

Consolidated Notes from City of Victoria Community Forum March 26 & 27, 2010

Introduction:

The following notes present a summary of discussions from the City of Victoria Community Forum held on March 26 & 27, 2010 at Crystal Gardens. The purpose of this document is to present a broad overview of discussion topics and points raised during the discussions. Approximately 550 people participated in the Community Forum; discussions were held in small groups (Friday night) and following topic-specific presentations (Saturday). The discussions on Saturday were based on the topics of heritage, food systems, climate change and energy, economy, housing, urban design, and population, housing and employment projections to 2041.

Efforts have been taken below to record the points as accurate as possible, and to represent the range of opinions on a particular issue. These points will form the basis of future discussions over the next few months as part of the OCP process.

Process:

1. Notes were taken during discussion by City of Victoria staff, Community Advisory Committee Members, Engagement champions and other volunteers.
2. Notes were consolidated by City of Victoria staff into two separate documents (#1: March 26 results; #2: March 27 results). The following presents a broad overview of discussions from both days.
3. Notes have been grouped into major themes.

1. Housing Affordability

- Many participants expressed support that there is “something for everyone” in Victoria, with a range of prices and housing types across a continuum, ranging from housing for the homeless to care homes.
- “It shouldn’t cost \$200,000 for a closet”.
- Some expressed concern that the new condo developments are catering to out-of-town residents, and not providing housing for people who already live here. There is concern that downtown heritage buildings will be converted into expensive units.

- Affordable housing should not ghettoize people or a neighbourhood. Certain groups, such as single parents and service workers, may face particular affordability barriers.
- Well-designed affordable housing buildings can achieve multiple benefits, such as mixing uses, income levels, address energy performance.
- The lack of provincial and federal support is a challenge.
- Integrating affordable housing into neighbourhoods is a challenge.
- Clear, yearly targets for housing affordability would measure success.
- There is a need for new tools and approaches to improve housing affordability, such as inclusionary zoning, financial incentives, relaxed zoning requirements for secondary suites, developing “grey” space (parking lots), housing cooperatives, cluster housing with shared living/dining areas, waiving parking requirements.

2. Food Systems

- Many people and groups felt that Victoria should increase food production in the city.
- There is an interest in increasing food security through urban agriculture, more regional agriculture and other food programs, such as in schools and how-to courses.
- Food could be grown on rooftops, community gardens, parks, schoolyards, street fruit trees, boulevards and other public lands.
- Food production on private lands should be encouraged by the City.
- Issues about liability and long-term maintenance of food production projects need to be addressed for urban agriculture.
- Supporting infrastructure, such as rainwater barrels, is needed.
- A year-round, indoor farmers market would serve farmers and customers.
- Inclusionary zoning could be used to require food production features in new developments, such as a certain land area for food gardens or fruit trees.
- A regional approach is needed due to cross-cutting issues such as a loss of meat processing facilities, agricultural land, curbside organics pick-up and decreasing economic viability of farms.

3. Sustainable Transportation

- Many people felt that Victoria should reduce auto-dependency through more walking, biking and transit.
- There was broad support for making Victoria more walkable, and neighbourhood services and amenities that support a small “walkshed”.
- Some specific streets are challenging for pedestrians. Children need to feel safe walking to school. Pedestrian-only streets could enhance street life.

- There is a need for more bike paths, bike lanes and infrastructure such as racks.
- Bike lanes need to be continuous and well-designed.
- Public transit needs to be more affordable and convenient, particularly downtown. New options such as light-rapid transit should be encouraged.
- Other issues mentioned include concern about tour buses in neighbourhoods, need to keep Harbour as a transportation hub, need for planning for scooters, and need for new features in developments such as electric car plug-ins.
- Parking requirements for buildings should be re-visited or eliminated.

4. Neighbourhood Design

- Neighbourhoods design is key to supporting a sustainable lifestyle; keywords used include “walkable”, “compact”, “complete”, “healthy”, “villages”.
- Victoria geographic setting can determine design.
- Neighbourhood centres can be integrated hubs, where people can find what they need within walking distance, and act as magnets and centres of activity.
- Neighbourhood design can foster connectedness, inclusivity, trust, diversity and resiliency among residents.
- “The places in between the buildings are the places that matter”. “Create the opposite of a gated community”.
- Victoria’s neighbourhoods have a unique character, and a strong identity.
- There is concern that density may diminish neighbourhood character. Others felt that density is essential. How can we encourage density in neighbourhoods?

5. Climate & Energy

- There is a need to both reduce Victoria’s carbon footprint and prepare the community to live with higher energy costs.
- Specific emission sources of concern include cruise ships, more uptake of industrial/commercial waste, upgrading the energy efficiency of all homes, challenges of upgrading heritage buildings, and the higher emissions of outlying neighbourhoods compared to the core.
- The City’s economy should diversify now to anticipate future industry changes due to peak oil.
- There is a need to plan for and focus on the local impacts of climate change, rather than the global ones.
- Air quality goals (e.g. reducing cruise ship emissions) can be dovetailed with GHG reductions. The OCP should have clear targets for emissions.

6. Heritage

- Many participants felt that Victoria has heritage buildings, views and landscapes worth preserving.
- There is concern that some heritage buildings are in disrepair, and that the City lacks the tools to require on-going maintenance. There is also concern that newly revitalized heritage residences are unaffordable to residents.
- Challenges to preserving heritage buildings include parking requirements, seismic upgrades, green technologies and cost. Some people felt that providing increased density as a means for paying for on-site heritage features is not a good idea; others felt that increased density can have a positive impact for heritage projects.
- Several financial aspects were discussed, including opportunities for tax exemptions (as in US), new home warranty which imposes standards on heritage conversions, and whether heritage benefits the tax payer over the long term.
- Heritage features and ornamentation can be applied to new buildings throughout the city. Heritage buildings could also be used for institutional uses (e.g. mixed use redevelopment in Havana)
- Heritage is not just about the past - it evolves over time and place.

7. Economy

- There is an opportunity to diversify Victoria's economy in order to make it more adaptable in the future. For example, peak oil and other factors may decrease tourism and other sectors in the future.
- New opportunities/sectors to explore include arts/culture ("creative city"), manufacturing, high tech, food warehousing, green industries and alternative models such as cooperatives. At the same time, Victoria should grow based on its existing framework.
- Future business development may require that lands be set aside now.
- Housing must be affordable in order to attract certain industries and accommodate workers. Yet, many people often choose to move to Victoria for lifestyle reasons, not purely economic ones.
- Any economic stimulus should have a positive impact on the community. Potential negative impacts include decrease in green space, decreased quality of life for residents (e.g. tour buses/cruise ships in James Bay) and unsustainable industrial practices (e.g. high tech relies on imported components).
- Victoria's tourism industry depends on character and scale of downtown. Institutional uses for heritage buildings could be explored (e.g. mixed use redevelopment in Havana).
- Telecommuting means that people do not necessarily have to live close to where they work.
- The implicit assumption the economic growth will take care of affordability can be problematic.

8. Growth and Development

- Density and development are important topics for the future of Victoria.
- Some growth will be necessary in order to accommodate new industries and residents.
- There are differing viewpoints on the issue of density. Some feel that density is important in adding vibrancy to areas (e.g. downtown), and supporting local businesses and transit systems. Others feel that density - particularly the types of building forms used- detracts from the character and feel of certain neighbourhoods. Building heights, building design and number of buildings per site are key issues.
- There is an opportunity to explore some innovative approaches for accommodating density in Victoria, including transferring density rights from one neighbourhood to another, new forms of high-density developments that retain heritage character, and new models for decision-making around issues of density.
- There is concern that the current trend towards condominium development will limit the opportunity to change the structure of the City in 20-50 years, if needed.
- There is room for improvement with current zoning bylaw, including need for site-specific zones, need for an update of the rezoning process, and need for new zoning regulations (see Portland, OR).
- Other development issues mentioned include the need to treat waterfront land as a valuable asset, the role of public spaces and public art in increasing liveability, the need for more incentives for developers, and the opportunity for the City to set new green standards for private development.

9. Regional Approach

- Many issues confronting Victoria are regional in scope and will require the participation of other municipalities.
- Amalgamation could make it easier to address some issues.

10. Demographics

- Victoria's diversity could be increased, with an emphasis on making it welcoming to people of all ages.
- There is concern that Victoria is losing children and young families to other municipalities in the CRD.
- Cities should be designed for children in order to appeal for all ages. Children also need to feel safe walking to school.
- Schools play an important neighbourhood role (e.g. as neighbourhood social centres and multi-purpose facilities).

- Victoria is in a position to be a leader in planning for an aging population. Recent retirees can be engaged as active citizens.
- The long-term care of seniors needs to be considered in planning - are there enough care homes? Who will take care of older seniors?
- There is concern that new condominium developments are targeted at out-of-town residents, who only live in Victoria part-time. Potential impacts include higher housing prices and a lack of long-term residents to contribute to the neighbourhood fabric.
- Victoria bears the brunt of many regional social and economic issues.
- Victoria needs to maintain its workforce, and simultaneously planning for an aging population.

11. Leadership and Vision

- Victoria could be a leader in quality of life, a place that all residents are proud of.
- “It’s really good to live in Victoria”.
- In planning for the future, the needs of residents should be first and foremost. Plans should also celebrate of what Victoria already does well.
- Victoria can be leader in green city development.

12. Additional Topics

- Environmental noise is a concern in certain neighbourhoods and can be addressed as part of the OCP.
- Sewage treatment is an on-going regional issue, and one with impacts on Victoria’s tourism, foreshore and ecosystems.
- Victoria is losing green space regional.