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## What San Diego can learn from Vancouver

By Mary McLellan and Mike Stepner

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San Diego and Vancouver: They've got far more in common that you think. And what's more, here in San Diego we need to learn from what they've done right; currently, we're 25 years behind the curve.

This was brought home to us recently at three events hosted in Vancouver, British Columbia: the World Urban Forum III; a United Nation's Habitat event on urban sustainability, which was immediately preceded by conferences of Canadian professional organizations representing landscape architects, architects and city planners; and the World Planners Conference.

The overriding theme of all the forums was, first, a recognition that more people will live in urban areas than rural areas and that most of the urbanization in the developing countries will be in slums. Vancouver was selected as host of the World Urban Forum as it's considered one of the world's most livable cities -- one BBC reporter described it as "Los Angeles without the mistakes."

So why is Vancouver a good model and teaching tool for San Diego? Both downtowns are of similar size and bordered on the north by a major park. Both cities have similarly sized regions with a similar number of municipalities that comprise the region.

Geographically, both are well defined by natural features such as the desert, mountains and oceans. We both have southern boundaries as borders, with what each considers a developing country. For us, it is Mexico and for Vancouver, it is the United States.

The San Diego region is expected to grow by 1 million people over the next 20 years; the greater Vancouver region is planning for 2 million over the same time frame.

But each city has chosen a slightly different approach to managing growth. In the 1960s, plans for an extensive freeway system were proposed for the Vancouver region. Planners projected that without the freeways, the city and the region would be in perpetual gridlock and downtown would wither away. Vancouver-ites joined the anti-highway revolt then underway in many cities in North America and said, "No!" They focused on transit instead and that choice has resulted in one of the most active and pleasant urban environments on the continent.

In the 1980s, Vancouver adopted its "Living First" strategy, not unlike the city of San Diego's proposed City of Villages. To implement the strategy, the city has adopted and followed up on several "organizing principles," including restricting car access to downtown by giving priority to public transport users and pedestrians and developing mixed-use neighborhoods designed for pedestrians.

While these principles have resulted in much higher densities than we are used to in San Diego, they were able to do it because of an extensive process to create a vision for the future and the determination to achieve the vision. Acceptance of the vision is so well accepted that elected officials no longer have a role to play in the development approval process. And recently, when Vancouver's mayor announced a proposal to increase density citywide, it met with praise from a cross-section of city interests.

As you may of gathered by now, discussions in Vancouver about the projected addition of 2 million people to the region over the next 20 years are not about whether to accommodate the growth but rather the best way to do it in order to create dynamic, livable neighborhoods.

Reinforcing such sentiments were the words of Enrique Penalosa, former mayor of Bogota, Columbia, and now visiting scholar at New York University, who was one of the forum's keynote speakers. Penalosa defined urban sustainability as: "An environment that is most conducive to the development of full potential -- happiness. Happiness is the measure of success of urban development and management strategies." He stressed the need to walk, to build community and to be with people. We need in our urban environment beauty, contact with nature and equality. "That the policies that address sustainability are also those that address social justice," Penalosa said.

His words should be at the forefront of our minds as we proceed with our various municipal and regional plans in the San Diego region.

Bluntly, San Diego is 25 years behind the vision and thoughtfulness that Vancouver put into building its forward-thinking community, economy and ecology. But on the positive side, we now have an outstanding model that we can use if we choose to grow into the city of our dreams here in San Diego.

The magic ingredient Vancouver used to become the world poster for sustainability and livability is that of deep citizen involvement and inclusiveness. San Diego City Hall is lining up with the best and brightest and is committed to finding new solutions to realign itself for a sustainable future. But there is a major component missing -- you.

We invite you and them to demand citizen participation and to find respectful, meaningful and empowering ways to do this. The process is going to be uncomfortable because we will all be walking along a new path that is unfamiliar, and we have no idea where it will take us. The choice is ours -- step into the unknown or go down with the ship. These are times to be bold, to have courage, to organize and implement our visions.

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*McLellan is a community and economic development specialist and chairwoman of the Urban Land Institute San Diego/Tijuana District Council. Stepner, FAIA, FAICP, is principal of the Stepner Design Group and a professor at the New School of Architecture and Design.*