

Issue Note: Vancouver Views, Downtown & Historic Area Height Considerations

January 14, 2010

Summary

On Thursday, January 20, 2011, Vancouver City Council will be reviewing two staff reports on the inter-related subjects of downtown and heritage area building heights and view corridors.

The first report - *Implementation of "Vancouver Views" and Opportunities for Higher Buildings in the Downtown* - recommends that Council formally adopt the changes to the view protection guidelines that were approved *in principle* in January 2010 (see details below). It also recommends that Council adopt a revised *General Policy For Higher Buildings*, which would allow consideration of higher buildings outside protected public views in the Downtown area.¹

Three areas are identified as candidate sites for higher buildings: two "gateway" areas at (a) the north end of Burrard Bridge (three possible buildings: 500ft, 375 ft, and 300 ft respectively), and (b) the north end of Granville Bridge (two buildings up to 425 feet), as well as (c) a series of other sites in the Central Business District. In this latter area the maximum allowable height would be increased from 600' to 700' along Burrard, Georgia and Granville,² and the maximum allowable height in 'shoulder areas' such as Alberni would be increased from 400' to 500.' In their report, City staff also note that several sites were rejected because their location would create adverse shadowing, were located on secondary streets, or were located on the waterfront.

The second report - *Historic Area Height Review Policy Implementation* - looks at height issues in portions of Gastown, Chinatown, Victory Square and Main and Hastings. It recommends that Council support the rezoning of portions of Chinatown to allow for the creation of mid-rise development upwards of 120 feet in Chinatown South and Hastings and Main, as well as the creation of limited opportunities for larger buildings up to 150 feet. The report notes that any rezoning undertaken in the Historic Area would need to comply with the protected view corridors.

A few other notes:

- Taller, landmark buildings are typically reviewed by an Urban Design Panel before getting approval, to ensure that the buildings meet a high level of architectural excellence.

¹ One view cone - the large corridor that arcs outward from Queen Elizabeth Park - would be impacted. The QE view cone is a broad, panoramic view encompassing a large portion of the city, including the existing skyline, along with the harbour and North Shore mountains.

² The Shangri-La, currently Vancouver's tallest building, is 659 feet.

- Any rezoning that would be required to permit allow taller buildings in the sites mentioned would be subject to public hearing.

What is a view corridor?

View corridors or view cones are three dimensional view points that start from a fixed position (e.g. Olympic Village, Commercial Drive & East 15th), encompass a given visual range, and terminate at a particular object. View cones can be 'narrow' or 'wide' depending on this visual range. In general, view corridors are designed to protect views to iconic natural features (e.g. the North Shore Mountains) or architectural landmarks. In Vancouver, the City's *View Protection Guidelines* notes that view cones were created "to protect selected threatened public views."

A product of planning policy, view corridors are a planning tool utilized by a number of cities around the world. View cone-related guidelines and policy can effect on the height, massing and distribution of buildings within a given view cone. Vancouver has a total of 30 protected views.

History of view corridors in Vancouver

1989 - City Council adopts 27 view cones to protect views to the North Shore mountains, the Downtown skyline and surrounding water bodies.

2009 - City Council directs staff to review view cones and to determine whether modification to key view corridors should be made. Strong public debate on the issue.

2010 - The 27 view cones are reinforced and three additional view corridors are adopted *in principle*. Options for allowing higher buildings within new and existing view corridors are rejected; however, City Council directs planning staff to look for opportunities for taller buildings in downtown that do not infringe on protected views.

Rationale for higher buildings

In general, there are several reasons that are advanced for supporting taller buildings. These include:

- Taller towers can add visual excitement in the urban landscape, act as iconic landmarks, and help form part of a city's identity by fostering a sense of place.
- Taller towers have the potential to help Vancouver reach certain environmental goals by encouraging higher density in places where infrastructure, transit, and job spaces already exist, discouraging sprawl, and bringing increased job capacity downtown;
- Higher buildings have also traditionally been used to leverage a variety of community benefits from the developers, including funding for heritage renewal/density transfer, daycare spaces, recreational facilities, public art, park and green space. For example, in the case of the Historic Area Height Review, part of the rationale behind allowing increased mid-rise development is that it will support various Chinatown revitalization goals.

Of course, it should be noted that the opportunity to 'build higher' is also attractive to developers - who see taller buildings as an opportunity to create additional residential or commercial space for sale or rent.

Rationale against higher buildings

In Downtown...

The City report also references public consultation on the increased building height - and notes that the following concerns were registered:

- The loss of private views;
- Increased population in the Downtown and additional strain on amenities such as community centres and parks;
- The potential for additional traffic and parking issues;
- Concern that the Downtown is already "too crowded" with towers;
- Concern about shadow impacts on streets - and a loss of access to sunlight in already dense neighbourhoods such as Downtown South.

The City report notes that "staff believe that many of the comments and concerns can be resolved through the detailed urban design and technical analysis at the rezoning and development permit stage."

In the Heritage Area...

Community organizations have noted:

- Concern about the potential for gentrification and displacement of low-income individuals and families to occur as a result of new development;
- A request for key social issues - and in particular the shortage of housing - to be dealt with prior to any new development.

Other things to think about...

- Currently, taller buildings are utilized by planners as one way to generate needed public benefits or economic revitalization. Where do you stand on this trade-off? Are there other ways to achieve the benefits associated with higher buildings?
- Would the city's key gateway areas - Granville and Burrard - benefit from stronger sense of architectural definition? Would higher buildings in these areas help with this?
- While iconic architecture can contribute to a sense of place, care must still be taken in evaluating a buildings' impact on their immediate vicinity (e.g. street fronts, shading, pedestrian flows, etc.) If these impacts can be reasonably accommodated are higher buildings acceptable?
- Where do you stand on view corridors? Vancouver's 'view culture' has shaped the actual urban form of the city, but is there a point in which a focus on distant, however beautiful views, sacrifices 'in the city' benefits and architectural/urban design opportunities?

- How high is too high? Are there social and health related considerations that should be taken into account with the creation of higher buildings? One body of literature suggests that buildings over a certain height cause a disconnect between the home and the street and that this, in turn contributes to socio-spatial problems in neighbourhoods with lots of high rises. Another body of literature notes that increased density (characteristic of downtown residential development) increases walkability and can foster social capital. How might this development affect quality of life issues?

Additional Resources

- City of Vancouver - View Corridors - <http://www.vancouver.ca/views>
- City of Vancouver - Historic Area Height Review - <http://www.vancouver/hahr>

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