



The Case for a Local Area Plan
for
Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Discussion Paper

November 2008

The essence of this proposal is the profound belief that the successful future of the Downtown Eastside will be a healthy, primarily low-income community that has avoided the two unwholesome alternatives of many other large cities – gentrification or ghettoization. A strong shared vision, plan and concerted action are how the preferred future can be discovered and achieved.

No one should ever underestimate the power of a plan generated through community planning to inspire people and institutions to make changes that they can see come together as a whole that is greater than their individual actions for community renewal.

Executive Summary

The Downtown Eastside is the most troubled district in the City of Vancouver. Despite committed efforts by many, the area is plagued by the ravages of drugs, mental illness and homelessness and other poverty conditions. None-the-less it is a community, one whose neighbourhoods each day demonstrate resilience, imagination and leadership in the struggle to build a healthy future.

Look past the look, and see what you see

DTES poet Anthony Dunne

1. The predominately low income permanent community is under siege by these conditions and by pressures for redevelopment to meet the demands for housing in the centre of the city – at their expense.
2. The challenge is to direct development in ways that ensure the present residents can continue to live here in safe, affordable homes and in a community in which they feel at home.
3. However there is no overall public strategy to guide the inevitable change that is going to occur.
4. A local area plan is urgently required for the DTES to guide change that benefits all who live here, and especially low income residents, and by so doing, all Vancouver can benefit from renewal of this historic part of the city.
5. Planning is more than housing and land use and the physical aspects of community. It includes social, economic, and environmental elements and their subsets that build healthy, sustainable communities: arts and culture, health, education and training, employment and local enterprise development.
6. Preparing a plan builds on the many strengths of this community. It involves the participation of the diverse groups of local residents, non-governmental and business people who comprise the community. It provides people with up to date information it generates informed discussion to build a local consensus about the future – a consensus expressed in a plan to guide and implement change.
7. The local area planning program will develop principles for informed planning and decision-making. It will recommend actions *during* the planning process that are consistent with these principles to support projects that can bring immediate benefit to the community.
8. The *Building Community Society* strongly recommends that the City of Vancouver establish and staff a community information and planning office for the purposes of preparing a local area plan for Gastown, Victory Square, Chinatown, Strathcona, Oppenheimer area, and Hastings Street,
9. The local area information and planning office will become the planning hub of the community, a place where people meet and a place where people come to obtain documents and view displays generated from within and without the area.

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10. The planning program should be initiated as soon as possible in 2009. In the fall of 2009 the results to date would be reviewed to determine progress and confirm subsequent action.
11. Vancouver has an opportunity to set an example for inner city renewal, one that avoids what has happened in many other large cities, gentrification or ghettoization – displacement or isolation and lack of opportunity.

The Case for a Local Area Plan in the Downtown Eastside

A Local Area Plan is urgently required for the Downtown Eastside (DTES). The geography of the DTES encompasses the neighbourhoods of Gastown, Victory Square, Chinatown, Strathcona, the Oppenheimer area and Hastings Street. These are places where low income individuals have historically found housing and created community. The area's long-standing struggle with the health, social, economic and environmental impacts of poverty and marginalization remains unresolved. Now the area faces new external stresses as the market forces of redevelopment move eastward with the potential to displace existing DTES residents and forever destroy their community.

More Information Needed for Informed Decisions

At present there is insufficient information and/or more information needs to be assembled for comparative purposes to aid informed planning and decision-making:

1. What is the history of the area and its neighbourhoods, and their role in the development of Vancouver?
2. Who is the current community and who are the population groups?
3. Where are the various populations located?
4. What do those who live there consider to be important community features and characteristics?
5. What are the major social, economic and environmental characteristics?
6. What is the current land base that is available for development and renewal?
7. What mix and intensity of land uses are appropriate?
8. What built forms should be encouraged/discouraged?
9. How can the stock of affordable rental and market housing be protected, improved, and increased to help ensure the area's future as a healthy, predominately low income community?
10. What amenities are priorities for the community?

In the absence of a local area plan it is hard to know the development capacity of the area and if new residential and commercial projects will benefit the low income community as well as other residents. Until the real characteristics of this community are known and what is needed to strengthen the opportunities for all whom live here, attempts at change will only be guesswork and can be expected to meet with resistance.

Lack of a Vision for the Area as a Whole

In the past the City of Vancouver has dedicated significant community planning resources to stabilize and improve neighbourhoods at risk. Planning work has been

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carried on within specific neighbourhoods of the Downtown Eastside by the City and through the three government partners in the Vancouver Agreement. Equally important work has and is being done by groups within the DTES such as the Carnegie Community Action Project, the Strathcona Revitalization Committee and the Chinatown Revitalization committee. However there is no unified vision for the Downtown Eastside as a whole. There is no sense of future security for the different groups and communities involved. A City-initiated, community supported and involved Downtown Eastside planning program is needed to build on and coordinate the work that has already been done to date.

The well being of the DTES is vital to the future of our City as a whole. At present it stands in stark contrast to the pattern of vitality and revitalization that characterizes the rest of the downtown peninsula and of Vancouver's other neighbourhoods. DTES citizens are particularly at risk because of health and social conditions of impoverishment and because of the spectre of massive physical change in their midst. These conditions are undermining the community and impacting most negatively its low income residents who comprise the majority of the population.

The Core Features of Community Planning

Community planning leads to an understanding of the community, its needs and its assets. It is not the answer alone to the area's problems. However by bringing a clear, consistent focus on the community it can contribute to fundamental shifts in public social policy and economic resource allocation regarding issues that affect our entire society. It brings everyone together to think more creatively about solutions. The process of developing a comprehensive community plan helps transcend past biases as citizens engage with one another as well-meaning people. It helps us prioritize the resources we need to do the work that needs doing in the Downtown Eastside.

Successful community planning:

- Builds on the community's strengths and assets
- Acknowledges work the community has already done to build for the future
- Supports individual and community capacity-building
- Ensures that those who are most vulnerable are included and benefit from the outcomes
- Builds partnerships for collaboration among key players
- Takes a holistic approach, linking land use planning with arts and culture, health, social, economic and environmental considerations
- Takes actions while planning is underway to support projects that stabilize and strengthen the community and advises against proposed projects that don't
- Provides a frame of reference for short and long-term decisions that guide the community's future
- Incorporates changes that respect the past and the community's values while including creative new solutions that inspire and secure its future.

Community Planning in the Downtown Eastside

While the Downtown Eastside suffers from negative publicity, it enjoys several fundamental strengths. It has a long history of community life, citizen involvement and organized neighbourhood and service advocacy groups. The six neighborhoods of the DTES have worked hard for many years to preserve who they are and to ensure their future. They have collaborated, such as in the opposition to the freeway in the 1970s or in contemporary arts and cultural events.

...Throughout this turbulent history of economic and political change, it is the strength of the Downtown Eastside residents that has anchored the community, keeping it alive, but vibrantly so. The Downtown Eastside is a loved and permanent home for a multitude of diverse peoples and cultures. Its streets are meeting places – like open-air living rooms for many people.
Pamela Fairfield in Painted Lives and Shifting Landscapes with Richard Tetrault. Anvill Press 2005. P. 35.

However one of the challenges for creating a DTES plan is for the various communities of interest to find common cause. Income, ethnicity, and geography are hugely diverse. Such diversity and an often contentious history among groups should not be used as an excuse for inaction on planning. Local residents are unequivocal about having a voice in their neighbourhoods' future. Community planning provides the opportunity and the means by which people can, if they choose find common cause through information, education, dialogue, constructive give and take and mutual support.

The Proposed Planning Package

It is proposed that a Downtown Eastside City - Community Planning Program:

1. Encompass the neighbourhoods of Gastown, Victory Square, Chinatown, Strathcona, the Oppenheimer area and Hastings Street.
2. Establish a community information and planning office centrally located to all neighbourhoods. This office would be the information hub for the community and government. City staff would locate here and, if they choose, others working for the community.
3. Establish a community planning committee with sub-committees, composed of representatives of the 6 neighbourhoods plus other key sectors: low income and business people, community service organizations, arts and cultural organizations, faith communities. Key will be assurance that the voices of low income people – the majority of the population – will be central in the process
4. Develop a framework that ensures that planning and development occurs within agreed upon principles about the community's future.
5. Advise the City about short and long-term directions and facilitates and expedite plans and proposals that benefit the DTES as a whole and the six neighbourhoods even while the planning process is underway.
6. Explore and where appropriate recommends vehicles such as a community land trust/community development corporation to further non-market and entry level market housing that benefits people with low incomes. These models continue local planning, decision-making and action after the local area planning concludes. They can act as facilitators, coordinators and leverages for resources,

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linking land use, housing, arts and culture, health, social supports, training, employment and local enterprises.

It is recommended that the planning program be initiated immediately for 2009 through 2010. Before the end of the year a progress report would be issued with recommendations for a subsequent work program and timetable.

Because of the urgency to proceed it is recommended that the City take on the funding responsibilities for the basic arrangements of the program as a symbolic gesture of civic leadership and priority. Then, from this strong position the City, in concert with community would advocate to the other governments and business to provide specific support for various initiatives as the program unfolds.

Conclusion

It is timely to begin community planning now in the Downtown Eastside. While there are various old and new plans for components of the area, there is no planning that encompasses the DTES as a whole. This can cause confusion and generate conflict between neighbourhoods. Clarity about development is especially urgent. The majority of residents are of modest income with a significant proportion of people at risk. They can be victimized by random development proposals and related land speculation.

Providing security of home and of neighbourhoods will build confidence among low income residents for their future. In turn this will strengthen collaboration among the diverse populations of the DTES. It will call on all who presently live in the area and on those who in the future wish to make the DTES home to respect and celebrate one another's history, cultures and accomplishments.

Vancouver does have an opportunity to set a global example for inner city renewal, one that avoids what has happened in many other large cities, gentrification or ghettoization – displacement or isolation and lack of opportunity. A collaborative local area planning program is worth the challenge.

Presently there is a renewed energy on the streets of the Downtown Eastside, and festivals and cultural events are precursors of this evolution. For the first time in decades, there is a strong indication of a collective will for change, and a recognition that the old ways of dealing with drug addiction, poverty and other issues have not worked. Richard Tetrault Ibid.
Page 25.

Appendix

About The *Building Community Society* (BCS – 2008)

The purposes of The *Building Community Society* are to ensure that development in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) benefits its present residents, the majority of whom have low incomes, and to support efforts in the DTES and throughout Metro Vancouver to end homelessness.

The Society works as follows:

- Prepares and distributes accessible, readable information electronically and in print about homelessness, housing, land use and their associated issues
- Acts as a convener and resource to community groups, business and government in forging collaboration that benefits the community
- Generates community planning and development approaches to help seek solutions that work
- Assists development projects in the DTES that model renewal which respects the heritage scale and character of the community and supports local capacity-building and economic development for the benefit of its current residents.

The Society takes a diverse, multi-disciplinary community planning approach:



The members of BCS are Milton Wong, (Convener), Larry Beasley, Michael Clague, Ian Chang, Maggie Geiser, Mike Harcourt, Terry Howard, Tim Pringle, Ray Spaxman, Paul Sullivan, Joe Wai, Gerry Zipursky.