

Ineffective Planning in Metro Vancouver

Jock Finlayson | Image: Antony Hare | Published: August 04, 2010



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Metro Vancouver’s draft regional growth strategy published last fall, entitled Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping Our Future, is more a preservationist document than a forward-looking framework for managing a dynamic region. With Greater Vancouver’s population set to climb by more than one million by 2030, it is odd that Metro’s professed strategy is tilted toward protecting the status quo. If the last two decades have taught us anything, it’s that steady population growth, high levels of immigration and changing global markets are sure to have a major impact on Metro Vancouver in ways that cannot be fully anticipated in 2010.

Although the document makes passing reference to “a long-term commitment to economic prosperity, community well-being and environmental integrity,” in truth the Metro Vancouver report gives scant attention to the existing industrial structure, nor does it articulate the steps needed to provide for future prosperity. In the vernacular of the Sustainable Region Initiative – the planning framework adopted by Metro Vancouver in 2002 – the economic leg of the vaunted “three-legged stool” of sustainable development is missing in action, resulting in what charitably can be described as a lopsided “growth” strategy.

The economic section of the draft plan is preoccupied with agriculture and ignores the many other industries that drive Metro’s economy and support 1.25 million regional jobs. Scarcely a word is devoted to manufacturing, advanced technology, tourism, the port or the film and digital media sectors. Readers could easily be left with the impression that farming is the dominant industry in Greater Vancouver, which is far from the case.

Metro Vancouver’s army of planners and their largely disengaged political overseers have a habit of steering clear of issues such as competitiveness, the region’s connections to external markets and the impact of public policies on industry structure, job opportunities, business location and investment decisions.

Aligning Metro’s growth strategy with advancing the economic well-being of Metro Vancouver’s 2.2 million residents ought to be a primary concern for policy-makers, especially given the region’s mediocre record in growth of real incomes and wages. With the highest housing costs in the country, Metro Vancouver falls below the Canadian average on employment earnings and household income. Yet nowhere in Metro Vancouver’s voluminous published materials does one find evidence that jobs and incomes are seen as important issues by regional authorities.

The fragmented nature of Greater Vancouver – 21 municipalities, one electoral area plus a stunted regional authority – raises questions about the region’s ability to organize itself to compete and prosper in the global economy. There is a basic mismatch between our interdependent regional economy on the one hand – a network of innovative firms, post-secondary institutions, mobile workers and the transportation and other physical assets that ensure connectivity – and, on the other hand, the administrative hodgepodge of often myopic municipal governments. The economic geography of Greater Vancouver is metropolitan in scale, not municipal, and this affects commuting patterns, the movement of goods and services, the labour market, energy demand and the role of universities and colleges.

To effectively manage growth and reach its potential as an emerging global city-region, Metro Vancouver should be looking at more streamlined, efficient administrative and service arrangements, as well as a directly elected regional government with a mandate defined in regional terms. There is also a compelling argument for shifting to a smaller number of discrete municipal units in place of the profusion of cities, districts and towns that taxpayers in the region are burdened with today.

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