeholder Respondent #7: Yah… if businesses thrive here, you become leaders. If business don’t…

Municipal associations and networks, such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, as well as planning and other urban professional associations, land development and business interests, universities and non-governmental organizations, have been actively pursuing and promoting programmes and policies of ‘urban innovation.’ Innovation has been constructed as an urban virtue – its pursuit, it is hoped, will ensure cities’ prosperity, or at least survival, amid the myriad of economic, political and environmental challenges they face. For example, the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM), the province-wide body representing municipalities in the province,
maintains a database and awards program for municipal Leadership & Innovations, in such areas as stormwater management, accounting practices, policing and sustainability. The sharing of best practices and policy, through databases, conferences and competitions, makes up a sizeable portion UBCM’s role. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), at the federal level, is similar. It is important to note that, while the awards offered by UBCM and FCM for innovations are competitive, the circulation and sharing of best practices and policy ‘innovations’ are seen as much more so about cooperation and policy learning between cities. A councillor explained Surrey’s role in this policy environment:

_Councillor Respondent #2:_ …Surrey recognizes that there is a responsibility that we have being the second largest municipality in B.C. Is that we have a responsibility ah... to every other municipality that doesn’t have the size of staff and the resources that we have ah... for us to share our best practices ah... as well as our worst practices. Ah... so that we can help other to take... shortcuts. Ah... who simply can’t afford to do what we’re doing, or … have other priorities within their community and, and they can simply take shortcuts by making use of our tools. And ah... so there’s very much consciousness of that.

By sharing its failures and successes with smaller communities, Surrey helps these communities with urban governance challenges, while simultaneously positioning itself as a producer and disseminator of urban experimentation and innovation.

The City promotes the virtues of innovation both in its own corporate operations and amongst local institutions and would be-business interests. First, in its own operations it has pursued innovation in such areas as watershed and waste management, engineering practices, risk management and reporting practices, architecture and policing (City of Surrey 2010b). It also promotes innovative governance in the form of its corporate culture of ‘lean’ staffing and interdepartmental cooperation. With a small body of staff relative to its size, Surrey’s civil servants are encouraged to innovate and problem-solve with minimal resources through inter-departmental cooperation and improvisation:

_Staff Respondent #3:_ I think it’s fast growing [city] with limited staff. Because if you try to work in a silo you’re dead. I – I think we’re really well positioned to … advance and um... develop you know, integrated plans and integrated communities, given the relationship between the departments. So ah... and even though we might be short on resources, I think that um... there’s a real willingness there and openness to connect with other departments.
One councillor respondent explained the link between the culture of ‘lean staff’ and the culture of innovation:

Councilor Respondent #1: And the thing is that you [asked] concerning our staff – … is this part of the culture of Surrey? – it is. And we have a culture within our staff that ah... when you compare our staff to Vancouver’s ours is very lean. Ah... We’re very creative and we’re very innovative because that’s what we have as a council, and that’s what we have as a community, and that’s what we expect from our staff. And it’s pretty great. Our staff, well lets be honest with ourselves, people come fishing for staff in Surrey Hall ah... because they know what they’re gonna get.

This respondent and others explained that staff raiding between municipalities is a common occurrence Metro Vancouver. For this councillor, staff raiding is a source of pride, since Surrey is therefore seen as a net exporter of urban governance talent. One respondent, however, pointed out the drawbacks of this interurban dynamic, and its implications for sustainability:

Stakeholder Respondent #1: and so I think part of sustainability for a city is- comes down also to sustainability of their own internal resources. To help lead and plan long-range planning from all aspects of, of the, of a civil society. [You] need to have bums in seat and hands in keyboards and people having conversations. If you don’t have those… you can’t do it. You can’t, you know, it’s an impossible task… and unfortunately Surrey is very proud of its reputation of as a frugal ah... frugal organization. Now it’s come to bite them in the ass. Because they don’t and cannot maintain their resources. Really highly qualified planners and engineers and top-level staff in Metro Vancouver – they raid each other. Now how can you have collaboration at the planning level around sustainable regional issues when you are raiding each other [for staff]?

Rather than hire a greater number of permanent staff, the City regularly hires consultants for many of its policy, research and public relations needs:

Staff Respondent #3: Like, you’re always looking – that’s why we like hiring consultants. You don’t want to hire the same one all the time, because that’s boring. You want the ideas.

Entrepreneurial city scholars have noted the increasing importance and rapid establishment of the practice of retaining consultants as a mode of policy development (Peck and Tickell 2002a: 398). Consultants are often hired by municipalities to offer policy solutions, visioning strategies, goals, and advice on “the cities they choose to emulate and compete with”
Surrey, for example, hired consultants to write the Surrey Economic Development Strategy, the Employment Lands Strategy, and had “a variety of consultants” on retainer during the crafting of the Sustainability Charter (Mayor Diane Watts, interview, 2008).

Second, Surrey is also attempting to foster innovation outside the municipal corporation, by trying to attract “high technology” business and green business (City of Surrey 2008: 24), and by actively engaging local hospitals and educational institutions in developing “state of the art” programs and services, and “world-class” opportunities (ibid. 19, 23). In these instances, innovation is promoted in the interest of improving the sustainability of Surrey and quality of life for its residents. While this is certainly the goal, we should also recognize that the pursuit of innovation serves to signal Surrey as open for business, cutting edge, liveable – in other words to market that, indeed, “the Future Lives Here.”

The recognition and press coverage brought by award-winning innovations becomes a form of currency in the struggle to play the competitive game, and as such Jessop has argued that innovation becomes a form of place marketing (1998: 84-5). The marketing-innovation link of seeking, attracting, producing and promoting urban innovations becomes part and parcel of enhancing civic image in order to remain competitive. Therefore, in the context of interurban competition, innovation is not simply a desire to improve municipal management; it is also a sort of imperative, where cities need to be seen as pushing the envelope in order to be seen as attractive to mobile capital, investment and residents. Policies such as the Sustainability Charter, the Employment Lands Strategy and the Economic Investment Action Plan are thus as important in form as they are in content – in what they signal as much as whatever their substantive contents may be. They are there to, as argued by the consultants hired to develop Surrey’s Employment Lands Strategy, “enhance and support the image of Surrey as a sophisticated and urban city” (Cushfield & Wakeman LePage Ltd. 2008: 36). Surrey’s core value of innovation should be read as the dual task of both improved urban management – through improvements and efficiencies in collective consumption, environmental protection and service and infrastructure provision – and a deepening commitment to urban entrepreneurialism – where the material outcomes and
discursive gestures of innovation serve to mark Surrey as an investment-worthy contender in the regional, national and world stages of urban competition.

In Surrey, the push for innovation and the discourse of sustainability are inextricably linked. This is not unique to Surrey, as a large body of sustainability literature on ‘best practices’ and policy learning, as well as the growing field of professional sustainability consultation and practice, will indicate (Betsill 2001, Bulkeley and Betsill 2005, Connelly et al 2008). Sustainable buildings, sustainable land-use planning and sustainability policies become ways in which cities become recognized as innovative, leading-edge places. In such an ecological modernizationist context, Metro Vancouver’s EcoDensity initiative and Surrey’s efforts at stormwater management in Fergus Creek, for example, being sustainable means being innovative and being innovative means being sustainable (Union of British Columbia Municipalities 2010).

The East Clayton neighbourhood development, one of the important pre-cursors to the Sustainability Charter, is the best example of how innovation and sustainability discourses have been co-constructed in Surrey. The innovative engineering and urban design features of East Clayton brought Surrey accolades and recognition, and prior to the release of the Sustainability Charter East Clayton was Surrey’s go-to example of its ventures in sustainability. It made the city the winner of the 1999 B.C. Energy Award for Green Infrastructure, awarded by the Community Energy Association, it won the 2003 Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) Excellence Award for Planning Innovation, and it was awarded the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ 2006 Sustainable Community Award. Similarly, the release of the Sustainability Charter helped Surrey win the Fraser Basin Council’s 2008 Overall Sustainability Award, and the $100,000 2008 Green City award from UBCM (Luymes 2008).

In light of sustainability innovations, and urban innovation in general, however, we must consider the observation of McCann: “the marketing of cities as nice places in which to live … do not necessarily entail true innovation. Rather, many have noted that the ideologies, strategies and geography of urban entrepreneurialism…are very similar from place to place” (2004: 1912). After all, while Surrey was the first municipality in the Lower Mainland to develop a sustainability charter, it is hardly the first city in the world to have one. Rather, the creation of the Sustainability Charter as been one of emulating and learning from others:
Councillor Respondent #2: and I can very much assure you that our staff have in fact, been talking to other municipalities that are also working on sustainability Charters ah... so that we make sure that we all get them going in the - in, in the same direction, in similar directions, so that we can, learn from each other, so that ah... we all come out with a great product that can help our communities.

Surrey’s promotion of its LEED™-certified Library/RCMP station as a showcase of sustainability is another such example: the design standards and criteria of this certification system, while ecologically admirable, are hardly innovative (though proponents of this system promote it as such). One stakeholder respondent explained the results of the East Clayton experience and it’s the impact of its innovative features:

Stakeholder Respondent #6: …and it’s touted and award-winning etcetera and yet it doesn’t work. And the reality that the community at least the environmental community is aware of that the site was chosen badly. Wrong um... subsoils etcetera. It doesn’t work. Therefore…in a way its been a costly exercise. So no one else is doing it. It’s not happening anywhere else in …Surrey. So to sit back and rest on the laurels of, of an experiment and yet not proceed with creating firm guidelines for that experiment so that all – for the development that follows through, for me is just a waste of effort and energy. They’re, they’re just not following through. So, so here we are now, we’re basically in a limbo, where development continues as usual… and they’re doing what they want. They’re still going in and completely clearing a property of trees. Ah... everything is business as usual. So we don’t see the will or the intention, the, the so-called good intention, translating into the communities.

But not everyone sees East Clayton as a failure. Some saw it as a trial and error experiment in both engineering and inter-agency collaboration (Connelly et al. 2008). The neighbourhood planning and design process represented the break down of departmental and agency ‘silos’ and in-process adaptation, things many Surrey staff and politicians pride themselves on. For some, East Clayton was about the City testing new forms of land use, design and engineering, and taking on the role and risks of the innovator in order to demonstrate to the development industry that alternative approaches to development were possible:

Staff Respondent #3: …so things like that we’re working together and were, we’re saying ‘How can we ask the industry if we’re not testing it ourselves? And so we’re testing…. 
This approach to innovation is in keeping with Harvey’s observations about the role of risk in the entrepreneurial city, whereby local states (as opposed to senior governments or private interests) increasingly play the role of the ‘facilitator’ in capitalist development (1989: 7). In the areas of urban development and environmental management, the local state takes on the risks of innovation on behalf of developers in order to facilitate incremental improvements in environmental and energy performance (Jessop 1998: 84, Staff Respondents #3 interview 2008), which, unregulated by higher levels of government, are undertaken by developers on a largely unmonitored, voluntary basis (Stakeholder Respondent #12 interview 2008; Staff Respondents #12 interview 2008). In this growth management approach to urban development, local governments assume the responsibility and risk of ‘ground-truthing’ new land-use practices, urban and architectural design features and environmental engineering solutions as trial balloons, not just in terms of their practical efficacy, but also in order to gage industry acceptance of practices that might reduce profitability.

New practices and standards are negotiated between the local state and industry to find outcomes that work towards greater energy efficiency, environmental protection and resource preservation in the interest of the public good and improvements in ‘quality of life’ on the one hand, and the maintenance of profit for industry (and thus tax revenues for the City) on the other:

Councillor Respondent #6: I think that, that, you know, again ah...I think that yes, we certainly do have leverage to do that [encourage environmental sustainability of new developments]. Um... and again I think that you know, we’re clear with what we need and where we need these amenities to appear. There’s an opportunity for these things, you know. The key is the developers need to come back as a group and they need to be the one pushing the agenda ah... for you know, what they want proposed. They’re selling these units in the market and ah... you know, they should be coming back to us and saying you know, well the market’s willing to pay for x, y, z but not a,b,c.

In this approach to urban development, innovation and the implementation of new land development practice is based on market feedback, rather than pre-existing standards set by local or senior governments, or external certification or standard measurements. Innovation in this form is more about gentle reform than ground-shaking revolution.
There is a perception among respondents that if the City extends environmental, land-use or efficiency requirements that harm profitability, it is liable to see development move elsewhere (such as Langley or Abbotsford). One stakeholder respondent recalls the discussion that emerged during the ‘economic sustainability’ session at the June 2007 public workshop seeking public feedback on the *Sustainability Charter*:

Stakeholder Respondent #10: I remember the one fellow saying I moved out of Surrey a long time ago: “I couldn’t, couldn’t operate under what looked like to be the ah... forthcoming. But,” he says, “if you get this settled I come back in because I'll know where I stand.” I gather that’s not there yet. And probably that’s what’s in the mind of, of a number of people. The other developers were quite open: “I don't want any of these ruddy [unclear word] guys you know, saying I can’t come in here because there’s a stream. And all those sorts of other things that environmentalists have” – they were quite open about it. And some of them were willing to give a little as long as it didn’t interfere too much...

This respondent also recalls that when presented with some of the proposed elements of the *Charter*, he observed:

Stakeholder Respondent #10: And you could hear the developers in, in various sessions… squirming a little bit because they could see some limitations -

Indeed, during the period of negotiations for the *Sustainability Charter*, the representative of the Greater Vancouver Homebuilders Association, Peter Simpson, expressed his organization’s concern about the *Charter*’s effect on the development industry: ”If Surrey rolls this out too soon, it will attract a lot of criticism… I hope they don't put the brakes on progress” (Spencer 2008a).

There is also a perception, among some staff and stakeholder interview respondents that, when faced with intraregional competition for development, “races to the bottom” occur in the form of pressure for municipalities to disregard their own assessments and policies:

Staff Respondent #2: People have put developments in the *middle* of nowhere, way outside the Growth Concentration Area, and nobody said “Boo”, because they had support. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. So there’s been almost no monitoring of OCPs or regional growth strategies.
In fact, as one stakeholder respondent put it:

Stakeholder Respondent #14: And they haven’t followed the Official Community Plan. Indeed, as one associate of mine said, it’s been, it’s been followed in the breach.

Although municipalities’ own Official Community Plans and the regional growth strategy provide guidelines for efficient land use planning and opportunities for ‘best practices’ in land use planning, there are no enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure communities are following these policies.

Another example of policy “races to the bottom” is the legacy of Surrey’s Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) assessment. This was an environmental assessment first conducted in 1990 and again in 1997 that mapped and coded areas of the City considered to be environmentally sensitive (Stakeholder Respondent #3 interview 2008, Stakeholder Respondent #RG interview 2008). The assessment was distributed to Councillors and staff, but was never made available to the public\(^\text{30}\). According to one stakeholder:

Stakeholder Respondent #12: It never got beyond the draft stage because it was far too, far too restrictive to suit the development side of the City… and they just said: “Hey we can’t do that because we won’t be able to build anything.”… And it was so comprehensive that it prevented development in a lot of areas in Surrey. …the lobby of … the developers killed it, in my view.

One staff member, expressing their concerns about the regulatory strength of the Charter, explained the legacy of the ESA in City development practice:

Staff Respondent #3: We’ve gotta make sure… like our ESA in Surrey. Ah… We have one… [Environmentally] Sensitive Areas Plan. We’ve have it for years. We even did an update…and so nobody’s ever used it.

Municipal attempts at environmental and land-use (innovative or not) can be seemingly undermined, at least in the context of urban development in Surrey, by the entrepreneurial city dynamics of “races to the bottom”. While, Jonas and Gibbs similarly noted in their study of Leeds and Manchester, that “governing for sustainability at the urban scale is consistently undermined by place competition and the limited fiscal and political opportunities for the local state to pursue alternative con development strategies” (2004:

\(^\text{30}\) I made a request for the copy of the Assessment in 2008 and was denied.
That is, cities may be interested in managing growth (trying to mitigate its negative side effects), but if circumstances force a choice between ‘growth with consequences’ or ‘no growth’, the entrepreneurial city imperative entails, in the final calculation, the choice for growth. In the light of downloaded senior government responsibilities, limited means of revenue-raising, interurban competition and a tax base skewed towards residential sources, that appears the only choice.

**vi. Florida in Surrey**

As we have seen, urban innovation strategies play a dual role of enhancing urban management for municipalities and citizens while serving as place marketing in order to attract funding, investment and residents from senior governments, private enterprise and upper- and middle-class mobile residents, respectively. Urban innovation and this dual role can be seen as part of a larger strategy of trying to attract ‘new economy’ businesses and jobs, through a combination of economic factors like low taxes, logistical and locational factors and a business friendly environment on one hand, and extra-economic factors like ‘quality of life’, liveability and amenities on the other (McCann 2004, Nevarez 2003, Florida and Gate 2001). The entrepreneurial city literature has made note of the increasing importance of these ‘extra-economic’ factors - social, cultural and political elements of life - in “the construction and legitimation” of interurban competition strategies (McCann 2004, Jessop and Sum 2000, Jessop, 1997a, 1997b, 1998). The intersection between improvements in liveability and quality of life, and the maintenance of business and local state competitiveness is one of the most interesting and revealing points in our examination the City of Surrey’s urban governance strategies, notably in consideration of sustainability. The goal of increasing quality of life in Surrey, through the *Sustainability Charter, Official Community Plan* and other policy documents function in a similar way as it does for innovation: performing as much as promotion material as policy proper.

The extra-economic urban strategy is best exemplified by the work of Florida (2000, 2002) who, based on the insights of economists Lucas and Glaeser, has argued that, “the key” to competitiveness rests in places’ ability to attract highly skilled people, or ‘human capital,’ mobile ‘knowledge workers’ and members of the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2000: 24, see also Glaeser 1999, and Lucas 1988). Successful cities and regions in the post-industrial
‘new economy’ are postulated to be those that attract human capital by facilitating the process of “generating ideas and turning them into successful products” (Florida, *ibid.*) – qua encouraging urban innovation - and by offering amenities and lifestyle choices favoured by knowledge workers. Since these workers are argued to choose their home city primarily on non-market forces such as environmental quality, amenities, arts and culture, and ‘coolness’ (Florida 2000, 2002), the primary strategy of urban competition is to “attract talent” not solely through economic strategies such as low taxes, business incentives, and urban development, but rather through “new combinations” (Jessop 1997b: 31) of economic and extra-economic such as “attempts to improve amenities and culture” (McCann 2004: 1914). These ‘extra-economic’ factors amenities and strategies include: “the modernization of the infrastructures and assets of urban regions (communications, cultural institutions, higher educational strengths and capacities) to attract investment and visitors and support existing economic activities; and [the formulation of policies addressing] the need to limit further suburbanization, retain population (particularly middle-to-upper income families) and workplaces and create compact livable cities” (Harding 1995: 27, quoted in McCann 2004: 1914).

A look back at the Vision and Goals for the *Surrey Sustainability Charter* (Tables 2, 3) shows these many of the above extra-economic strategies appear in the *Charter*, such as the goals for provision of environmental amenities, housing affordability, improving job choices, accessibility, diversity, liveability, family-friendliness and a sense of belonging (City of Surrey 2008). We should also recall that the provision of ‘quality of life’ is central to the definition of sustainability in the *Surrey Sustainability Charter*. In fact, the Surrey definition differs little from the Brundtland definition of sustainability other than the “Made in Surrey” proviso that sustainability should be achieved “without compromising quality of life”:

“Sustainability” in Surrey’s context is the principle of meeting the needs of the present generation in terms of socio-cultural systems, the economy and the environment while promoting a high quality of life but without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (City of Surrey 2008).

How should ‘quality of life’ and ‘liveability’ be interpreted in this context, and in the ‘new economy’ discussion more broadly? As Ley has noted, over its career the term ‘liveability’ “has served a range of masters” (1990: 34). The same could be said of quality of
life’: over the years, quality of life research has concentrated on, variously, “overcrowding, natural hazards and ambient environmental conditions, stressful events in everyday life, urban form in relation to ease of access and orientation, security and privacy, residential satisfaction and community ties, among others” (McCann 2004: 1911, see also Pacione 1990). Needless to say, many of these definitions of quality of life are tacitly aimed at particular social groups and classes and may in many cases be in contradiction to each other (the goal of privacy, and the goal of social cohesion, say, in the context of the gated community). The vagueness of “quality of life’ and liveability point to their multi-interpretable, empty character, which functions in urban discourse similarly to sustainability:

When I asked a staff respondent what ‘quality of life’ meant, their response was as follows:

Staff Respondent #4: Living well…living well – enjoying life. I like this a Genuine Happiness Index or Genuine what’s it called?…How you feel?…how-how one feels. You like getting up in the morning. You’re healthy. You know, um… you look forward to the next day. There’s stimulation all around you and there’s things to learn. There’s beauty around you. Enjoying life. You can do that, I guess, by the pride of ownership of stuff…but it doesn’t simply mean acquiring stuff and having a monstrous house…that definition can only be in a low - remote location that by definition means you can only access it by…car. That poses huge impacts on society in terms of: air quality, and congestion, and traffic safety, and the gas you burn, and the metal to make the car, and the roads you have to build. So if people equate standard of living with quality of life – we’re in big trouble.

But the problem with quality of life is that many people do associate it with material standard of living. More broadly, the meaning of quality of life will vary greatly from person to person, and be informed by social and political difference such as class, gender, political ideology, race, ‘lifestyle choice’, etc. Quality of life as it is presented in the Charter, however, is depoliticized, declassed, despatialized and deracialized. While the staff respondent added that the “Made in Surrey” quality of life proviso was meant to emphasize the ‘non-consumptive’/extra-economic aspects of life, they were also quick to add that the wording of the Charter made no indication of such emphasis:

Staff Respondent #2: and that’s - that last part we added. That was the ‘Made in Surrey’ aspect. And I think it’s very important. Cuz I think when people realize that maybe having access to good arts and culture and a beautiful jogging trail by the river, … maybe that will
Kennedy: OK. And this was discussion amongst staff or amongst?

Staff Respondent #2: - among stakeholders. Yah.

In workshops held as part of the public participation phase of Sustainability Charter development, several stakeholders expressed their concerns about the implications of the inclusion of the quality of life proviso in the sustainability definition:

Stakeholder Respondent #9: One of the concerns …people had – not everybody – but some people including me was that when they had their workshops…they had a definition for sustainability that was not the same as Brundtland. Now, cuz they added the phrase “...while living a high…quality of life.”… the insertion of that phrase simply in my opinion ah… confounds the whole intent of concept of sustainability. I said: “I still have real concerns with the working definition of sustainability, as it states high quality of life. There will be too much explanation needed to clarify that it does not mean a high standard of living.” …A lot of people pointed out that you couldn’t have that phrase because with that phrase in, it does not mean that anybody has to make any changes.

And indeed, the staff respondent seemed to confirm this same concern with the notion of ‘liveability’:

Staff Respondent #2: …one person’s definition of liveability is no traffic congestion, wide streets to get me to my house, so I can pick up the kids and take them to a big rec centre with ample parking so I don’t have to fight for a spot. And then…a nice path by the dyke or the seawall that I can drive to with ample parking so I can go for a walk or a jog. For a lot of people that’s life-liveability… A lot of them don’t really think that means take the bus …or live in a townhouse.

The definition of sustainability in the Sustainability Charter should be read as being intentionally vague about the meaning and implications of ‘quality of life’. It permits one, depending on their subject position, to interpret the term as: a reassurance of continued material and land-use consumption patterns, or a goal of increased human health and physical welfare, or to the sought-after prospective ‘knowledge worker,’ a bit of both (a
jogging trail and a plasma TV). I suggest that the Surrey definition of sustainability does, however, imply a more specific meaning: given that the wording separates from, and thus differentiates, quality of life from (economic, social, and environmental) need provision – sustainability… is “[collective] social, environment, and economic needs” attained “without compromising [individual] quality of life” – I suggest that quality of life is coded as a reassurance of individual lifestyle choices over and above the requisites of collective consumption. In fact, the wording suggests that meeting needs does not ensure quality of life, and may in fact diminish quality of life.

McCann argues that, in spite of or because of its vagueness, the “contemporary master” of the definitions of these quality of life and liveability discourses is “the neo-liberal vision of the city as a commodity that should be branded and marketed as part of a wider process of interurban competition” (McCann 2004: 1912, see also Brenner and Theodore 2002). In this vision of the city, quality of life and liveability are instrumentalized as components of urban competitiveness (McGuirk 2004: 1037), becoming “object[s] of consumption for mobile residents and, relatedly… a selling point for cities” (McCann 2004: 1911). So, in light of the co-structuration of quality of life and sustainability discourses in Surrey, what is sustainability in the entrepreneurial city? McGuirk (2004: 1037) notes that while “‘the sustainable city' discourse is replete with the vocabulary of urban consolidation, maintenance of environmental diversity, inner-city 'greening' projects, [and] community enrichment through new urbanism and urban liveability, its social and redistributive dimensions are poorly specified” (see also Keil, 2002). Or as McCann asks, when a city strives to offer high quality of life, “[t]he crucial question… is, “a good place for whom?” (2004: 1927). Likewise, we should also ask, vis-à-vis the sustainability discourse, a sustainable city for whom?

One respondent seemed to capture a possible answer to these questions in Surrey’s push to improve environmental amenities:

Stakeholder Respondent #14: We’re increasingly understanding that people in the high tech area want to access to um... urban living and all the rest of it. But they’re also cognizant of concerns about fresh air, clean water, healthy environment, which means it’s gotta be green….

Kennedy: So … there’s a social desire for some of these environmental amenities?
Stakeholder Respondent #14: Well you know, the, the, it - it’s a class thing. We have to be honest here. The developers, builders, who are in the construction industry, who are building for the well-to-do, and for the more upper class neighbourhoods, they will put in these amenities. But if it’s for the lumpenproletariat, they don’t.

Environmental amenities, such as forested areas, clean air and clean water are, in fact, one of the key components of the ‘new economy’ race to the top for the provision of a high quality of life. Florida observes that, “[i]n the new economy, environmental quality has become important not simply as an end in itself but as a prerequisite for attracting talent.” (2000: 17). Rather than simply a source and sink, the environment becomes “a key component of the total package required to attract talent and in doing so generate economic growth” (Florida 2000: 5). Therefore prospects economic growth are argued to be directly tied to the ability of cities raise the environmental bar:

Regions have begun to see the environment as a source of economic competitiveness, quality-of-life, and talent attraction. Leading regions have undertaken efforts to reduce sprawl and move to smart growth, promote environmental sustainability, clean-up and reuse older industrial sites, encourage firms to adopt environmental management systems, and preserve natural assets for recreation and improved quality-of-life (Florida 2000: 17).

In Surrey, City staff and politicians view environmental protection and amenity provision, and the maintenance and improvement of quality of life as expectations upon the city by citizens (and, crucially, potential citizens):

Staff Respondent #6: Um... well clearly, there’s quality of life and ah... um... and values and attributes that um... citizens of Surrey would like protected. And so ah... issues around the natural environment, trees, creeks, you know, ah... flora, fauna, wildlife – need to be respected. And um... It’s part of building the city that our citizens ah... expect us to build.

While Surrey cannot compete with Vancouver for extra-economic ‘cultural’ amenities such as museums, galleries, nightlife, architectural and design standards, and retail, it offers much in the way of environmental amenities such as forests, beaches, farmland, wetlands, and parkland (City of Surrey 2009a). As a newer city, not yet built out, Surrey still has relatively large tracts of undeveloped land. Such a large amount of greenfield land presents itself as a ‘natural’ advantage in the regional competition to attract upper- and middle-classes seeking access to walking trails, natural areas, beaches and so forth. As Mayor Watts asks
prospective visitors, businesses and residents: “What other city can offer you beautiful urban forests, pristine beaches, championship golf courses and a whole host of eco and agri-tourism opportunities? With over 6,000 acres of parkland, there is plenty of opportunity to enjoy Surrey's natural beauty” (City of Surrey 2010a). Offering “green living” to residents, visitors and would-be residents, however, is just as much challenge for Surrey as it is an opportunity:

Staff Respondent #1: So, so um... you know, I think that we’re being held to a higher standard um... in terms of environmental sustainability than some of the cities that developed before us. So that’s good that we now have that opportunity. And to some extent, we sometimes feel like we’re bearing...the load of that.

Older cities in the region, especially Vancouver, covered watercourses and significantly altered existing habitats beginning well over a century ago, in an era when there was no pressure grow and grow sustainably. Surrey’s sustained high rate of growth late in the twentieth century and into the present century, along with its overtures of sustainability and liveability, combine into a tall order, where policies such as the Sustainability Charter, the OCP and municipal discourse in general promise the attainment of a broad array of goals that may be impossible to achieve within the confines of limited financial resources and competing internal, local and extra-local political and economic pressures.

An all-encompassing, accommodative approach to local politics, promulgated by the consensus-building Mayor and the broadly populist Charter, has both advantages and disadvantages. It is able to appeal to a broad spectrum of political actors, promising habitat protection to environmental groups, accessibility and affordability to social justice and housing advocates, low taxes and business-friendly City Hall to both small and large business owners, transit-oriented development to urbanists and regional planners, and gated communities, low-density developments and hobby farms to the local gentry and elite. But an accommodative stance involves the possibility of having to deal with contradictions that emerge in between different promises, one being, “for example, the apparently contradictory desires for high levels of amenities and low taxation” (McCann 2004: 1913) in the Floridian ‘new economy’ city. Or as we have already seen, too strong of a push for environmental amenities from City Hall can lead to the fear of flight of the development industry from the City. Other possible contradictions may be support for increased public transit along with
continued support of low-density residential development, and support for highway expansion and increased truck-dependent trade through the provincial Gateway Initiative, along with the goal of protecting and preserving water and air quality.

Our examination of Surrey has revealed that the entrepreneurial city imperative wrought by internal and extra-local pressures on the City has entailed not simply “races to the bottom” for low taxes, urban development and lean government (as highlighted in the entrepreneurial city literature), but also races to the top for environmental protection and enhanced ‘lifestyles’ or quality of life, and improved civic image. Surrey can be characterized by the interacting often antinomous, dynamics that emerge between these two ‘races’. However, in the final calculation, races to the top waged through city centre revitalizations, image and branding makeovers, efforts to improve quality of life and other extra-economic factors should be recognized as undertaken in the effort of enhancing urban competitiveness to support the primary imperative of economic survival in the ‘new economy’. The final, crucial piece in our analysis of policy-making in Surrey is to make sense of the role of the sustainability discourse within these dynamics. This will be explored after a brief look at the enlightening case of a controversial business park development.

vii. Campbell Heights: High Technology Beaver Habitat?

The case of the Campbell Heights industrial park in Surrey helps to illustrate some of the political challenges that emerge as the City struggles to provide the proverbial ‘good business environment’ characterizing economic “races to the bottom” on the one hand, and the amenities (in this case, environmental) that characterize extra-economic Floridian races to the top, on the other. This will help to reveal the ambiguous status of the sustainability discourse in its ability to help actors in the City – politicians, staff, environmental groups, business interests, residents, among others – negotiate between the competing forces of urban politics, some of which are competing neoliberal dynamics.

Campbell Heights is a 105-hectare business park located at the southeast edge of the Surrey, representing Phase I of a proposed two-phase development process. The area was an early 20th century gravel pit that, since its closing, has regenerated as prime terrestrial and aquatic second growth habitat. In July 2002, then mayor Doug McCallum’s City Council approved an agreement-in-principal with the Campbell Heights Group consortium of
developers to build the $300-million business park on City-owned land (Anonymous 2002a). The development was initiated by the City in attempt to spur industrial development in the area (which was first zoned for industrial development in 1966) in hopes of jump-starting construction and development and on the adjacent privately-owned 520 hectares in the area (Colley 2003). The deal, as Mayor McCallum argued, "[would] not only open up the Campbell Heights Business Park 10 years ahead of schedule, but will also contribute to Council's top priority of accelerating industrial-business development" (Anonymous 2002b). The business park was part of the City's strategy of improving the tax base, and the development itself was to "expand significantly" the non-residential tax base through the creation of a project minimum 5,000 permanent jobs (ibid). The approved business park was promoted by the City as a "high-tech industrial and commercial complex", as "the largest high-end business park in the Lower Mainland" (Anonymous 2002a, City of Surrey 2009g).

While the final agreement for Campbell Heights was reached in June 2003, and ground was first broken in late 2003, major development did not begin until Mayor Watts had begun her post in office in 2005. From the outset, the Campbell Heights deal has been a subject of controversy, and for Watts in particular it has been perhaps her biggest political challenge in office. As one reporter put it, during the time of her re-election campaign in fall 2008: "[i]n her run for a second term as mayor of Surrey, Watts' otherwise strong record had one nagging weakness - Campbell Heights" (Lewis 2008b). The deal was controversial, first of all, because selling price for the land was considered by some to be too low. The development deal with the Campbell Heights Group stipulated that the consortium could purchase land from the City for $35,000 per acre the first year, with three per cent increases price in each of the following 11 years (Colley 2003). Colliers International Realty Advisors reviewed the agreement and found the cost assessment "reasonable, but on the low side of the acceptable value range" (Zytaruk 2002). The CHG consortium was given exclusive development rights in Campbell Heights for the first four years (Colley 2003).

The second source of contention in the Campbell Heights deal was the amount of financial risk involved on the part of the city, which agreed to pay half of the estimated $20 million in infrastructure servicing costs to the remote industrial zone in a public-private partnership scheme (Colley 2003). Colliers cited the major risk to the City was the possibility that infrastructure servicing could exceed $20 million (Zytaruk 2002). But council took the
wager: “If it works, Surrey will see a first-class industrial park created on about 80 hectares (200 acres) of city-owned land in Campbell Heights. If the plan fails, taxpayers could be on the hook for millions in infrastructure costs to supply services to land which could sit idle for years to come” (Colley 2003).

Contention and concern about the environmental effects of the Campbell Heights development, however, has underlain the most sustained opposition to the development. One reporter has called Phase I of Campbell Heights “a textbook example of how not to develop” (Lewis 2008a). Opposition to the development had started before land clearing had even begun. The final approval of the development in 2003 sparked an unsuccessful petition campaign from a rival mayoral candidate to force the deal to a public referendum (Anonymous 2003), who cited inadequate public consultation on the true extent of the impacts of the development. Campbell Heights drew fire from environmental groups who argued that, located in the extreme southeastern part of the city, the development would serve to further encourage car-dependency and suburban sprawl:

Stakeholder Respondent #15: The next one is I think is determining how many people Surrey can hold and where are they going to live? … They’re building Campbell Heights way out in the … southeast corner where there is no good access.

Stakeholder Respondent #11: The development in Campbell Heights …. it’s right on the border of Langley. It’s miles from anywhere….So that’s another ah… disaster, I think.

Habitat destruction was and remains the largest source of opposition to the business park. Part of the Campbell Heights area, known as Stokes Pit, was not ‘pristine’ nature but in fact, second growth forest over a former gravel pit:

Stakeholder Respondent #4: …Well, It’s already been destroyed by its previous industrial use. But the fact is, is it had started to ah… revivify itself…what the gravel mining did is it changed the hydrology in a way that produced more potential for diversity than the original geography gave you.

The topographical disturbance caused by digging in the former gravel pit had created a pond, which was an “amazing spawning areas for toads, frogs, and in some cases salmon” (Stakeholder Respondent #5 interview 2008). Over the years, second growth forest regenerated over the site, created terrestrial habitat as well.
Once the construction of Campbell Heights began in late 2003, local residents, environmentalists and recreational users of the area began to notice the deleterious effects of construction work on Stokes Pit. The area includes the headwaters of the Little Campbell River, an important regional salmon and trout river, which is listed as the 12th most endangered river in British Columbia by the Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia (Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia 2009). Much of the stream and wetland habitat in Stokes Pit was classified as Class A fish habitat in a predevelopment assessment that was conducted by an environmental consultant on behalf of the City in 1999 (David Suzuki Foundation 2007:8, Dillon Consulting 1999). Observers began to report adverse impacts of development activities on fish habitats as well as habitats of over 200 species of wildlife in the area, including: 94 species of birds, deer, coyote, fox, beaver, otter, black bear (Lewis 2008a), and rare and endangered species such as the red-legged frog, Pacific water shrew, painted turtle and great blue heron (David Suzuki Foundation 2007:7). The Fraser Valley Conservation Coalition (FVCC), a Surrey/Langley environmental advocacy group, claimed that wildlife was being displaced and in some instances killed by construction: trappers were hired by the City to kill beaver, displaced deer were being killed while crossing roads, and black bears presumed to be from Stokes Pit were being sighted in surrounding areas (Colley 2005).

In response to public outcry, the City of Surrey held a public meeting on May 12, 2005, proposing the creation of a park approximately 1/20 the size of the original forested area, which was to include man-made wetlands and “forest strips” to serve as wildlife habitat/corridor (Passmore, in AGC 2005). Dissatisfied, in July 2005, the FVCC contacted the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF) about the claimed habitat destruction occurring at Campbell Heights. Site visits by a DSF biologist later appeared in a report on worst practices in salmon habitat conservation in British Columbia. The report outlined the damage to aquatic habitat caused by the development at Campbell Heights. At site visits the investigating biologist found tributary streams and creeks to the Little Campbell River, stripped of riparian vegetation (“thousands of trees”) and in-filled with silt and sediment from land clearing. The report estimated that, “In all, about 600 linear metres (2,000 feet) of stream and associated riparian vegetation and several hundred square metres of adjoining wetland habitat had been harmfully altered” (DSF 2007:8).
The construction at Campbell Heights also included “active dewatering,” or lowering of the water table, of the Brookswood-Fernridge aquifer, deemed necessary for construction because much of the site was wet year-round (DSF 2007:7). The lowering of the water table led to significant drainage of Latimer Lake, which was a popular local fishing hole. The DSF reported, “the lake level was so low our investigator could, and did, walk across the lake bottom” (DSF 2007:7). The FVCC contended that further industrial development at Campbell Heights would also affect groundwater quality of the Abbotsford, Aldergrove and White Rock aquifers and community water supplies, which are hydraulically connected. The DSF report concluded that “virtually all the on-site fish habitat was ruined by construction and dewatering of the site's aquifer” (DSF 2008: 9), and further, that, “our investigator determined that in 15 years of doing this kind of work he had never witnessed such significant loss of fish habitat associated with any one development” (DSF 2007: 8).

In the summer of 2005, the FVCC petitioned the Auditor General of Canada (AGC), asking for a stop-work order as well as a comprehensive environmental assessment and community consultation prior to resumption of work (Auditor General of Canada 2005, see also Colley 2005). The FVCC based its petition to the federal government on the grounds that federal involvement was triggered through the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (based on the size and scope of the development) and the Fisheries Act (based on the fact that the project involved the destruction of fish habitat) (DSF 2007: 8, AGC 2005). The stop-work order was not granted, however, as Stephane Dion, minister in charge the Department of Fisheries & Oceans (DFO), argued it had already been evaluated and approved the proposal according to the requirements of both relevant Acts. The ministry advised FVCC that it had already concluded: “the project is not likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects” (Dion, in AGC 2005).

Indeed, the project proponent, the City of Surrey, did have all necessary permits and approvals from provincial and federal environmental agencies (Anonymous 2005a). The information on fish habitat submitted to the DFO by City’s environmental consultants was “a brief and incomplete summary of fish habitat of about one-third of a page describing the fish-habitat features on the site” (DSF 2007: 9). The City, however, was in possession of the more detailed above-mentioned 1999 assessment, which “recommended that no development take place in key areas because of fish-habitat concerns” and called for “a more
detailed site investigation before development took place” (ibid). DFO was unaware of this earlier report, and as such, thought that the proponent had taken all the steps it could to protect watercourses (DSF 2007: 8). The David Suzuki Foundation report criticized the Department of Fisheries and Oceans “for its failure to properly monitor this development and for DFO’s admitted assumptions that the business-park property owner - that is, the City of Surrey - was indeed taking all necessary steps to protect fish habitat” (Lewis 2007).

In the meantime environmental community groups had formed a coalition (Lewis 2008a), and in March 2008 sent a letter to Mayor Dianne Watts requesting that the 80-hectare Phase 2 of Campbell Heights be abandoned. The coalition proposed that instead the City secure the remaining areas of Stokes Pit and adjacent forest as parkland (Lewis 2008a). The coalition cited studies that suggested the city would need three additional major parks in the future, and argued that the remaining Campbell Heights area represented an excellent opportunity to capture a valuable piece of major parkland at a good price, which would offset future park-acquisition payments. I interviewed one stakeholder respondent during this period, and they described the general sentiment towards Campbell Heights:

Stakeholder Respondent #5: They say ‘Nature Matters’31. But that’s just another – if nature matters,
why are we clearing all the woodlots? Why have they gone into, for example,
Campbell Heights and through Phase One, literally um... destroyed whole habitats?
And beginning Phase Two without listening to the stakeholders, without protecting
the sensitive areas, without restoring the sensitive areas they’ve already destroyed.
It’s just...a perfect example of land use where they’ve just taken the map and said:
“Oh there’s nothing there. Let’s make that an industrial area”. And meanwhile it’s
forest, and river, and, and, all kinds.

The temporal overlap of the Campbell Heights controversy with the drafting of the Sustainability Charter was in no small part the reason that the release of the Charter was delayed for almost a year (from fall of 2007 to the fall of 2008) (Lewis 2008a). The scale of environmental destruction and controversy surrounding the Campbell Heights development left the City of Surrey in a position where it needed to extend the consultation process with stakeholders, especially representatives of environmental groups, who were questioning

31 The Nature Matters program is a series of environmentally focused education and volunteer programs operated by the City of Surrey.
Council’s commitment to sustainability in light of these events (Stakeholder Respondent #14 interview 2008, Stakeholder Respondent #13/#3 interview 2008):

Stakeholder Respondent #6: So now we’re at a stage where the remaining sensitive areas are up for grabs as well as part of Phase 2. And we’re basically saying, is this sustainability? It’s 'business as usual'. ….it is a land grab and that hasn’t changed since the days of the gold rush days, and the days of the early pioneers.

The City needed to convince *Sustainability Charter* environmental stakeholders and other environmental groups that it was committed to sustainability in order to secure credibility for the City’s sustainability discourse and environmental overtures.

   Beginning in May 2008, Campbell Heights went from being a liability on perceived commitment to sustainability, to an asset. As a result of the pressure from the David Suzuki Foundation report and the vocal opposition to Phase II from environmental advocates, the City of Surrey announced it had formed a panel of experts, including a representative of DFO as well as the investigator from the David Suzuki Foundation report, to review and begin mitigation measures for Phase I, and to offer their views on the proposed development of Phase II (Babic 2008).

   By the fall of 2008, with an upcoming election, the resolution of the Campbell Heights issue was a top concern. On October 16th 2008, the City of Surrey announced it had purchased a 123-hectare parcel of nearby land a gravel pit from the provincial Ministry of Transportation (Diakiw 2008, Lewis 2008b). The deal, which had been in negotiation for over a year (Diakiw 2008), was brokered in order to “[take] the development pressures off the Campbell Heights Phase II lands, which need more study and analysis” Watts says. (Lewis 2008b). She also announced that a forested 23-hectare parcel of the area would be set aside in perpetuity as parkland (Lewis 2008b), and that Phase II lands would be untouched by development for nine years while it underwent further study (Diakiw 2008). Watts told the press: “I am pleased that an agreement regarding the purchase of this site by the city has been reached that will support the city's sustainability objectives as outlined in our new Sustainability Charter” (Anonymous 2008). The investigating biologist who had originally criticized the development practices at Phase I, and then joined Watts’ panel of experts remarked: “At this point, the way she is approaching things, it’s very progressive” (Dembicki Oct 2008a).
Through the combined actions of striking an expert panel, implementing environmental mitigation measures, relocating industrial development pressure to a nearby area, and dedicating a portion of forest land in the area as regional parkland, along with the discursive articulation of these actions as part supportive of the new Sustainability Charter, the City of Surrey turned a political liability into a political asset. The City was able to preserve both environmental assets and growth trajectories, and was able to link its actions to the rollout of its new sustainability discourse qua Sustainability Charter. The contours and implications of Campbell Heights can be better understood by examining some of the work of other geographers who have examined sustainability discourses, and who have developed useful ways that we might interpret the actions of Council, environmental advocates and others.

VI. Understanding Sustainability as a ‘Fix’

The preceding pages have outlined how the dynamics of neoliberalism and senior government downloading have affected economic, social, land use and environmental policies in the City, not least of all the content, purpose and position of the Sustainability Charter. We have seen that the discourse of sustainability is interlinked with the urban dynamics of neoliberalism in two important, and perhaps antinomous, ways. First, sustainability performs as a sort of municipal survival strategy: it functions as an accounting mechanism that (at least discursively) offers the appearance of functioning as “taking into account” and rendering compatible a wide range of possible political demands and policy concerns through a totalizing discourse made possible by the ‘empty’ character of the signifier sustainability. In this way the sustainability discourse can acts as a discursive defence mechanism against the political and governance challenges brought about by provincial and federal downloading and regional and global interurban competition qua neoliberal urban dynamics. Second, the Sustainability Charter and municipal policies designed to cultivate business investment, jobs, place promotion in the competition to attract mobile upper- and middle-class residents, capital, and senior government funding act as a discursive offence strategy, helping to give Surrey a competitive edge by establishing the city as progressive and cosmopolitan, capable of attracting high technology industries, higher learning institutions and the creative classes. This double function of the sustainability discourse as
offensive/defensive discursive strategy was noted by Temenos, in the case of Whistler, B.C. and its sustainability planning document: “[d]iscourses of sustainability, as articulated through Whistler 2020, are both a marketing tool as well as a method through with local conflicts can be resolved” (2007: 67).

It makes sense that the concept of sustainability, which advocates principles of equity, empowerment and environmental sensitivity, has been used as a defensive ‘coping mechanism’ for the effects of neoliberal new urban politics, which prioritizes capital accumulation above social reproduction and environmental protection. But how is it that sustainability has come to also be used as a discursive strategy in service of such politics? As Raco suggests: “many of the premises and underlying rationalities of the approaches seem diametrically opposed in both conceptual and empirical terms” (Raco 2005: 325). Similarly, While, Jonas and Gibbs observe that the imperatives for sustainable development and the imperatives for the entrepreneurial city appear as “two seemingly antithetical sets of pressures,” which seem to conflict both ideologically and materially (2004: 550).

They go on to point out, however, that the “concurrent rise of neoliberalism and environmental protection in urban politics and local state strategies may not be as paradoxical as first appears” (ibid. 550). While, Jonas and Gibbs, assessing development practices in Manchester and Leeds, and Raco assessing development practices in London find that there is a greater hybridity of approaches and rationalities than is often acknowledged in simple characterizations of both sustainability and the entrepreneurial city (Raco 2005: 326). These scholars insist that we look critically at the assumptions that characterize these discourses and their deployments (Raco 2005: 325) in order see that “actually existing” urban development agendas occur “in the context of a variety of competing development rationales” (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 329). That is, we should look for the ways in which, not only have entrepreneurial city and sustainability discourses deployed unevenly and selectively in various locales (by not only local governments, but also senior governments and other actors), but also at the ways in which they have been discursively co-constructed.

Upon further investigation, we can find ways in which the neoliberal and sustainable development discourses in fact, share common ground. First and foremost, as previous chapters have illustrated, sustainability is “a chameleon-like discourse which has been
(re)interpreted and deployed by a range of interests to legitimate and justify a range of often contradictory and divergent agendas” (Raco 2005: 329). While in its standard mainstream form it is linked with the values of “democratic reform, economic equity, and new times frames of less exploitative economic development” (Raco 2005: 329), we have seen that it is sufficiently vague to accommodate a large range of political demands (many of which may be far from democratic, equitable, etc.). Therefore, in the context of entrepreneurial city-making, we might expect to find sustainability policy discourses and programs that are themselves become ‘neoliberal’ in a broad sense of the term (ibid). Mainstream sustainable development, for example, is concerned with resource efficiency as well as ways in which the degradation of environmental resources might impinge upon economic development. Both of these would also be of concern in a neoliberal agenda, which might seek to reduce resource and waste efficiency though market measures and the seek to eliminate environmental externalities through ‘win-win’ policy and programs (ibid. 330). Another key convergence of neoliberal and sustainability agendas is the emphasis on “community empowerment”, which places the locus of governance in the hands of sub-state actors and citizens. In the sustainability discourse, this is promoted as a means to more direct forms of democracy, while in neoliberal discourses it is represents a central element of neoliberal subjectivities, “act[ing] as a mechanism for instilling the illusion of self-sufficiency and societal detachment” – that is a reduced reliance on the state (making possible, therefore, a reduction in its size) (ibid. 331).

In order to account for the empty feature of the sustainability discourse, that which enables it to be paired with the seemingly antithetical pressures of neoliberalism, While, Jonas and Gibbs propose that the sustainable development strategies of cities can be understood as an “urban sustainability fix” (2004: 551). The notion of the sustainability fix, derived from Harvey’s (2006 [1982]) conception of the ‘spatial fix,’ is:

the insight that the geographical reproduction of the capitalist mode of production depends on uniting territorially-based class interests and factions behind a coherent line of action (or state strategy) in the form of a ‘spatial fix’. This fix acts to hold, for a time (though not necessarily resolving), tensions between capital and labour, and economic development and collective consumption (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 551).
The concept of the ‘sustainability fix’ is intended to account for “some of the governance dilemmas, compromises and opportunities” arising from the efforts of cities to balance economic, social and environmental demands (ibid. 551). While, Jonas and Gibbs place the sustainability fix at the convergence point of several forces, some which pressure local governments to enact environmental policy-making and some that may undermine such policy-making efforts. The urban sustainability fix is useful for explaining and illustrating the function of the sustainability discourse in Surrey in general, and the case of Campbell Heights specifically. By examining Figure 4, we can see that both “intensified interurban competition” and “(neoliberal) state restructuring” acted as pressures on environmental policy-making in Surrey, as the rationale for the developing Campbell Heights was to increase tax revenues in light of restricted local state financing and interregional competition for jobs and development. The private-public partnership infrastructure financing scheme, the promotion of Campbell Heights as ‘high-technology’ and ‘high-class’, as well as the cursory adherence to federal environmental legislation procedures also indicate state restructuring and intensified interurban competition as pressures on the City’s approaches to environmental policy-making.
On the other hand, however, the “economic imperative” of seeking to re-image Surrey as a place with high quality of life, along with “legitimation and public pressures” stemming from environmental advocacy groups and citizens, served to pressure the City to reassert environmental goals into the Campbell Heights area. “Regulatory drivers”, in the form of national environmental regulation, served as pressures on the City to adopt environmental goals only via their assertion by non-state actors, namely the David Suzuki Foundation and the Fraser Valley Conservation Coalition. That is, the protocols of the federal *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* and the *Fisheries Act* did not in any way alter or threaten the development of Phase I project when it went through the federal approval process, but rather when the DSF and FVCC used the authority of these acts to cite improper process on the part of the local and federal state.

The act of purchasing the nearby parcel of land (not considered environmentally sensitive) in order to defray development both pressures for industrial real estate and environmental preservation, acted as a sustainability fix, enabling the City of Surrey to...
“balance...pressures for and against environmental policy” in the Campbell Heights area. Economic goals for industrial and ‘high tech’ development, and increased jobs and tax revenues, as well as non-economic goals for environmental quality, quality of life and state legitimacy (especially its new Sustainability Charter), were all preserved by spatially separating competing values for the Campbell Heights area (the environmentally-based argument against the industrial park’s location distant from residential areas and transit service, and the possible failure of mitigative measures at Phase I, however, still stand).

At this point, we should examine more closely, as well as broaden, While, Jonas and Gibbs’ conception of the sustainability fix. Recall that in their definition, a sustainability fix is “coherent line of action (or state strategy) in the form of a ‘spatial fix’” (emphasis added). But they also argue that the ‘sustainability fix’, may take the shape of, “inter alia investing in a range of environmental policy initiatives” (such as the Charter), “developing partnerships with non-state actors” (as in East Clayton), and “constraining anti-environmental behaviour” (such as the striking of the expert panel and the implementation of mitigation measures in Campbell Heights) (ibid. 564). These sustainability fixes are not necessarily, if at all, spatial but instead discursive or perhaps non-spatially material (e.g. regulating recycling procedures). I propose that we add to While, Jonas and Gibbs’ notion of the spatial sustainability fix the dimension of a discursive sustainability fix. The Sustainability Cube ® is an excellent visual heuristic of the sustainability fix, as it represents the uniting, ordering, and reconciling of divergent local interests into discrete jurisdictional, temporal and (spherical?) categories in order “to hold, for a time (though not necessarily resolving), tensions between capital and labour, and economic development and collective consumption.” Its empty character enables sustainability to function as a policy narrative that can contain and suture antagonisms between divergent local and extra-local interests and demands. Perhaps the most important means by which a discursive sustainability fix is achieved is through the long time frame (50 years) of the sustainability Vision, which enables potential conflict and contradiction to be deferred into the future.

As we have noted in Chapter 3, sustainability discourses, through the promotion of subsidiarity and citizen participation, “encourage a variety of actors to engage directly in the politics of development, not just those in powerful positions” (Raco 330-1). These participatory openings offer these actors opportunities to challenging the neoliberal growth
agendas, “in favour of social justice, alternative ways of thinking of environment and economic development” (Raco 2005: 330). One of the primary arenas in which this growth is contested in Surrey is through demands for environmental protection and preservation (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 549; see also Keil and Desfor 1996, Braun and Castree 1998, Keil and Graham 1998). Pressure on the local state for environmental protection (or social justice, in other cases) represent ways in which neoliberal ‘roll-out’ is far from even and far from uncontested in its actually existing forms. As Raco argues, some accounts of the entrepreneurial city tend “to overlook the political demands made on states by a range of (competing) interests” (2005: 329) in urban governance, such as non-government organizations, community associations an environmental groups (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 553). These players “may or may not be linked to wider neoliberal objectives” and may have the capacity to “radically” alter the roll-out of neoliberal policy agendas (Raco 2005: 329).

The case of Campbell Heights seems to demonstrate that, “there is evidence that environmentalism… in its various forms does exert a powerful influence on urban growth politics” (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 550). Environmental groups and concerned citizens in Surrey have influenced environmental and development policy prior to the Sustainability Charter, as evidenced by the City’s tree preservation by-laws (Munro 1996), the creation of Green Timber and Sunnyside Acres Urban Forests, two of Surrey’s largest parks (Stakeholder Respondent #2 interview, 2008), and on-going efforts to preserve Agricultural Land Reserve lands (Salinas 2006). The official adoption of the discourse of sustainability through the Sustainability Charter, by legitimating environmental goals, may open up additional space for these actors (as well as social and economic justice actors) to assert their demands into Surrey’s urban policies.

Another possibility is that uptake of the sustainability discourse will enable the local state to counter-hegemonize claims for environmental and social values by “articulating their social base of support amongst dominant interests”, and in the course of consultative practices like open-houses and public hearings “secure[e] the broad consent of subordinate social interests” (McGuirk 2004: 1023, see also Keil 1998, Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The invitation of DFO representatives and the David Suzuki Foundation investigator to the Campbell Heights panel of experts serves as an example of this, especially as evidenced by
the investigator’s later support of the Watts actions in Campbell Heights as “progressive.” Thus, according to While et al, “‘sustainable development’ … can be read as attempts to neutralize environmental opposition by projecting a value-free vision of ‘win-win-wins’ between economic growth, social development and ecological protection,” with actions largely restricted to those “that are either non-threatening or complementary to prevailing growth strategies” (554, 566).

The sustainability discourse, as we have seen, acts as a totalizing policy discourse, enabling a nearly endless number of political demands and policy items to be woven together into one broad policy. In the case of Surrey, this feature of the sustainability discourse allows the City to incorporate a wide range of policy interests, including demands from non-state actors such as business improvement associations, environmental advocacy groups and developers. While sustainability is able to act as an empty signifier, drawing a large number of political demands into a chain of equivalences, we must recognize that sustainability is able to “strategically [draw] together” demands “in a particular conjuncture through which governance capacity is activated” (McGuirk 2004: 1023, emphasis added. See also Hajer 1989, Jessop 1997a). That is, not all demands, but particular demands, especially win-win ones, or demands that can be achieved without compromising others, tend to be given priority in the Charter and in its implementation. As such, the local state should be understood as “both structurally and strategically selective…more permeable to representations of some types of political agents and agendas than others” (McGuirk 2004: 1023), as some policy issues, agendas and programs are privileged over, conditioned by “the balance of state powers and competencies, pressures and incentives [which] variously enables and constrains urban environmental policies” (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 550).

In discourse theoretical terms, successful urban governance depends upon strategies that enable political interests, rationalities, programs and interventions to “be drawn into relation, and articulated into a concrete conjuncture or a ‘nodal point’ in which identities and relations are temporarily fixed” (McGuirk 2004: 1024, see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). As we have already seen, sustainability is, par excellence, such a nodal point, and the forces of poor civic image, regional growth pressure and entrepreneurial city races to the top and bottom create pressure for the City to adopt a sustainability discourse. For this reason, the ‘sustainability fix’ “is often as much about changes in political discourse as it is about
material change in the ecological footprint of economic activity” (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 554). This is not to “deny progress on ecological [or social] issues, but draws attention to the selective incorporation of ecological goals in the greening of urban governance” (ibid.). The City’s strategy to purchase an alternative parcel of land in Campbell Heights is admirable, politically savvy and environmentally responsible. But one is left to ask what the political outcomes would have been if the spatial fix of purchasing a nearby parcel of land were not there to defray development pressure? This would have brought more sharply into focus governance dilemmas between the City’s policy goals of balancing jobs with residents, increasing business tax revenue, minimizing environmental impacts, locating businesses for transit service, and protecting the city’s ecosystems (City of Surrey 2008: 24, 25). In any case, the notion of the urban sustainability fix is very useful in explaining the role not only in the case of Campbell Heights, but also the role of sustainability discourses in Surrey’s contemporary urban governance.

i. The Forced Choice of sustainability?

Reiterating a Floridian understanding of the city, While, Jonas and Gibbs observe that contemporary urban entrepreneurialism governance depends on “the active remaking” of urban environments and environmental discourses (2004: 550). As such, they contend the “relation between urban entrepreneurialism and the search for an urban sustainability fix is becoming a necessary rather than contingent condition of the contemporary political and economic form of urbanization in capitalism” (2004: 554). In the ‘new economy’ context, “urban politics is becoming increasingly dependent on the ability of local political and economic elites to manage, if not necessarily resolve, ecological demands emanating from within and outside the urban area” (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 564).

As Peck and Tickell observe, the pressure for municipalities to race both to the top and the bottom against each other “is not simply an aggregate outcome of spontaneous local pressures” (2002a: 393). Speaking about efforts to preserve wildlife habitat and ecosystems in Surrey, one respondent the described the larger political context:

Stakeholder Respondent #17: You definitely start with the belief that if you’re, if you’re organized and effective you’ll get more done and that people will listen and so on and so forth.
And then you realize you’re running up against massive forces. And that many politicians are, are themselves are running up against those forces, you know?

Some of these “massive forces” to which the respondent refers are national and international economic and political dynamics of neoliberalization, which act as an “external coercive power’ over individual cities to bring them closer into line with the discipline and logic of capitalist development” (Harvey 1989: 10). The outcome is, according to Harvey, that “cities have no option, given the coercive laws of competition, except to keep ahead of the game, thus engendering leap-frogging innovations in life-styles, cultural forms, products, and service mixes, even institutional and political forms, if they are to survive” (ibid. 12).

How does sustainability relate to these “coercive laws of competition”? The response of a City staff member shed light on why sustainability and other ‘green’ policies have been leveraged by so many local governments, senior levels of government, corporations, institutions, etc., and why Surrey has chosen to follow suit:

Staff Respondent #2: What motivated the city? Well there’s been lots happening in ah... recent years. Ah... actually in the last two years. Sam Sullivan announced the EcoDensity Charter at you know, the World Urban Forum in Vancouver….Whistler has, has their sustainability program and their Mayor…really has been promoting it quite a bit. He’s been quite a champion for it. You have cities like North Vancouver have been going you know, out and doing their own district heating system... and Vancouver, [unclear word] been with “Cool Vancouver” ah... and “One Day”. They’ve been out there promoting sustainability for a number of years. Ah... and on top of that - suddenly the Premier has gone green….and ... he’s put together the Climate Action Charter this past last fall... You know, talking to Governor Schwartznezgger. So the Premier was getting a lot of mileage... Al Gore. A lot of people have been getting a lot of mileage on this. And a lot of people have been starting to brand themselves as being green or sustainable....Plus Mayor and council go to a lot of events like the UCBM. … and the FCM....meetings. And they hear about Toronto. They hear about Okotoks...they hear about all these things and they come back and say ‘What are we doing, staff?’

Sustainability becomes a form of discursive currency from which both senior and local government are “getting mileage.” To greater and lesser degrees of raw honesty, Surrey staff and politicians explained why the City chose to undertake a high-level sustainability planning exercise in the form of the Sustainability Charter.
Staff Respondent #10: There’s also some legal requirements now. Or not legal requirements, but agreements…You know, the province is moving in a certain direction. The federal government assisting us to understand how we can be complimentary to those directions. So… others … are doing things that are helping to shape where we need to go as well. You’re aware that we’ve on as part of the B.C. Planet Charter through the UBCM. So we are a signatory to that. … it says yes, we’re in this with you. We want to do our best to support the province. Not undermining global objectives to correct the problem we see being made at the federal government trickle down to the province. And those trickle to the province and those trickle down to municipalities though ah... things like the Charter we signed…. So, that’s, that’s the idea of basically saying that ah... we’re taking our cues from others. Some of it is original thought. But a lot of it is saying: “What are others doing? And how can we build on those best practices?”

Councillor Respondent #1: I think in real terms I, I just don’t know how to be - how blunt to be with you. …but, but you know, there’s the crass part of this that it’s the current thing to do… I mean you know, there’s sort of the political wind that is going in this point in time. And you see it with for example with the Fraser Basin Council all of a sudden coming up with their sustainability charter... And, and so its, it’s sort of the current in thing to do. So I don’t think you can sit there and really point at one person or one day or one decision that did this….Ah... I read a thing that it’s the current flavour of what’s happening generally in the political world… It makes sense for us to do this because… we have to address these issues.

What we can take from the words of these respondents is that Surrey is “getting its cues from others,” emulating green and sustainable policy practice, not only to get mileage, but also because it has to address sustainability issues for its own survival (as, variously, a corporation, or Council, or urban area).

The entrepreneurial city literature has explored the serial reproduction of economic investment and development policies formulated from city to city (Peck and Tickell 2002a, b, McCann 2004, Harvey 1989), and these insights can be applied to Surrey’s efforts at transferring and reproducing sustainability policies from elsewhere. According to McCann this “serial reproduction…works to the detriment of most cities by fostering a ‘treadmill’ effect in which every city feels an external pressure to upgrade continually its policies,
facilities, amenities and so on to stave off competition and maintain its position in the competitive urban hierarchy” (McCann 2004: 1909, also Jessop 1998, Harvey 1989). Peck and Tickell further elaborate on the consequences of this treadmill effect (2002a: 393):

because signature cultural events, prestige corporate investments, public resources, and good jobs are in such short supply, cities…are induced to jump on the bandwagon of urban entrepreneurialism, which they do with varying degrees of enthusiasm and effectiveness. And ultimately, their persistent efforts and sporadic successes only serve to further accelerate the (actual and potential) mobility of capital employment, and public investment. In selling themselves, cities are therefore actively facilitating and subsidizing the very geographic mobility that first rendered them vulnerable, while also validating and reproducing the extralocal rule systems to which they are (increasingly) subjected…The logic of interurban competition, then, turns cities into accomplices in their own subordination….The public subsidy of zero-sum competition at the interurban scale rest on the economic fallacy that every city can win, shored up by the political reality that no city can afford principled noninvolvement in the game.

This treadmill position in which municipalities are left can be explained with the Lacanian notion of the ‘forced choice’ (Zizek 1989: 165-169, 2000: 19, 2006: 96), which is described by Zizek: “you have the freedom to choose, but on the condition that you choose the right thing…If you make the wrong choice, you lose the freedom of choice itself” (1989:165). While cities could opt to stay out of the game of interurban competition through “principled non-involvement” (Harvey 1989: 5), they would gain nothing and probably, in fact, lose much. As Peck and Tickell argue, “[n]eoliberal regimes are unforgiving in the face of incompetence or noncompliance, punishing cities that fail in the unyielding terms of competitive urbanism through …malign neglect” and “exclusion from funding streams” (2000a: 395). Instead, local states will ‘choose’ to participate in the ‘zero-sum competition,’ which is based on the Floridian promise that earnest effort, proper marketing and positioning, and successful investment will yield success for any city. Success, however, can only be measured as, for a time, not losing. The result is that cities must choose to innovate, choose to lower tax rates, and choose to try to contain the contradictions brought by low tax rates and senior government downloading, on the one hand, and ‘amenity provision’ and the uptake of downloaded responsibilities, on the other. They “must choose what is already given to [them]” because they were “never actually in a position to choose” (Zizek 1989:165, emphasis in original). Whether it is a race to the top or a race to the bottom, the treadmill of
the entrepreneurial city is just that – a race, and one city’s position in the pack is always subject to change, for better or for worse.

The same forced choice applies to the very policies and signifiers cities take-up in order to discursively “take into account” the complexities and antinomies of urban growth, and to promote their cities as progressive entities committed to liveability and quality of life. Will adopting a sustainability charter keep Surrey ahead of the game or is it simply trying to keep up? Cities can choose to not undertake sustainability planning exercises, to not mention their desire for a sustainable city on their website and to the press, or to not submit their urban interventions into award competitions for “sustainable communities”. But they would do so at this risk of falling behind in the race to see who will be the greenest city in the world. A particularly telling example of this forced choice comes from a modest document produced by the City of Surrey. In the fall of 2007, the City held a workshop to strategize how the redevelopment of Surrey’s City Centre might incorporate sustainability considerations. A report produced afterwards to summarize the outcomes of the workshop was sub-titled “Sustainability is not a fad.” While the intent of the subtitle was to express a genuine commitment to sustainability, it revealed a dynamic with which the city must contend: sustainability is a fad, but it is a fad which must be taken seriously by the city in order to stay afloat in the struggles of interurban competition wagered at the discursive level.

From this perspective, then, “sustainable development itself it interpreted as part of the search for a spatio-institutional fix to safeguard growth trajectories in the wake of industrial capitalism’s long downturn, the global ‘ecological crisis’ and the rise of popular environmentalism” (While et al. 2004, 551):

It is not sufficient to attribute attention to environmental regulation to growing pressures on the urban growth coalition arising from the impact of negative externalities in the living place; nor is it simply a matter that enlightened urban elites have responded positively to growing environmental regulation ‘from above’. Attempts to move forward on a green agenda reflect a set of powerful economic incentives in terms of drawing down public funding, finding appropriate languages and polices for reconciling potential conflicts between growth and quality of life and seeing in positive

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32 An example of this was the Metro Vancouver municipality of Maple Ridge’s ‘choice’ to become Smart Growth B.C.’s first “Smart Growth on the Ground” partner after it receiving scrutiny for rating near last in the organization’s 2001 “BC Sprawl Report.”
urban environmentalism opportunities for revalorizing urban space or mitigating further devaluations (While, Jonas and Gibbs 2004: 565)

In the final analysis the *Sustainability Charter* should be read as much as a reaction against neoliberal interurban competition an example of it. Through policies such as the *Charter* or the *Plan for Social Well-Being* Surrey is attempting to contain the antinomies produced by the economic and non-economic imperatives of the entrepreneurial city, as well as the dual role of city as manager of collective consumption and entrepreneur. The discourse of sustainability is of especially critical value in a city such as Surrey, where continued rates of high residential growth, poor civic image, and low standing in the regional hierarchy have left it in need of an urban strategy that enables it to look cleaner and meaner, large and in charge.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: AFTER THE VISION

“The political conflict is hidden in the question of what definition is given to the problem, which aspects of social reality are included and which are left undiscussed.”

— Maarten Hajer

“Words are never “only words”; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do.”

— Zizek

The central goal of this research was to examine the political work that sustainability performs in order to extend the critical discussion of why and how municipal government adopt sustainability discourses. Three research objectives stemmed from this goal. The first was to explore the value of viewing the concept of sustainability as hegemonic political discourse in order to understand the history, appeal and limits of the discourse of sustainability. In Chapter 2, we explored understanding hegemony as a discursive operation, achieved when a particular identity comes to contingently represent a set of identities beyond its own differential identity. As such, in Chapter 3 it was argued that sustainability operated as a hegemonic discourse by historically developing into an empty signifier, attached to not only environmental demands but also social and economic demands, and thus becoming progressively emptied of its particular contents. The understanding of sustainability as an empty signifier took us through the development of sustainability discourse and enabled us to understand that its ‘empty’ character makes it both widely appealing but limited in its capacity to garner widespread agreement about specific political demands.

The second goal was to investigate the adoption of a sustainability discourse as a socio-spatial imaginary response to local and extra-local pressures such as ecological change, senior government roll-back, crime and regional competition. In Chapter 3, we saw that
sustainability discourse has its roots in forestry, but it was adopted by ecologists and systems theorists as a response to the socio-spatial imaginary of the global ecological crisis and ‘limits to growth’. When tied with notions of development, sustainability (qua sustainable development) became a discursive response to failures in international development efforts, and a means of reconciling environmental and development goals of both developed and undeveloped countries. In Chapter 4, we saw that the City of Surrey adopted sustainability as a policy discourse in response to multiple local and extra-local pressures, including regional urban growth and development pressures, poor urban image, and entrepreneurial city dynamics.

The final research goal was to examine the extent to which the sustainability discourse is employed in Surrey as a means of framing policy issues in such a way as to ‘fix’ contradictory or conflicting political goals. In Chapter 4, we examined some of the ways in which sustainability was mobilized as a means of defining, accounting for, and rendering compatible a wide range of policy problems. The notion of the ‘sustainability fix’ was presented as a useful conceptual tool that enabled us to view the ways in which entrepreneurial city imperatives, combined with the increased prominence of non-state actors in decision-making processes, present cities with pressures for and against sustainability policies and agendas. These pressures are in many ways forced choices, and the uptake of a sustainability discourses and policy agendas can be increasingly seen as forced choices in themselves. We saw how sustainability’s status as an empty signifier enables it to accommodate both (broadly) neoliberal and non-neoliberal policy goals into one chain of equivalences qua vision and goals of the Sustainability Charter. While Jonas and Gibbs postulated the sustainability fix in spatial terms, exemplified by Campbell Heights, we also saw that as an empty signifier, and as a discourse that works on long timeframes, sustainability also acts to discursively ‘fix’ any number of environmental, economic and social goals, which may contradict each other.

Policy scholars note that policy-makers and planners work within the confines of insufficient resources and knowledge, entrenched political pressures, short timeframes, and emerging policy trends. In this context, policy-makers are interested in formulating policies that maximize agreement, those that accommodate a wide range of demands – local and extra-local, public and private. And in the current entrepreneurial city context, policy-makers
must simultaneously act as both managers and entrepreneurs. The discourse of sustainability is appealing to policy-makers in Surrey because it constitutes both an accounting device in order to manage the multiple demands of fast growing city and entrepreneurial city dynamics (races to the top and bottom), and a promotional device to enhance Surrey’s image and market the city as innovative and progressive.

In the final analysis, we can answer how and why Surrey institutionalized a sustainability discourse. As a master (empty) signifier of the social ideal of environmental, economic and social harmony, the discourse of sustainability evolved as an expanding chain of equivalences, capable of accommodating a broad set of demands, contingent upon the particular discourse coalition negotiating its terms. Through the vision of an ideal, fissureless society that it conjures, and the wide range of demands and imaginaries it accommodates, the political work of sustainability is its ability to garner consensus. Since few people are against the notion of sustainability, it has the ability to get a wide range of competing interests ‘at the table’.

What can keep actors at the table are the typically long timeframe of the visions that sustainability plans operate on (fifty-years in Surrey’s case). But the long timeframes can leave unanswered questions of how multiple, sometimes conflicting, goals will be achieved, and which will take priority. With its discursive focus, this thesis has looked primarily at plans and policies, and only a little at the actions and material interventions implemented (or not) in their name. But what happens now that the Sustainability Charter has been adopted by Surrey Council? That is, when does planning and policy-making end and sustainability start? In their observations of sustainability planning, Mercer and Jotkowitz found “the production of an individual ‘stand-alone’ document has frequently been seen by senior council officials as the ‘end-point’ of the whole exercise” (2000: 174). They also found that “an enthusiasm for ‘vision statements’… is not matched by a commitment to detailed action and implementation plans with parallel timelines and responsible agents” (ibid.)

Vision statement and visioning exercises, not unique to, but characteristic of sustainability planning, are “a decision-making technique characterised by a rhetoric of openness, which is welcoming to direct input of ideas of all interested parties and by a focus on evoking inspirational visions of the future rather than on outlining the concrete policies needed to foster change” (McCann 2004: 1916, also McCann 2001). Visions capture and
account for various demands and secure endorsement from stakeholders. And as a totalizing policy discourse centred around multi-interpretable empty signifiers; sustainability is able to cover over the internal differences of a discourse coalition at this visioning stage.

But in the case of Surrey, both staff and stakeholder respondents expressed their concerns about how the high-level vision and the long list of goals might translate into implementation, and ultimately, a state of sustainability:

Stakeholder Respondent #4: And that’s a problem is: we’re, starting at sustainability at a very high… conceptual level, right? That’s why it’s so great easy, you know? Like: “it, its, it’s a virtue, we’re adopting it, oh now what do we do?” Right?

Stakeholder Respondent #9: Sustainability’s become nearly completely devalued as a concept. And seems to be followed in the breach then by intent. We only hear of plans, not of assessments etcetera.

Staff Respondent #2: Now…will that translate into action? Have we spelled it out: “By the way, … that means increasing you average density to a minimum of forty units per acre. And focusing all your new arts and cultural facilities in those centres - not where you get the land cheap”….OK. It doesn’t get that explicit….which is a concern to me....

Staff Respondent #11: Yah, planners may – OK, you’ve got these nice words here, but what am I supposed to do?…what do I ask the developer to do? I don’t quite get how this all comes together. Cuz they haven’t had phasing, and implementation and all these things…So there’s - that’s still a challenge. And I think it’ll always be a challenge. Um... bringing the Sustainability Charter um... I don’t think…we’ve really looked…at what it will mean to do some of the things. Like, so financial commitments etcetera are gonna be a challenge, I think…for some of the initiatives. Not all of them. But you know, there’s gonna be some - there could be some pretty hard decisions for Council …some tough decisions coming up,…I fear the Sustainability Charter, unless there’s some really good rules and implementation rules and commitments – it’ll go on the shelf. So I mean, … these ideas have to
have a commitment behind them because I don’t want it to be just lip service. And that’ll be where the challenge is…and will it be meaningful?

Despite these valid concerns, at this juncture there seems to be a continued commitment on the part of the City of Surrey, at least with the current Council, to move the Sustainability Charter beyond a paper policy. Several of the scope items in the Charter were tagged as “Immediate Actions” to be undertaken immediately upon the Charter’s release (City of Surrey 2008: 57). While many of these actions could be characterized “low-hanging fruit,” easily achievable or pre-existing policy goals (Kennedy et al. 2007), others indicate more substantial commitment. The first was the hiring of a Sustainability Manager to “act as a catalyst for sustainability throughout the corporation, and work with City staff to maintain a strong focus on sustainability within the City” (City of Surrey 2009c). The City has also established an inter-departmental Sustainability Team, has completed a “Corporate Energy and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory and Plan” in accordance with the City’s signing of the BC Climate Action Charter, and has launched a Community Enhancement Partnership Program, a grant matching program for communities to undertake small neighbourhood-based projects and activities. The City has also struck an Indicators & Targets Task Force, which is set to see public review in the summer of June 2010.

Despite concerns about the translation of high-level vision statements and a myriad of goals into tangible outcomes, staff and most stakeholder respondents recognized the Charter as an opportunity to leverage change:

Staff Respondent #11: Like, …the vision I’ve always had with SHaRP33 is…you know, it’s, I said: “Ah... that’s so insignificant.” …[But] no, no you can’t look like that. You gotta look…- just start. We gotta start somewhere. Even if it’s small, we’ve gotta do something. And like, with sustainability Charter, it may not be the panacea... when we implement it year one or whatever. But we just keep working on it. And don’t give up on it.

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33 SHaRP is an acronym for Salmon Habitat Restoration Program, a youth-directed salmon habitat mitigation program ran by the City of Surrey.
The sense I got, even from sceptical stakeholders, was that the *Sustainability Charter* is, if nothing else, a good place to start in terms of improving environmental, social and economic conditions in the city. Either way, the City has only begun its true negotiation of a “Made in Surrey” sustainability discourse: “planners will find their vision of a sustainable city developed best at the conclusion of contested negotiations …not as the premise for the beginning of the effort” (Campbell 1996). Only time will tell how well the sustainability fix functions, discursively and materially, in the mix of Surrey’s politics. Operating on a long time frame, and with so many scope and goal items, the City will not likely ever be seen as having shelved the *Charter* (as was the case with *Future Vision Surrey*). And perhaps just as important as the operationalized and implemented outcomes of the *Charter* is the discursive currency the City has already gained from having the *Charter* in the first place.

Because sustainability engenders widespread support and agreement, and as such operates as a potent form of social and political currency, it is important that we seek to understand how and why it operates. Here we can apply McCann’s insights to sustainability:

Safe streets’, ‘vibrant economy’ and ‘high quality of education for our children’ might, in the US context, be termed ‘motherhood and apple pie’ issues. It is hard to suggest that they are not good things, but the very fact that they seem self-evidently desirable for any policy process often makes it very difficult to question the means by which these ends will be achieved. (2004: 1926)

The City of Surrey should be lauded for its efforts to try and simultaneously improve environmental, social and economic conditions in the city. The goals of the *Charter* are all to greater and lesser degrees, good things. But in a world of competing ideological projects, limited time and money, which vision of sustainability will prevail, and by what means will Surrey’s sustainability goals be achieved? As we have seen, large part of the value of sustainability discourse is its ability to solicit consensus. This has many benefits, as it can facilitate productive partnerships and win-win policy solutions. But all users of the discourse of sustainability should be aware of the political pitfalls that await when consensus itself, rather than what contents consensus is sought for, becomes the goal of sustainability. This opens up a couple of paths for further research.

Interviews with the some of the ‘official’ *Sustainability Charter* stakeholders revealed a dynamic of public participation in sustainability policy-making that deserves further
investigation. While stakeholders were involved in crafting the vision, goals and scope of the Charter, in some cases they had little faith in the process to deliver outcomes they advocate for. Some stakeholders felt compelled to participate in the creation of the Charter as a strategy of negotiating future political claims with the City. In addition, many interviewees explicitly expressed the sentiment that sustainability was a ‘meaningless’ or ‘devalued’ term, but nonetheless provided their own personal interpretation of the term, and participated in the creation of the “Made in Surrey” sustainability discourse. As such, there is further work to be done to further understand what could be called a politically cynical (Zizek 1989: 28-30) approach to sustainability planning and policy-making.

There is also room for further research into the role of sustainability in what political philosophers describe as the post-political condition (Rancière 1998, 2003a, 2003b, Zizek 1999, 2006, Mouffe 2005), “a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars” (Swyngedouw 2009: 609). Swyngedouw argues that urban post-political formations, including those surrounding environmental policy, run parallel to the rise of a neoliberal urban governmentality “that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, and technocratic environmental management” (Swyngedouw 2009: 604). Swyngedouw’s theoretical contributions could be supported by empirical research into context-specific investigations of sustainability policy as urban post-political formations.

Further research into both the dynamics of cynicism in sustainability planning participation and the imbrication of sustainability with post-political formations would make valuable contributions to critical understanding of sustainability policy. Shore and Wright (1997) observe that despite the important role of policy of modern society, it remains “curiously under-theorized and lacking in critical analysis”. Policy, the mundane province of bureaucracy – and precisely because it is so – is too important a locus of power to go unexamined. And sustainability, container of hopes radical, liberal and conservative, a green word in a greying world, remains too important to leave at face value.
# Charter Scope Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Area of Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>Establish a Sustainability Office</td>
<td>EC7</td>
<td>Sustainable Building &amp; Development Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>Measure Progress using indicators and targets</td>
<td>EC8</td>
<td>Energy Security</td>
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<td>SC1</td>
<td>Personnel Policies &amp; Staff Training</td>
<td>EC9</td>
<td>Quality of Design in New Development &amp; Redevelopment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC2</td>
<td>Cultural Awareness in the Workplace</td>
<td>EC10</td>
<td>Green Technology Development &amp; Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC3</td>
<td>Sustainable Procurement Policies</td>
<td>EC12</td>
<td>Surrey’s Employment Land Base</td>
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<td>C4</td>
<td>Cultural Awareness in the Community</td>
<td>EC13</td>
<td>Surrey’s Agricultural Land Base</td>
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<td>SC5</td>
<td>Plan for the Social Well Being of Surrey Residents</td>
<td>EC14</td>
<td>Municipal Finance Reform</td>
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<td>SC6</td>
<td>Accessible &amp; appropriately located services within the City</td>
<td>EC15</td>
<td>Building/Energy Codes &amp; Standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC7</td>
<td>Participation in Leisure Programs</td>
<td>EC16</td>
<td>Increase Transit to Support a Sustainable Economy</td>
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<td>SC8</td>
<td>Municipal Outreach, Public Education &amp; Awareness</td>
<td>EC17</td>
<td>Educating the Workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC9</td>
<td>Adequate, Accessible &amp; Affordable Housing</td>
<td>EN1</td>
<td>Energy Efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC10</td>
<td>Historical &amp; Heritage Assets</td>
<td>EN2</td>
<td>Waste Reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC11</td>
<td>Public Safety &amp; Security</td>
<td>EN3</td>
<td>Vehicle Fleet Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC12</td>
<td>Adapting to Demographic Change</td>
<td>EN4</td>
<td>Employee Trip Reduction Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC13</td>
<td>Create a Fully Accessible City</td>
<td>EN5</td>
<td>Green Procurement Policies &amp; Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC14</td>
<td>Support Food Security</td>
<td>EN6</td>
<td>Enhancement &amp; Expansion of Nature Matters Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC15</td>
<td>Literacy, Education &amp; Training</td>
<td>EN7</td>
<td>Implement &amp; Publicize Green Infrastructure Pilot Projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC16</td>
<td>Socio-cultural Infrastructure &amp; Services</td>
<td>EN8</td>
<td>Sustainable Engineering Standards &amp; Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC17</td>
<td>Crime Reduction Strategies</td>
<td>EN9</td>
<td>Sustainable Land Use Planning &amp; Development Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC18</td>
<td>Community Economic Development</td>
<td>EN10</td>
<td>Integrated Community Energy Master Plans</td>
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<td>SC19</td>
<td>Equity in Social Infrastructure Investment</td>
<td>EN11</td>
<td>Surrey’s Commitment to the Climate change Action Plan</td>
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<td>SC20</td>
<td>Coordination with Local Educators on Sustainability</td>
<td>EN12</td>
<td>Enhancement &amp; Protection of Natural Areas, Fish Habitats &amp; Wildlife Habitat</td>
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<tr>
<td>EC1</td>
<td>Corporate Economic Sustainability</td>
<td>EN13</td>
<td>Enhancing the Public Realm</td>
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<tr>
<td>EC2</td>
<td>Economic Development Strategy &amp; Employment Land Strategy</td>
<td>EN14</td>
<td>Public Education &amp; the Sharing of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC3</td>
<td>Sustainable Infrastructure Maintenance &amp; Replacement</td>
<td>EN15</td>
<td>Sustainable Transport Options</td>
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<tr>
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<td>“Green” Infrastructure &amp; Sustainability Grants</td>
<td>EN17</td>
<td>Enhance Biodiversity</td>
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<td>EC6</td>
<td>Sustainable Practices through Business Licensing Operational Requirements</td>
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REFERENCE LIST


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