

7 BEST PRACTICES

Transportation Land Use Linkages

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

WHAT IS IT?

Vancouver, British Columbia has nearly doubled its downtown population in less than two decades, sustainably accommodating regional growth while creating new, highly livable neighborhoods. This change is due to progressive land use policies coupled with supportive transportation policies.

WHY DO IT?

If planning for smart growth is to succeed, policies must include a transportation component that not only prioritizes sustainable modes of transport, but, to some extent, restricts accommodation for automobiles.

HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?

The broad strokes of the so-called “Vancouver model” are well known to American planners: develop dense, mixed-use and walkable neighborhoods in and around downtown. Many of the details of Vancouver’s approach to land use, however, are less understood—including the relationship between land use and transportation policy.

Vancouver’s “Living First” policy, adopted in 1991 as part of the Central Area Plan, rezoned 8 million square feet of space from commercial



to residential use; since the policy was implemented, the population of the downtown peninsula has risen from 47,000 to 88,000 (in the 2006 census). However, former planning director Larry Beasley has explained that the policy’s success “is not just the result of favoring housing and changing the zoning to allow it to happen. Nor is it just the result of a vibrant market...The first principle has been to limit commuter access into downtown and let congestion be an ally in a household’s profound first decision to live downtown or in the suburbs. Walking, biking, and transit get priority for both space and spending.”¹

“Vancouver,” writer Trevor Boddy has further explained, “is the only major city in North

¹ “Living First” in Vancouver, American Planning Association’s Zoning News April 2000

America without a single freeway within its boundaries. Citizen activism in the late 1960s saved Gastown and Chinatown by stopping a roadway with the Orwellian name of the ‘East Downtown Penetrator,’ followed by significant investment in elevated rail public transit.”²

The growth of the SkyTrain system has helped Vancouver’s downtown peninsula—which is connected to the rest of the city only by a narrow bottleneck that might otherwise be choked with traffic—to remain a major civic and commercial center, with 10% growth in employment between 1991 and 2001, even as outlying areas have continued to grow. (Downtown growth may have mitigated suburban sprawl, but the entire region is growing rapidly.) The share

² <http://uskyscraper.blogspot.com/2005/09/vancouverism.html>

of downtown trips made by car has remained relatively constant and even declined: from 46% of all trips in 1994, auto mode split had fallen to 40% by 1999. In 1999, transit accounted for 28% of all trips and walking accounted for 31%.

With so much residential growth downtown, trips into and out of the core are increasingly less important than trips within the downtown peninsula. Morning peak trips entirely within downtown increased from 18% of all downtown trips in 1974 to 21% by 1996; These trips were expected to reach 27% by 2021. While trips to downtown destinations from outside downtown were expected to grow by 18% by 2021, trips within downtown were expected to grow by 64%.

To accommodate the continued growth of downtown, the city's 2002 Downtown Transportation Plan built on the 1997 City of Vancouver Transportation Plan, which made explicit the following hierarchy of transportation priorities: pedestrians, bicycling, transit, goods movement, and private automobiles. The 1997 plan also made clear that "(o)verall road capacity to the downtown will not be increased above the present level." In the 2002 plan, a "Pedestrians First" policy was established, and it was further noted that:

"Over the next 20 years, the total number of trips to downtown will grow by 30%. Some kinds of trips will increase more than others. Commuter trips on foot and bike are expected to double. Rush hour transit use will rise by 50 to 60%. Car and truck trips are projected to stay about the same."

The plan anticipated doubling the total length of bike lanes downtown, on top of a twofold increase between 1994 and 1999. It projected an 85% increase in transit trips within downtown during the morning rush hour, accommodated by local bus routes. It also projected that rail would accommodate 90% of all new non-walk and bike trips into downtown. The total number of commercial parking spaces per employee, meanwhile, was expected to drop from 0.44 in 1990 to 0.32 by 2021.

With congestion declining, the plan projected a 3% increase in average vehicle speeds, with average transit speeds increasing by 14%.

Criticisms of Vancouver's downtown transportation policy have focused on its land use policy: with housing prioritized over offices and limited remaining space for commercial growth, downtown is becoming something of a "bedroom community" with increasing numbers of commute trips from downtown to outlying jobs.

Since the 2002 plan, the city has taken additional steps toward a sustainable long-term transportation policy. In 2006, the South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority, or TransLink, implemented a parking tax on all non-residential properties of \$0.78 per square meter. A "demonstration" streetcar line between the Olympic Village Canada Line subway station and the popular Granville Island shopping area opened in time for the 2010 Winter Olympics; it is the first phase of a greater downtown network. The Canada Line, the latest installment of TransLink's driverless metro system, opened between the airport and downtown

just before the Olympic games. The Olympic Village area itself is now being redeveloped into a neighborhood and will be the first community in Canada to offer car-share vehicles throughout its entirety. The Southeast False Creek Plan forecasts that 60% of all trips in the area will be made without a car and that the neighborhood will generate 25 to 50% less greenhouse gas emissions than similar urban districts.

For information about density and appropriate transit modes, refer to the *Mode Analysis* section.



Well-marked bicycle routes improve navigation by bike and indicate to drivers the multimodal nature of the street.

Image from Nelson\Nygaard



A graceful mix of density and open space improves livability and encourages residents and visitors to make full use of the city.

Image from Flickr user Duane Storey