

Harcourt: What kind of city do we want? **Thanks to public consultation, quality of life in Vancouver has consistently improved over the past decades.**

Special to the Sun September 16, 2012

The late 1960s and early 1970s are now widely recognized as a turning point in the history of Vancouver and its region. We decided against freeways in the urban area and in favour of the protection of neighbourhoods such as Strathcona and Chinatown. We decided against ad hoc planning in the backrooms of city halls in favour of open, participatory approaches in which the people have a say in the future of their city. We decided against sprawl and in favour of regionally planned growth that protects agricultural land and provides density and the opportunity for more travel choices.

We can see the results of those decisions around us today: a diverse, dense and livable downtown, the jewel that is False Creek, the regional town centres in Burnaby, Surrey and Coquitlam, the rapid transit lines that form the skeleton of a regional transportation system and the Green Zone with agricultural land, regional parks and open spaces protected from urbanization. By almost any measure, be it air quality, drinking water quality or water quality in the region's waterways, environmental quality has improved significantly in Metro Vancouver over the past 40 years. There are few if any urban regions in the world that can say that.

Those decisions took vision and courage. I know — I was there. But we were guided by a unique public opinion survey conducted by the late Dr. Walter Hardwick in 1973. In the Urban Futures Survey, Dr. Hardwick conducted in-depth interviews with a representative sample of households in all parts of the region in which he probed their opinions on a range of subjects as diverse as growth, livability, environmental protection, transportation, social planning, daycare and honesty in government. The survey revealed strong public support for environmental protection, planning, protection of open spaces and a transit-oriented transportation system. This gave us, as decision-makers, the confidence to pursue policies that might have otherwise been dismissed as impractical, utopian or too costly. In short, the survey was an early confirmation of what most of us here in Greater Vancouver want, which is to have our cake and eat it too.

A second turning point came in the late 1980s, when the idea of cooperative planning to protect livability had been eclipsed, after the region's first real recession, by an obsession with reducing government regulation to spur economic growth. By then, the growth had begun to come back, but there were concerns it was out of control. It seemed entire hillsides were being clearcut and converted from forest to bland, low-density subdivisions almost overnight.

The Board of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (now Metro Vancouver), led at that time by Richmond Mayor Gil Blair and Vancouver Mayor Gordon Campbell, launched a public outreach program called "Choosing Our Future," which included seminars, public meetings and a children's poster contest,

all designed to find out what, in the view of residents, was important for the future of the region. Dr. Hardwick led that program on behalf of the region, and it included a replication of the Urban Futures Survey with many of the questions that had been in the 1973 survey. The idea was to find out what had changed — and equally important, what had not changed — since 1973. To quote the summary of the results published at that time, “Lower Mainland residents still rank as primary concerns the issues of air and water pollution and preservation of the environment — just as they did in 1973. Transportation issues, crime and housing also remain important concerns.”

Once again, this information on public priorities spurred strong action by government at both regional and provincial levels, including AirCare, upgrades to waste water treatment plants and the Livable Region Strategic Plan and Transport 2012, just to name a few. Receptive public opinion underlay two of the decisions of the provincial government that I led of which I am most proud — the doubling of the region’s parkland through the Lower Mainland Nature Legacy and the re-introduction of regional planning legislation guided by my close friend and colleague, Darlene Marzari.

So you see, governments get along better when they know they are doing what the people want. Now we have an opportunity to express our priorities and our vision of the future through a 2012 version of the Urban Futures Survey. With funding from the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia, the City of North Vancouver, the City of Vancouver, TransLink and Vancity, the Urban Futures Survey 2012 is being conducted right now, but this time on an online platform through PlaceSpeak, a new consultation tool developed by Dr. Hardwick’s daughter, Colleen.

Conducting the survey online allows you to participate at a time and place that are convenient to you. It takes about 22 minutes, which is considerably less than the previous method took for participants back then. Try it now at <http://www.urbanfuturesurvey.com/>. Participation in the Urban Futures Survey 2012 offers you a unique opportunity to express your views and your priorities on matters that are important to the future of your region. Participants in the earlier surveys served us well by helping to create the beautiful livable place we enjoy today, but we face many challenges if our future is to be sustainable as well as livable. Now it’s your turn to help us get the city we you want.