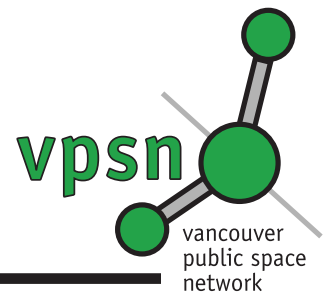


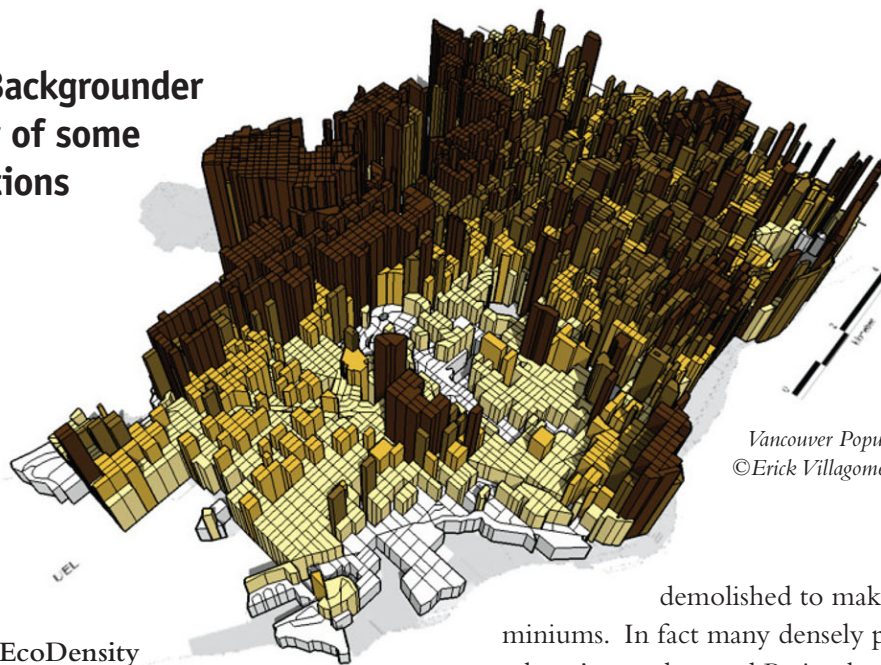
EcoDensity

VPSN BACKGROUNDER



In February 2007, the City of Vancouver launched a new initiative called “EcoDensity” which aims to map a course for future development that encourages increased density, while at the same time reducing the city’s ecological footprint.

The following VPSN Backgrounder provides an overview of some of the key considerations and concerns around EcoDensity.



Vancouver Population Density Map
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What is EcoDensity?

★ Our understanding of EcoDensity is that it is an attempt to encourage a form of densification that is environmentally friendly and helps to reduce the city’s ecological footprint.

★ In a practical sense, EcoDensity will mean encouraging forms of development in low to medium density areas that will allow for an increased number of people to reside there. Such areas could be along transit corridors, in areas of the city that are considered transitional (e.g. some of the light industrial areas), or in neighbourhoods where existing development patterns have typically favoured a small number of houses per square kilometre.

★ From a design standpoint, EcoDensity could also mean a variety of things – the adaptive reuse of existing buildings, the development of secondary housing suites (granny flats) and the creation of new housing forms. It does not mean that the big, old single-family character homes will all be

demolished to make way for condominiums. In fact many densely populated cities – such as Amsterdam and Paris – have very few high-rises compared to Vancouver.

★ The city links EcoDensity to a number of specific principles – around sustainability, affordability, livability.

A Few Other Points

★ One of the challenges with the term “EcoDensity” is that it is not totally clear how this differs from the more conventional forms of densification that are talked about around urban planning tables.

★ Our understanding is also that the idea of EcoDensity was borne in the mayor’s office and then handed off to the Planning Department to realize. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but given the Mayor’s track record this last year on some development decisions involving the public realm, it is something that we want to keep our eye on.

What is Densification?

* Densification in its simplest sense refers to the idea of increasing the number of people in a given area – this can happen through sheer population growth but is usually also facilitated through planning, design or architectural means.

* For example, if you were to develop an area with warehouses and a few old homes – say around South False Creek – and put in a series of low-rise flats you would be densifying the area; that is, increasing the number of people that are living there.

Is EcoDensity a Good Thing?

* In so much as the City is articulating a proposal to increase density and allow for population growth, while being cognizant of environmental issues, yes.

* There are also provisions around the potential creation of better public transit opportunities and urban agriculture that need to be supported as part of this process.

* In that regard, it is important for people to get out and participate in the shaping of the EcoDensity initiative – by participating in the feedback options, or by attending the Ideas Fair that is taking place in early March.

What are the VPSN's concerns?

* The VPSN wants to make sure that people put pressure on the city to ensure pride of place not just for more residential development but also for the public amenities that help to define neighbourhoods and make the city what it is.

The Problem

* There is already a shortage of a number of types of amenities – childcare spaces, parks and greenspace, bike lanes, libraries, public transit, community centres... all of which are at capacity or have waitlists. So adding more people to a given area will stretch these resources.

* To be fair, the City's website and EcoDensity literature acknowledge the need for these items... but not yet in a concrete fashion. They say, for example, that "*growth largely covers its own costs*" -- but this assumes that sufficient amenities are provided as part of the growth process.

* The City is asking, for example "*which amenities will we need to create high quality EcoDensity neighbourhoods?*" – and we really want to emphasize that this should not be about an either/or ranking of different amenity types. The answer, really, is more of everything... because what we have is already stretched.

* We are asking citizens to remind the City to tackle the need for developing public amenities in a very aggressive fashion. To implement something as radical as EcoDensity, you need an equally radical approach for the public realm

– an approach that has to be transparent and allow for a good measure of public input along the way.

* The City has a track record of successfully increasing the density of the city – just look at Yaletown or Cole Harbour or the new South East False Creek development. Creating public spaces in these areas has been hit and miss. So, for example, we have the Seawall as a plus, but childcare hasn't fared as well.

* The other concern related to this is that the current Council's decisions -- to reduce childcare and social housing at South East False Creek, for example, or to eliminate the bike lane proposal for the Burrard Bridge -- make their rhetoric around EcoDensity seem a little contradictory. These early signals need to be resolved and the VPSN is emphasizing the need for citizens to really hold the politicians and planners to account for the intent and spirit of the EcoDensity initiative.

Are there other concerns?

* The VPSN wants to ensure that EcoDensity is more than rhetoric and more than marketing. Because some of the green-development strategies outlined in the City's EcoDensity materials have been tried before, it will be important to monitor the plan as it evolves over the next few months, and to hold the City accountable to the proposals that it has made.

* Some of the issues in the EcoDensity portfolio seem a bit hard to link to municipal activities. Affordability? Realistically, our city already has very dense, very small, shoe-box condominiums that are also very expensive -- and it is unclear how principles like this will be met as part of the EcoDensity initiative. The issue of jurisdiction (the intersection of different levels of government) will also be an important consideration here.

* Again, the VPSN's main concern is to ensure that people know what's going on with EcoDensity and are able to ask the City planners informed questions and to know how to hold them to account.

* Incidentally – we know through the grapevine that there are vocal community groups that are opposed to EcoDensity on principle – they don't want a change to existing land-use patterns (i.e. large, single family dwellings) and perceive an increase in population – as inevitable as it may be – as a threat. It is important that there is a reasoned voice that comes to the table to support densification in a way that is good for the community as a whole, to ensure that it is not just imposed on select neighbourhoods.