

Southeast False Creek: The Struggle for Sustainability

Introduction

Picture the shape of central Vancouver as a backwards, heavy-bottomed letter ‘C,’ curving around English Bay and False Creek. Southeast False Creek is an 80-acre section of the city occupying the centre of the curve, across the bay from the Concord Pacific development that replaced the Expo 1986 facilities. Beginning in the middle 1800s, this former tidal marsh began attracting heavy industry and was soon the city’s industrial heart. Thousands of people worked in the area’s factories and lumber, gravel and ship-building yards.

After the Second World War, Southeast False Creek’s industries gradually faded away, leaving behind contaminated water and soil and dilapidated structures. This last stretch of vacant Vancouver waterfront is now a focal point for the debate over sustainable development within an urban environment.

When planning began for Southeast False Creek (SEFC) in 1996, there were no examples of sustainable communities in existence for planners to use as a guide, nor was the concept of sustainability clearly understood. The vision of

sustainable development put forward by the United Nations in 1987 defined it as: “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹ Three components of sustainability – environmental, economic and social – are accepted today as integral parts of the sustainability discussion.² Social sustainability has proven the most challenging component to define and integrate into SEFC planning.

As it is currently envisioned, Southeast False Creek will be a mixed-use community, developed at the highest density compatible with livability and sustainability. Housing will be built to accommodate a mixture of incomes, with 35 percent family component, up from the standard 25 percent. There will be a commitment to reducing both the consumption of energy and resources and the production of waste and pollution. It is intended that SEFC will be a complete community with goods and services within walking distance. The network of streets and paths will be designed to emphasize priority for pedestrians, cyclists and public transit. A large public park will provide space for relaxation and recreation, and both private and community gar-

dens will be encouraged. Renewable energy source options are being identified.

In the seven years since planning for Southeast False Creek began, the many and diverse groups involved have learned a great deal about sustainability and one another. Described as a ‘whitewater’ situation in which the issues and positions are in constant motion, all involved have come to see SEFC planning as a long-term project. City officials are preparing to unveil a preliminary version Official Development Plan in May 2003; the completed plan should be ready by December 2004.

Vancouver’s Olympic bid submission helped raise the profile of the SEFC project by proposing that a portion of the area be used as an athletes’ village and training venue. More interest in the project also was generated when the Greater Vancouver Regional District, the province of British Columbia and the City adopted LEED Silver³ protocols for green construction for 30 acres of the area. This decision makes Vancouver the first North American municipality to include these protocols as a requirement in the development process. This initiative will affect SEFC plans and eventually may change the way the province builds in the future. Sustainability is a concept which is still struggling to be realized, but there are signs that Southeast False Creek may yet succeed as a model sustainable community.

Putting social sustainability on the table

Community involvement and pressure have been important factors in the City of Vancouver’s decision to aim for a sustainable approach. The City’s planning vision has been affected by public interests and the economic climate of the day. At times taking the lead in creating mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhoods, city planners also have allowed the con-

struction of high-density, high-income developments.

While technological and design solutions – in particular, advances in green construction – will help to move toward the goals of environmental and economic sustainability, the deeper issue of what constitutes a socially sustainable community has forced all parties to examine more closely their attitudes towards wealth and poverty, and how these factors influence community design.

Social sustainability is linked with notions of social justice and social equity. Social equity means more than equal opportunity; it implies opportunities for adequate housing, health care, education, employment and mobility.⁴

The two issues of design and social sustainability became entry points for the debate into SEFC’s future for environmentalists, design professionals and those concerned with social justice. The Southeast False Creek Working Group was established in 1996 and emerged as the main channel of activist advocacy for the fate of the site.

Project background

Senior Planner Ian Smith grew up in Vancouver’s Kitsilano district and appreciated the City’s early commitment to building livable neighbourhoods, well before the concept of sustainability was ever defined. Says Ian: “During the 1950s and 1960s, west end Vancouver became the City’s first template for a mixed-use environment that made it easy for people to live and work downtown. Parks, schools, day cares and commercial spaces were included from the start, and amenities like bicycle paths were integrated later. The goal was to get people to live closer to their jobs.”

In the early 1970s, South False Creek, an area of roughly the size of SEFC and located next to its western boundary, was the City's first experience with transforming a former industrial site into a mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhood. At the time, real estate professionals predicted a poor outcome for the concept. They argued that families were moving away from the city core, not into it. Despite these concerns, the City proceeded with plans to accommodate equal thirds of wealthy, middle-class and working poor families, and it took care to include the facilities, parks and schools that would be expected in a full service community. The area's proximity to downtown businesses made it an attractive place to live and work. Even though the area included a higher density housing mix than the single family norm of the suburbs, families moved in. Thirty years later, both government-subsidized and market housing have been maintained, and the income mix of households has remained stable.

In 1975, an important building block for achieving economic sustainability was laid when City Council established the Property Endowment Fund. This action made managers responsible for ensuring that City-owned real estate generated a 'reasonable' economic return. A governing body was set up to oversee the buying, selling and maintenance of city-owned property and to ensure that the City's public objectives were supported. Over time, the City's Real Estate Services Department would come to recognize the benefits of economic sustainability and reorient the traditional real estate goal of maximizing the value of city-owned property.

Changes in practice?

In 1987, planning began for the former Expo lands known as False Creek North. An industrial site with some ground and soil contami-

nation, False Creek North is now referred to as the Concord Pacific development. Though City planners were pleased that certain environmental benefits were achieved, such as the elimination of contamination entering False Creek from the site, the first series of Concord Pacific buildings and the later Coal Harbour development were planned to appeal to wealthy buyers. Some residents felt that these projects represented a departure from the mixed-income, mixed-use traditions established in Vancouver.

In 1988, and in contrast to these higher end projects, the City's Planning Department put forward several policies that would govern the development of Southeast False Creek. The area would include public access to the waterfront, an emphasis on residential building and an upholding of the City's core needy household target of 20 percent and 2.75 hectares of park per 1,000 population. For SEFC, at least, the department declared an intention to continue the City's tradition of building socially sustainable neighbourhoods.

In 1990, Vancouver City Council commissioned the *Clouds of Change* report from a task force which was looking at the implications for municipal policy-making of global climate change. In accord with that document, Council passed a resolution in 1994 which promised to explore Southeast False Creek's potential as a working model of sustainable development. "Unfortunately, no one had a clear idea of how that would translate into practice," says Bruce Maitland, Vancouver's Director of Real Estate.

During the implementation of the Concord Pacific and Coal Harbour projects, the Planning Department devised a collaborative approach with developers that they hoped would apply to all inner-city projects. City staff extracted concessions from developers for the construction of city amenities such as parks,

schools and community centres in exchange for the rights to build high-density residential projects on former industrial sites.

To streamline the planning process, the City adopted a team approach to projects, wherein all the relevant City engineers and planners were brought into a project at the outset. This involvement assured a common understanding of the work planned and made the approvals process more efficient. To those outside the process, however, the arrangement also might appear as a too-familiar relationship between government and business.

When City Council hired Stanley Kwok, the Concord Pacific developer, to assess possible futures for Southeast False Creek in 1996, the action was received by the environmental and social sustainability interest groups as a warning that the City might be changing the course of its plans for SEFC. Ian Smith disagrees that this was the case. Says Ian: “City Council was hoping that Stanley Kwok’s input would pay more attention to achieving economic sustainability for the area, and allay fears that the area would be very expensive to clean up and develop. There was some interest in developing an area which would be attractive to high technology enterprises, and continued interest in mixing commercial and residential projects, all the while factoring in the costs of remediating the contaminated soil.” One year later, the Creekside Landing Plan was ready. So was the opposition.⁵

Stormclouds of change

In April 1997, the Vancouver Planning Commission and Simon Fraser University City Program held a one-day workshop entitled “Cents and Sustainability,” which attracted design professionals and activists. The workshop created excitement and resolve that Southeast False

Creek must be developed as a model sustainable community.

When the Kwok report was presented to Council in May 1997, 32 speakers, many of whom had attended the Cents and Sustainability workshop, came forward and raised concerns about the report. Upon closer examination, City Council agreed that the consultant had paid scant attention to sustainability issues and agreed to release funds to a sustainable development consultancy.

In September 1997, the City hired Sheltair Scientific Ltd. to help strengthen and extend the City’s understanding of environmental sustainability issues. A few Sheltair staff were members of two community organizations – the Southeast False Creek Working Group and Designers for Social Responsibility.

Vancouver’s Director of Real Estate, Bruce Maitland, felt that the Sheltair work helped provide a practical sense of environmental sustainability, but that it did not go far enough in linking together components into a whole plan. “The work didn’t recognize that targets for one component might obviate another.”

City planners now clearly recognized that the Kwok report and the 1997 design for Creekside Landing had challenged their credibility and that they had not put enough effort into tapping the ideas that had been generated by groups already interested in the project. In response, they invited design professionals, property owners and activists to become part of a Policy Advisory Group (PAG). Their mandate was to study Sheltair’s work, review it, understand it and help City staff put together a policy statement for SEFC development.

John Irwin, a founding member of the SEFC Working Group, was frustrated by the early

Policy Advisory Group meetings. “There were too many competing interests for the group to come together. After a couple of sessions, we requested the appointment of an outside facilitator.” ORCAD Consulting Group President, Fiona Crofton, was hired to get the group working effectively. Says Fiona: “My objective was to unite the group as quickly as possible. We did a visioning exercise in which people identified images of what SEFC should look like. The commonality of themes put forward – nature, family, youth, gardens, recreation and relaxation – made everyone realize that they had been too busy arguing over their differences to notice that they wanted the same things.”

Sheltair’s contract was limited to environmental issues. Says Fiona: “The need to address social issues became of increasing importance during the PAG work.”⁶

“Ultimately, PAG was able to help craft the final policy document and the members came to a much better understanding of one another’s positions,” Fiona continues. “Transparency about motives and positions is essential for movement; advisory groups can run into trouble when people are unable or unwilling to put their cards on the table. If some representatives are instructed to listen but stay silent, for example, some unwelcome surprises and misperceptions can occur later. We had a situation where the interests of one constituency were not made clear during PAG work. When that group raised counterproposals, assumptions were made that they had not been involved in the process; questions were raised about the representativeness and, therefore, the integrity of PAG.”

New visions, new solutions

A second important Southeast False Creek visioning exercise was a three-day design

charrette (i.e., a small group discussion process) which the Planning Department organized in the fall of 1998. Architects, landscape architects, planners and others were brought together to freely exchange design concepts. The charrette coincided with an international green building conference. Ian Smith was pleased to note that many new ideas were generated, and that these were immediately picked up by PAG and the City’s architectural consultant, Baker, McGarva, Hart Architects.

Says Ian: “The charrette exercise helped us to concretize sustainable community planning. It gave visual form to ideas and it tested and proved the sustainable development policies the City had developed.”

In the summer of 1998, a difference in priorities between Vancouver’s Park Board and City Council came to a head. The neighbourhood of Mount Pleasant lies to the east of Southeast False Creek, and is virtually bereft of green spaces (less than .75 acres of green space per 1,000 citizens, compared with the City’s desired 2.25 acres per 1,000). With the support of some members of the Park Board, Mount Pleasant residents mounted a serious campaign to have all of Southeast False Creek declared a park. Planners and politicians wrestled with the issue and eventually reached a compromise. By July 1999, the City’s drafted policy document stated that 27 of the City’s 46 acres would be developed as a park.

“The Mount Pleasant argument that a regional park would satisfy the green space needs for their residents was questionable,” says Ian Smith. “Studies have shown that most people will not visit a park which is more than a five-minute walk from their homes. However, by including a large park area in SEFC, there will be greater opportunities for water management projects, greater space for community gardening

and composting initiatives, and a less expensive soil rehabilitation requirement. Had we agreed to making all of Southeast False Creek a park space, we would have had to face more safety and security problems. The solution we devised satisfies development, environmental and social sustainability concerns.”

Onward and upward

The Southeast False Creek Policy Statement was adopted by Vancouver City Council in October 1999. An important intermediate step between the policy’s initial unveiling and its final adoption took place between July and October.

Says Ian Smith: “The City Manager requested that a real estate assessment be done to allay fears that the actual costs of sustainability would be prohibitive. Our Real Estate Department used a full-cost accounting system which included operations, life cycle, marketing and infrastructure expenses. This process not only made the case that sustainability is economically viable, but it also helped us to appreciate the fact that the Planning Department needed to develop a separate process to keep everyone abreast of our learning curve. In future, we will make intradepartmental communication an ongoing activity.”

Lessons learned, transformations acknowledged

Once the SEFC policy was approved, Sheltair continued to press for more work on the environmental sustainability side of the equation. The City had to be concerned with design, livability and the social aspects of good neighbourhood development. Taking all things into consideration meant prioritizing a range of issues –

from street width to transit considerations. Focussing strictly on environmental issues clouded planners’ view of workable structural schemes.

The Planning Department hired an urban design consultant to help establish a process and discussion mechanism for evaluating plans. The City Manager had imposed a deadline for a workable structural plan to be ready by May 2000. By the end of that month, a basic structural plan was in place for two million square feet of development space and 26 acres of park. It laid out the kinds of roads, open spaces, development sites and densities the area would include.

“Originally, we thought we would be able to merge environmental considerations with our policy and our structural requirements, but this was not a workable solution,” says Ian. “Instead, we’ve developed a basic understanding of structure which has been incorporated into the requests for proposals we’ve put out to water and waste management firms. This type of information-sharing will help ensure dynamic, responsive planning.”

In the interim, Planning Department staff have moved forward with the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) and the province to develop green building standards. “All of this worked towards the good as far as SEFC was concerned,” says Ian. “We could have addressed site selection, waste, demolition, new construction and indoor air quality issues without the lens of green building construction, or we could have focussed strictly on green buildings and not accounted for the social and economic portions of the sustainability equation. Serendipity has placed us in a position to take advantage of all the American and British work in green design which will inform planning for SEFC and help lead us to a construction market transformation.”

A GVRD-sponsored workshop about green building and sustainable community attracted 450 people – roughly four times the number expected. Says Ian: “We had architects, engineers, politicians and developers in attendance. The event represents the mind shift that is happening in the building industry. Developers recognize that change is coming, and if we can make green buildings and sustainability easy to adopt, change will come even faster.”

John Irwin continues to work with the Southeast False Creek Stewardship Group to guide the planning process now that the Policy Advisory Group’s work is done. The next phase of work is in the City’s hands, and though the outcome is still uncertain, the notion of sustainability is alive and well. Since 1990, reports to City Council must include an evaluation of the project’s impact on sustainability. In September 2001, the City of Vancouver’s Corporate Management Team appointed a subcommittee to investigate what sustainability means, to establish a set of principles for Vancouver as a sustainable city and to recommend a structure for an Office of Sustainability. An outside contractor is in the process of creating a framework for this initiative.

“The city took a risk by promoting sustainable development at a time when its benefits were not clearly understood,” says Bruce Maitland. “Once the life cycle accounting process made the concept economically justifiable, the social and environmental considerations make sustainability an imperative.”

In the whitewater world of planning and development, the dream of Southeast False Creek may yet be realized.

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Endnotes

1. World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Brundtland Commission).

2. Torjman, S. (2000). *The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, May.

3. Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) is a self-assessing system designed for rating new and existing commercial, institutional and high-rise residential buildings. Developed by the US Green Building Council, it evaluates environmental performance from a ‘whole building’ perspective over a building’s life cycle, providing a definitive standard for what constitutes a green building. LEED is based on accepted energy and environmental principles, and strikes a balance between known effective practices and emerging concepts. Further information is available at: www.usgbc.org

4. Roseland, M. (1998). *Toward Sustainable Communities: Resources for Citizens and Their Governments*. Gabriola, BC: New Society Publishers.

5. The timeline of SEFC development history is well detailed in Don Alexander’s case study, made available by the University of Waterloo’s Assessment and Planning Project. His report is entitled *Southeast False Creek: From Brown to Green? Anatomy of a Case Study*. It is available on-line at <http://ersserver.uwaterloo.ca/asmtplan>

6. Fiona Crofton recently has produced two works on sustainability. “Participation Tools and Practices for Sus-

tainable Community Planning & Development” (2001) was written for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and “Sustainable Community Planning & Development: Design Charrette Planning Guide” was produced for the City of Vancouver and CMHC. These documents are available from CMHC or on the Internet at:

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