



Saturday, January 24, 2015

Mayor Charlie Hales
400 SW 4th Avenue
Portland, Oregon USA 97205

Dear Mayor Hales:

RE: West Quadrant Plan

My name is Patrick Condon. I am the chair of the Urban Design program of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver Canada. Over the years it has been my honor to work in Portland and get to know many of its most active citizens and public officials. Portland is known far and wide, and rightly so, for the quality of its urbanism, and for the care its citizens have taken over the years to enhance it.

Portland and Vancouver are commonly seen as sister cities, most importantly as models for good urban design. As citizens of both cities have come to know, urban design is a crucial element for economic development success and the key means to ensure citizens are satisfied with their city.

Thus I wish to humbly caution you when confronting decisions for your West Quadrant that may dramatically alter what we all love about your city, and send it on a path that can potentially disrupt its social and ecological sustainability. Here in Vancouver citizens are increasingly concerned about the potential of high rise structures, poorly placed and insensitively designed, to alter the things they love about their neighbourhoods. Now that we have almost run out of sites in the downtown for new high rises, surrounding former "streetcar" neighbourhoods are under pressure to accept them. While all in Vancouver are committed to increasing density (to reduce sprawl and to increase affordability) many now question those who say high rises are the only way to achieve this end. The science suggests that there is little benefit to sustainable transport and building energy use when area densities exceed 20 DU per acre. Low rise and mid rise structures are more than able to reach this density. Furthermore at these densities wood construction is cheaper, more earthquake resistant, and absorbs rather than emits GHG. Finally, your very sensible strategy of rebuilding the streetcar network in your city is enhanced by a more even mid density over large areas. Cities such as Copenhagen and Amsterdam prove that the most sustainable approach to city building is medium densities over large areas. These cities achieve over 75 percent bike/walk/transit mode share through this form. I fear that shifting your market to high rises will negatively impact what now seems like a positive trend.

There are a few other things that are now part of our uncomfortable discourse in Vancouver that you might consider. While it is possible to have a very efficient high rise building ours have not been, consuming as much as twice the energy per square foot as mid rise buildings. Higher exposure and the inherent inefficiency of glass skins seems to be the cause. Also, while its difficult to tease out the statistics, there is evidence that high rises are not helping to provide affordable housing, but in some ways are making housing more of a financial instrument than a place to live - "safety deposit boxes in the sky" is what some here now call them. It is clear that rates of actual occupancy are lower in our tower districts than elsewhere in our city, with up to 30 per cent of Coal Harbour tower units essentially unoccupied. Taxing unoccupied units was a hot election issue here recently, giving evidence for how disconcerting this trend has become.

Finally I want to point out that proposing towers in existing lower density streetcar city areas can bring down a government and cripple efforts to make cities more sustainable. When 10 towers were introduced into what had heretofore been a mid rise but high density plan for the Vancouver "Grandview Woodlands" neighbourhood, citizens from all parts of the city took to the streets in opposition. The City overreacted by placing a moratorium on any new development there in whatever form. Our common efforts to make our city more sustainable were set back by years, while the word "density" was needlessly degraded.

Sincerely,

Patrick M. Condon, Professor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick M. Condon', written in a cursive style.

UBC James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments
Chair, UBC Master of Urban Design Program
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