

FEBRUARY 2, 2016

A REGION AT A CROSSROADS

A research challenge

Open to SFU Urban Studies and Master of Public Policy students

Award of \$5,000 for the winning proposal and essay

Where we are

For half a century, the Metro Vancouver region has been guided by an informing vision, captured in a single elegant phrase:

“Cities in a Sea of Green”

The foundations of this vision were captured and legally embedded in every regional plan for Metro Vancouver (and, as a matter of required consistency, each municipal plan), including the Lower Mainland Regional Plan (1966), the Livable Region Proposals (1975), Creating our Future (1990) the Livable Region Strategic Plan (1996) and Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping our Future (which is due for a five-year review and update in 2016).

The principles for planning and shaping the region in these documents can be summarized as follows:

- Growth will be accommodated within the existing built-up urban areas and in complete communities that provide opportunities for living, working and playing without the need to travel long distances on a daily basis
- Higher density residential, commercial and institutional development will be concentrated in regional and municipal centres
- Metro Vancouver will have an automobile-restrained, transit-focused transportation system that offers enhanced transportation choices
- Metro Vancouver will continue to have a Green Zone comprising lands that have a better use than urbanization as part of a working landscape of agricultural areas, forests, watersheds, wetlands and regional open space
- Metro Vancouver will have a sustainable future in which the needs of the current generation will be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet social, economic and environmental needs

There has been a remarkable consensus across this region, across ideologies and across decades, formalized by a federation of municipalities in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (now Metro Vancouver), that this is the kind of region the people want. The leaders who forged this consensus, the staff who applied it, the community builders and developers who worked within it have maintained this consensus to a degree that many, perhaps most, Metro Vancouverites are unaware of, or take for granted.

As widely supported as the consensus is, determining whether it is being fulfilled on the ground is a significant challenge because of the need to document and measure the myriad aspects of the region's development in a comprehensive and comprehensible way.

Governance in a large and growing metropolitan region involves a complex matrix of decision makers, including not only the local governments who are formally responsible for planning but also federal and provincial agencies and special purpose authorities, not to mention the private sector. It has always been clear that the regional vision could not be achieved unless most if not all decision-makers were broadly in alignment with it and are able to reconcile the diligent pursuit of their responsibilities and objectives with the vision of the region reflected in the regional consensus. The lesson from the failed transportation and transit plebiscite is that it is risky to reduce complex problems and consequences to simple questions.

While the Vancouver region continues to attract worldwide attention for its livability and the quality of its urban form, there is enough evidence that decisions made recently and today will take us away from the regional vision rather than closer to it.

Therefore, the research questions to be explored in this challenge are:

- Are the residents getting the region they said they wanted? Why or why not?
- Is the vision relevant to today's issues such as climate change, housing affordability, economic innovation and food security?
- What should Metro Vancouver and the other key regional actors do going forward: Develop a new regional vision? Refocus on the existing vision? Allow "market forces" or local plans to determine the future?
- Focusing on Metro Vancouver and one other key actor (e.g. Municipalities, individually or collectively; TransLink; Port Metro Vancouver; YVR airport; the provincial Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure; the provincial Ministry for Local Government or Agricultural Land Commission; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, etc.), describe the key decisions that have contributed to progress, or otherwise, toward the attainment of the vision of the region's residents.
- Or, in addition to Metro Vancouver, select a project or event for analysis that illustrates the region's experience with trying to implement the regional vision (Transportation and Transit Plebiscite; Port Mann Bridge and Highway 1 expansion; South Fraser Perimeter Road Port facilities expansion, notably at Roberts Bank; Massey Bridge and Highway 99 expansion; Sunshine Coast Connector proposal; Mall and urban development in the ALR or outside growth boundary).
- Provide your recommendations.

The intent of this challenge

This challenge is for the current generation of Urban Studies and Public Policy students to become familiar with the intellectual and policy underpinnings of the vision for the region encompassed in "Cities in a sea of green" and to assess their relevance in the light of the region's recent experience and today's realities.

- What is the evidence to support consideration of whether we are adhering to, or departing from, the vision of "Cities in a Sea of Green"?
- What is at stake in the current course of policy and decision making, and the consequences of such events as investment in transportation infrastructure, local planning decisions on new development, and the current state of community participation in local and regional planning?

- Using Metro Vancouver and one other decision-making authority or Metro Vancouver and a particular project or event of regional significance, trace how decisions taken during the past 30 years have advanced or not advanced the regional vision;
- Is there an alternative vision that would have the potential to serve the region better in the future?
- What three key steps would you recommend to the region's decision makers?

Parameters and considerations

- Each entry must be from a team of two to five current students, including at least one from the SFU Urban Studies Program and one from the SFU Public Policy Program.
- Each team must create a five-minute presentation and approximately a 500-word proposal for a April 15th 'Pitch Event' evening
- The winning team will complete a research project with an essay that will constitute significant original and secondary research as described in the pitch
- The essay will be up to 7,500 words in length, not including references, tables and appendices (all of which are expected)

This analysis of the regional authority should consider such factors as:

- service delivery responsibilities and operating costs
- decision-making powers and overrule
- communication and cooperative agreements with other organizations

Timeline

Feb 4, 4:30 pm - Announcement and launch, Urban Studies work area, Harbour Centre 2nd floor
 Apr 15, 5 pm - "Pitch Night" for entries and team presentations to jury
 Apr 30 - Announcement of winner of \$5,000 prize at the 'Rethinking the Region IV' event in New Westminster. There will be an initial payment of \$2,500
 June 1 - Deadline for submission of final research essay and payment of remainder of award