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Greater Vancouver's Leadership in Smart Growth Slips

Analysis of census data finds recent decline in Greater Vancouver's compact, walkable neighborhoods

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Despite impressive growth in pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods in some parts of the region, Greater Vancouver's overall smart-growth record slipped in recent years, according to a new analysis by Seattle-based think tank Sightline Institute. From 2001 through 2006, the share of new urban and suburban growth that went into compact, walkable communities declined and the amount of land developed to accommodate new residents increased, compared with the 1990s. (See related map.)

"This is more of a warning signal than an alarm bell," said Sightline research director Clark Williams-Derry, who authored the report. "Greater Vancouver is still a smart-growth leader. But in light of BC's ambitious climate goals and the rising costs of gasoline, the Lower Mainland should redouble its efforts to foster neighbourhoods where residents can walk, bike, or use transit for their daily travel."

Ken Cameron, the Chief Executive Officer and Registrar of the Homeowner Protection Office and former manager of planning at Metro Vancouver, said: "This report demonstrates the urgency of 'reconnecting the dots' by ensuring that local planning decisions and transportation planning and investment work together through regional growth strategies to achieve our goals of greenhouse gas reduction, livability, and sustainability."

To conduct the study, Sightline researchers mapped population density trends throughout the greater Vancouver area, using data from the last four Canadian censuses. They found that in the 1990s, a combination of factors helped Greater Vancouver limit the type of low-density sprawl that marred many comparably sized US cities during that decade. But in recent years, the pace of compact growth slowed.

Between 2001 and 2006, compact neighbourhoods accounted for just 56 percent of new urban and suburban development, compared with 67 percent during the 1990s. And for every new 100 residents, Greater Vancouver converted 45 percent more rural land to suburbs from 2001 to 2006 than it did during the previous census period.

The cities of Vancouver and North Vancouver ranked highest at fostering compact neighbourhoods—without their stellar records, the metropolitan area overall would have marked far less progress in boosting walkable, pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods. They were followed by New Westminster, Burnaby, White Rock, and Richmond.

Cheeying Ho, executive director of Smart Growth BC, said that to maintain its leadership, the region should focus its efforts on investing in fuel-efficient transportation options instead of highway expansion; adopting strategies to channel growth in compact, walkable neighborhoods; and moving towards better-coordinated regional planning. “We can spare more farmland and open space from development, even while helping residents reduce their fuel costs,” she said. “It’s a win-win.”

Sightline Institute, Cascadia's think tank on sustainability, tracks key trends critical to the region's future.

See also:

[Download a pdf of the full report here](#)

[See interactive map of Vancouver, BC's growth since 1991](#)