



Intergovernmental and Administration Committee Meeting Date: October 17, 2012

To: Intergovernmental and Administration Committee

From: Denise Philippe/Joanne Gauci, Senior Policy Advisors, External Outreach and Intergovernmental Relations, Corporate Relations Department

Date: September 19, 2012

Subject: **Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues and Post-Dialogue Forum: Building Community – Social Connections Matter**

Recommendation:

That the Board:

- a) Direct staff to explore collaboration with the Vancouver Foundation to facilitate expansion of the Neighbourhood Small Grants program throughout the Metro Vancouver region; and
 - b) Forward the report dated September 19, 2012 and titled “Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues and Post-Dialogue Forum: Building Community: Social Connections Matter” to member municipalities, and other related agencies for their information and comment.
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1. PURPOSE

To provide the Intergovernmental and Administration Committee with the results of the Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues and Post-Dialogue Forum held throughout the region in June and July 2012, on the topic of Building Community – Social Connections Matter.

2. CONTEXT

Metro Vancouver’s Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues, hosted in collaboration with local Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade, are high-profile discussions intended to help decision-makers shape the future of the region by presenting a range of views to stimulate fresh thought on regional issues.

The post-dialogue forums aim to move from dialogue to action by convening a small group of dialogue participants, subject matter experts and appropriate Metro Vancouver staff and directors to reflect on the outcomes of the dialogues and identify action areas for the consideration of the Metro Vancouver Board and other community organizations.

In June and July, Metro Vancouver hosted a dialogue series on the topic of social connections, in which dialogue participants were presented with the following scenario:

By many accounts the Metro Vancouver region is on the fast track to sustainability, renowned for being “green”, embracing diversity and scoring high in terms of livability. But new research by the Vancouver Foundation suggests that people in the region may be feeling a sense of isolation – a lack of connection to their neighbours, to their community and by extension to their city and region – a finding that has the potential to undermine even the best sustainability efforts.

What factors are contributing to this trend - our planning approaches and patterns of growth? Our growing population, or increasingly multicultural population? The transition to a digital age? Other factors yet to be determined? How do we address this divide and build social connections that foster strong and healthy communities? What examples of cohesive communities can we learn from moving forward?

Dialogues were hosted in New Westminster – Central Northeast (June 19), North Vancouver – North Shore (June 26), Vancouver (June 27) and Richmond – South of the Fraser (July 4), followed by a post-dialogue forum (July 25).

This dialogue series was built around recent findings by the Vancouver Foundation on an emerging trend of social isolation and community disconnection experienced by people throughout the Metro Vancouver region – and in particular, by people falling into the 25 – 36 years of age category. The Foundation has continued to drill down into their recent findings with large polls intended to better identify key drivers, community sectors most impacted, and possible directions forward. The dialogue series provided a platform to further explore, with key experts, what might be prompting an unraveling of the social fabric, the implications that this might have for long-term sustainability in the region, and how we might systemically address challenges. In total, 11 subject matter experts were engaged as panelists to provide a range of perspectives, looking at the role of the built environment to the impact of digital and social media on community cohesiveness.

Social sustainability – including the dimensions of community and sense of place – was articulated as one of the key themes of Metro Vancouver’s 2011 Sustainability Congress, and are among the imperatives and principles underlying our Sustainability Framework.

Approximately 199 people participated in the dialogues, reflecting a cross-section of key stakeholders and community interests. This included the participation of three Directors providing open and closing remarks. The June 27 dialogue was webcast – our second live streamed dialogue – and secured 118 additional viewers/participants. The dialogue was also videotaped airing on Shaw TV as part of The Sustainable Region (Metro Vancouver’s weekly TV show); on average, shows airing the dialogues reach 8,000 – 10,000 viewers. A cross-section of 21 key stakeholders and thought leaders joined with key Metro Vancouver staff and directors at the post-dialogue forum to reflect on dialogue outcomes and consider ways forward.

A summary of the dialogues, which formed the basis for discussions at the post-dialogue forum, can be found in Attachment 1. A comprehensive transcript of each dialogue (i.e., the Issues Summary Notes) is available on the Metro Vancouver website.

3. KEY THEMES

This set of dialogues raised public awareness about an emerging trend of social disconnection within and between communities throughout the region, and explored what might be potential causes and solutions.

A large part of the discussions focused on the built form, and how the way we design and build our residential buildings and neighborhoods might be impeding instead of facilitating stronger community ties. There was also considerable discussion of alternative housing models, and community engagement best practices, and the ways in which these might present solutions. The role of social media, and the rapid increase in use of tools such as Facebook, was discussed with respect to the ways in which these seem to be replacing, instead of augmenting, face-to-face communication and human experience. The metaphor of 'Facebook as junk food' was used to explain how digital and social media is not being used to drive people *into* social interactions, but as a replacement of such interaction. The impact of cultural diversity, including immigrant settlement trends, was explored with respect to values and skills around community engagement, and relationship-building across language barriers. The question of whether settlement into more culturally-homogenous communities best served the region and its citizens as a whole was posed. Regional affordability was a consistent theme. This was expressed as a challenge with respect to people needing to work more to afford to live in the region, and that the time spent at work translated into citizens spending less time at home in their neighborhoods, and having less time to volunteer or participate in their communities.

Barriers

The dialogues and post-dialogue forum engaged participants in a robust discussion of the complex challenges facing a region with rapidly changing urban landscapes and demographic profiles, and contextualized by ever-more demanding employment and communication requirements.

With respect to the addressing social isolation within and between communities, the following were identified as challenges:

- Current planning approaches, as well as much of our existing built form (streetscapes, etc.), do not best support social interaction. For example:
 - The move to high density developments, in the form of towers, does not encourage interaction between neighbours.
 - Walkability has yet to be achieved in most neighbourhoods, with the car continuing as the main mode of transportation.
 - There is a lack of well-designed gathering and communal spaces.
- Cultural Diversity: While cultural diversity is supported or tolerated by most within the region, the research suggests that the more languages spoken in a community, the less people feel they can communicate with and trust each other, and the more likely it is for people to believe that it would be difficult to rally neighbours if there was a local problem to be solved.
- Affordability: People are working more. They have less time to volunteer or participate in community. For neighbourhoods, this often means fewer people at

- home during the day, and fewer ‘eyes on the street’ that has historically facilitated greater community connection and social monitoring.
- Digital and Social Media: The common use of social media tools is reducing the amount of human, face-to-face interaction in communities. It is expected that the use of social media will only increase in the future.

Areas for Action and Collaboration

The dialogues generated ideas for action and collaboration in four key areas: supporting social interaction at the neighborhood scale; bridging diversity; encouraging participation in civic life; and (changes to) digital and social media.

1) Supporting social interaction at the neighbourhood scale

- 1.1. Reconsider the development of our communities with social connectivity in mind – design public spaces and built form that nurtures social interaction. Examples include:
 - Target mid-level density instead of low density sprawl or high density towers – best exemplified by townhouses, row houses and mid-level buildings.
 - Move parking away from living areas and create shared courtyards as village entry points.
 - Consider removing or reducing parking allotments – the cost of providing parking, particularly underground parking, significantly drives up the cost of housing.
 - Provide more communal spaces inside and around buildings. In buildings, make halls wider, enabling people to stop and talk; include lighted lounges on every floor next to a window; provide central, shared stairways instead of locked off floors and fire escape stairwells.
 - Create smaller scale communities and public spaces so people are offered both a space to retreat from, as well as engage in.
 - Consider pod-oriented design that still accommodates walkability and connectivity instead of the grid approach.
- 1.2. Consider establishing initiatives that rely on community-based co-operation in order to function, such as collaborative consumption projects like tool libraries.
- 1.3. Provide more opportunities for community gardens and local farmers markets, and better support ones that already exist.
- 1.4. Encourage and provide support for dog ownership in communities particularly struggling with cohesion.
- 1.5. Continue support at the regional and municipal level for developing walkable and transit-friendly communities.
- 1.6. Government to support experiments with different types of common spaces that explore a range of community connections across ages and cultures.

- 1.7. Implement more co-housing projects, as a housing model that better fosters community connections.

2) Bridging diversity (across ethnic backgrounds, age groups and other differences)

- 2.1. Promote and support the integration of newcomers.
- 2.2. Develop a strategy that better integrates temporary residents (6 months – 3 years of residency), who can contribute to communities in a variety of ways, and make up a sizable portion of our population.
- 2.3. Support the Chambers of Commerce in enhancing their role as “the front door to the community”, providing information for newcomers from inside and outside Canada on how to settle and establish a business and a home in a specific community.
- 2.4. Continue to offer opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and cross-cultural interaction.
- 2.5. Government initiatives – from dialogues to park programs – to better include diverse viewpoints and diverse cultural perspectives.
- 2.6. Create more, and improve the functioning of already existing, neighbourhood commons.

3) Encouraging participation in civic life

- 3.1. Enhance support for arts, culture and sports.
- 3.2. Reconsider current approaches to public engagement on civic issues. Provide more meaningful opportunities for citizen decision-making in government consultation processes; and provide real alternatives instead of ‘blank slates’ to communities providing feedback on urban design.
- 3.3. Expand opportunities for dialogue and exchange – focus on two-way conversations instead of sharing monolithic narratives.
- 3.4. Work places to provide opportunities for employees to volunteer within their communities.
- 3.5. Create more accessible community development and civic education programs, and offer them throughout the region, so that residents can redevelop the skills required to participate in and build community.
- 3.6. Municipalities to partner with the Vancouver Foundation and create city-specific youth grants program for innovative/green neighbourhood projects.

4) Digital and Social media

- 4.1. Provide more opportunities for social media to facilitate real-world interaction, instead of a substitute for in-person communication, particularly in public spaces such as parks, plazas, and neighbourhood gathering spaces.
- 4.2. Support the use of media that is place-based and emphasizes real-world interaction and participation.

4. POST-DIALOGUE FORUM – KEY CONCLUSIONS/NEXT STEPS

A summary of the dialogues was presented to participants at the post-dialogue forum, with the goal of prioritizing actions and exploring roles and projects for Metro Vancouver to pursue in collaboration with others.

In reviewing challenges and opportunities to move forward, participants felt that not enough emphasis was placed on how to best target the 24-36 age range, given that the Vancouver Foundation found that this particular demographic was among the hardest hit with respect to community disconnection. Otherwise, in general, participants agreed with the challenges as identified, and the main categories of potential actions and collaborations. In particular, participants focused on building design and housing arrangements; skills training and education; greater support for community development policies and practices; and the need for more cities to partner with the Vancouver Foundation through the Neighborhood Grants program to provide on-the-ground resources to community leaders.

With respect to building design and housing, participants highlighted the need to include amenity spaces, such as shared cooking facilities, in multi-family complexes and the need for better/different by-laws that support co-housing and policies that better support co-ops. Participants felt that a dialogue with developers, city planners and architects on how to use the built form to better support community involvement was an action that Metro Vancouver could pursue.

Training and education recommendations ranged from the need to have more civic education and newcomer welcoming programs through to more investment in early childhood education where social/community-belonging skills begin to be developed.

A number of participants asked for greater support for community development positions in a variety of agencies, and that those positions shift away from a service focus towards a capacity-building focus including reviewing new developments for their ability to contribute to social interactions. The need for more family-friendly policies in organizations and a living wage policy implemented at the municipal level was also emphasized.

The Vancouver Foundation's Neighborhood Grants program was discussed, highlighted for its ability to help build community in a wide range of neighborhoods across the region and its current strategy of finding municipal partners to increase its outreach and impact. A role for Metro Vancouver may be found here, as the organization has the ability to reach out across municipalities through its Neighbourhood Grants Program.

While the Vancouver Foundation has been successful in targeting different municipalities (e.g., the City of New Westminster was a recent recipient of Neighbourhood Grant Program) collaboration between Metro Vancouver and the Vancouver Foundation could facilitate greater awareness of the program throughout the region and broader uptake and access to neighbourhood grants regionally. The result would be more communities with greater access to resources – building communities' capacity to establish and nurture social connections and relationships within and between neighborhoods across the region. Supporting the reach and impact of this existing program would also deliver on one of Metro Vancouver's core sustainability principles – building community capacity and social cohesion.

5. ALTERNATIVES

The Board may:

- a) Direct staff to explore collaboration with the Vancouver Foundation to facilitate the expansion of the Neighbourhood Small Grants program throughout the Metro Vancouver region.
- b) Forward the report dated September 19, 2012 and titled "Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues and Post-Dialogue Forum: Building Community: Social Connections Matter" to member municipalities, and other related agencies for their information and comment.
- c) Receive this report for information and take no further action.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues form part of Metro Vancouver's ongoing community outreach and engagement program and are reflected in the 2012 and 2013 budgets. Collaboration with the Vancouver Foundation to expand the Neighbourhood Small Grants program would entail additional financial resources in the form of a grant. Should the Board endorse recommendation a), staff will report back detailing the opportunity for collaboration, including the financial implications and potential benefits to Metro Vancouver and its member municipalities.

7. CONCLUSION

A key objective of the Building Community – Social Connections Matter dialogues was to inform and engage on what has emerged as a surprising but concerning trend – one that has the potential to negatively impact our ability to thrive, prosper and achieve a sustainable region. The dialogues and post-dialogue forum brought out individuals and agencies that do not regularly attend the dialogues – we reached a new segment of the region's population with this series. Through participant response, we found that the topic was one that resonated with people. Many participants were eager to share stories of both challenges and achievements, and even more importantly, were interested in connecting outside of the dialogues to better address the issue. In this way, the dialogues contributed to Metro Vancouver's goal of promoting collaboration to achieve sustainability.

The challenges identified were both systemic and localized. In hearing the many stories of successful community connections, it was made apparent that more support at the

neighborhood level would be one effective way to reverse the trend of social isolation and community disconnection.

In moving forward, Metro Vancouver may find further opportunities through its existing community-based programs (in parks and housing, for example) to implement some of the recommendations expressed in the dialogue series. There were also many planning-related solutions identified and while these are largely locally based, they also have a regional component and should be considered in the implementation of the Regional Growth Strategy; the strongest linkages being with goals related to the development of complete communities.

Building community capacity and social cohesion is a key sustainability principle underpinning Metro Vancouver's suite of management plans. This dialogue series has strengthened our relationship with the Vancouver Foundation – a key community agency with a core mandate in this area – establishing a framework for further collaboration moving forward.

Attachment: Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues – Summary of Dialogues and Post-Dialogue Forum (*Orbit #6559640*)

Metro Vancouver
Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues
BUILDING COMMUNITY: SOCIAL CONNECTIONS MATTER
SUMMARY OF DIALOGUES

Metro Vancouver hosted four dialogues on the topic of Building Community: Social Connections Matter: Central Northeast on June 19, North Shore on June 26, Vancouver on June 27 and South of the Fraser on July 4. This is a summary of the dialogues, including a snapshot of challenges and possible areas for action and collaboration as suggested by dialogue panellists and participants. This summary formed the basis for discussions at the post-dialogue forum held on July 25.

Dialogue Panelists:

- *Frank Ducote*, Principal, Frank Ducote Urban Design (June 19, 26, 27))
- *David Vogt*, Executive Director, Mobile Muse Network; and Director, Digital Learning Projects, University of British Columbia (June 19, 26, 27)
- *Charles Montgomery*, Urbanist, Journalist and Author of *Happy City* (June 19, June 27)
- *Dan Hiebert*, UBC Co-Director, Metropolis, (June 19)
- *Faye Wightman*, President and CEO, Vancouver Foundation (July 4)
- *Catherine Clement*, VP, Public Engagement and Communications, Vancouver Foundation (June 19)
- *Andria Teather*, VP, Granting and Community Initiatives, Vancouver Foundation (June 26)
- *Lidia Kemeny*, Program Director, Partnerships and Projects (June 27)
- *Ninu Kang*, Director of Family Programs, MOSAIC (June 27)
- *Paula Carr*, Community Strategist, Intercultural Neighbourhood Development, Collingwood Neighbourhood House (July 4)
- *Brandon Yan*, Vancouver Public Space Network (July 4)

Attendance:

	Date and Location	Participants	Opening and Closing Remarks
Central Northeast	June 19, 2012 Inn at the Quay, New Westminster	25	<i>Director Wayne Wright, Mayor, City of New Westminster</i> <i>Cori Lyn Germiquet, Executive Director, New Westminster Chamber of Commerce</i>
North Shore	June 26, 2012 Eagles Hall, City of North Vancouver	33	<i>Director Derek Corrigan, Mayor, City of Burnaby</i>
Vancouver	June 27, 2012 Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Vancouver	78	None
South of the Fraser	July 4, 2012 Richmond Cultural Centre, Richmond	63	<i>Director Malcolm Brodie, Mayor, City of Richmond</i> <i>Craig Jones, Executive Director, Richmond Chamber of Commerce</i>
Post-Dialogue Forum	July 25, 2012 Metro Vancouver Head Office	21	<i>Director Wayne Wright, Mayor, City of New Westminster</i> <i>Director Derek Corrigan, Mayor, City of Burnaby</i>

Challenges

- **Planning Approaches:** Much of our existing built form, streetscapes and cityscapes do not support social interaction, for example:
 - a lack of gathering spaces, communal areas and inspiring public places;
 - a move to high density developments that don't encourage interaction among neighbours; and
 - communities where residents move around by car as opposed to walking.
- **Diversity:** Increasingly diverse populations in our neighbourhoods are both positive and challenging. At the larger community level, residents are tolerant of diversity. However, the more languages spoken in a neighbourhood, the less people feel they can communicate with, and trust, each other; the less likely they are to feel welcome and that they belong; and the more likely they are to believe that it would be difficult to rally neighbours if there was a local problem to be solved.
- **Affordability:** A lack of affordability is limiting social interaction. People are working more. They have less time at home and have less time to volunteer or participate in community. For neighbourhoods, this often means fewer people at home during the day, and fewer 'eyes on the street' that has historically facilitated greater community connection and social monitoring.
- **Digital and Social Media:** Digital and social media are not being maximized for the role they can play in engagement - to create conversations; to connect people and to grow that connection.

Areas for Action and Collaboration

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