

March 20, 2009



Michael Gordon  
Senior Planner, Central Area Planning  
City of Vancouver  
#406-515 W. 10th Ave., V5Z 4A8

## **Re: North East False Creek High Level Review**

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Dear Michael,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the City's North East False Creek concept. This is an important undertaking and we appreciate the opportunity to provide input. As part of our process of preparing this submission we have consulted with our members and have incorporated their suggestions into this document.

### **Background**

The Members of the Vancouver Public Space Network (VPSN) have been involved in public consultations of the North East False Creek (NEFC) High Level Review and as part of the consultative group organized by the Planning staff at the City of Vancouver since early 2008. The intent of this letter is to our collective feedback on the process of the NEFC High Level planning review and direction of the land use, density and areas identified for public open space and amenities for the North East False Creek Area.

### **High Level Review Process**

The Vancouver Public Space Network has been involved in the NEFC consultative process since early 2008. In our opinion, the process was compromised early on with the imposition of an ODP amendment to BC Place as well as the unanticipated (and still to-be-determined) siting of the Vancouver Art Gallery in the Plaza of Nations area. These two large planning directions have, in the view of VPSN members, greatly diminished the opportunities and limited the possibilities for a vibrant, diverse and liveable neighbourhood in a new NEFC. More immediately, they have shifted the focus and significantly constrained the broad intent of the high-level review.

#### *BC Place ODP*

The VPSN believes that the imposition of the BC Place ODP revision has weakened and confused the planning direction and shifted the planning study towards a focus on developing large masses of dense public-use commercial and residential housing in the blocks surrounding BC place. We find questionable the appeal of residential use in such close proximity to a facility such as BC Place that regularly schedules large organized events. The events that are typically hosted by BC Place create noise above accepted levels for extended periods and require the continued movement of large numbers of motor vehicles and people to supply, support and transfer crowds and goods to BC Place. With regard to the impact on the public realm, the ODP amendment has not provided sufficient gathering spaces for the crowds expected at

BC Place events. BC Place continues to block the physical and visual connection between downtown Vancouver to False Creek. The opportunity given to improve these connections was overlooked in the ODP amendment and provides little flexibility for improvements to the area's public spaces and to create elements that relate to a human scale surrounding BC Place.

### *Vancouver Art Gallery*

The provincial government has suggested the former Plaza of Nations to be the new location for an enlarged footprint for the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG). The relocation of the VAG to the Plaza of Nations site was another disruption and seemingly imposed decree on the planning study of NEFC. The proposed site and orientation of the VAG building, as has been presented in the planning study, serves as a literal wall to access to False Creek and limits the possibilities for an outdoor plaza large enough for a festival or performance space that Vancouverites have enjoyed since 1986 as Plaza of Nations. This loss of contiguous public space, in favour of segmented, interrupted 'mini plazas', as portrayed in the study, is a serious deficiency of the proposed layout that would, if enacted, seriously handicap the area's great public realm potential.

To this, we also want to add that there is, at current, a critical lack of information around the Vancouver Art Gallery's own perspective on its relationship to the public realm of the NEFC, and the role that it will potentially play in enabling (or not) the vibrancy of the public spaces that surround it.

### **NEFC Planning Direction**

Vancouver residents, businesses and visitors hope that the NEFC high level review will provide a strong direction and vision for the future of the last underdeveloped part of False Creek. It is currently very difficult to walk, bicycle and drive between Downtown and NEFC because of the poor physical and visual connections between downtown and NEFC. On this note, there are three major deficiencies in the proposed High Level Review that we would like to identify.

#### *1. Connectivity*

We believe that the proposed building form should provide porosity to False Creek and to the seawall, one of Vancouver's public space successes. These areas will only remain a success if new development continues to respect and relate appropriately to the existing structure of the seawall and provide adequate access and additional gathering spaces that create a variety of experiences within the NE section of False Creek.

The proposed plan does little to reconnect the downtown to False Creek or provide viable walking or biking routes between the seawall and downtown. It is unclear how the visual connection between the sub areas presented in the plan and wayfinding will be addressed to support these much needed connections. BC Place, GM Place, Pacific Boulevard and the Georgia viaduct all act as significant barriers to the area and are a considerable source of frustration for residents and visitors to the area. The

imposition of large commercial and residential building masses will only exacerbate the problem unless strong, purposeful linkages to the downtown are developed.

While discussion of potential “Georgia Steps”, connecting Georgia street to NEFC is an appealing notion, it remains an idea with little description or accommodation in the current plan. The continued treatment of Pacific Boulevard as a fast moving car-centric arterial belies this point. Connections between Transit centres, such as Stadium SkyTrain station, and NEFC are also in need of greater emphasis and attention as transit ridership in and out and out of the city will increase dramatically in the coming years.

## *2. Starting with Public Space*

Vancouverites are looking to the City to develop a land use strategy and building massing around a sufficiently robust allocation of public open space and adjunct public benefits and amenities. Such spaces are essential for injecting a social and cultural structure to NEFC. Moreover, these spaces can provide a structure to locate private residences and commercial buildings by setting scale, location and proposed uses around the public realm.

We believe that determining an open space structure as a starting point for the NEFC area is essential. Our fear, however, is that the fabric of the public space in the area will be determined in an incidental fashion—i.e. as a later detail that comes shaped as the result of whatever hasn't already been planned. Starting early with the public realm would ensure a high level of quality and usability for pedestrians, bicycles and transit uses, and would provide needed venues for neighbours to interact, artists to perform and children to play. It would also enhance the sense of place that is inherent in False Creek. From that starting point, land use and development form would be more thoughtfully structured in relation to the network of open space - which we believe would lead to a well-scaled, vibrant, inclusive and attractive neighbourhood.

On this note, we wish to register our concern that a good portion of public open space identified in the NEFC plan has been located in a marginal area under the Georgia Viaduct or other non-desirable areas that have soil contamination issues. We also understand that the High Level Review has only identified 7 acres of new open space - much less than an anticipated 21 acres that would typically be provided in a similar size development. We feel that this deficiency in public open space is unacceptable.

To remain a desirable place to live, attract people, business and tourists, Vancouver must continue to retain and develop a variety of open spaces to allow for a diverse range of activities and possibilities. The plans presented in the High Level Review reveal that the former Plaza of Nations site sadly won't be resurrected, potentially throwing community festivals such as the Taiwanese Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and other cultural events out of Vancouver.

## *3. Public Amenities*

The VPSN is concerned that the High Level Review has not properly identified the public amenities needed for the proposed density or land uses.

A comprehensive public amenity strategy was not adequately identified or described in the Review process - leaving us little to comment on. This is unfortunate because it is clear that Vancouverites, particularly in the downtown peninsula, require more daycare, playground space, sport fields and gathering space. These are needs that, even in the absence of any residential development in the NEFC area, will only increase in the coming years. With thousands of new residents projected in NEFC these needs will be exacerbated. If there are public amenity studies that have been done of the area, we would encourage the City to share them as part of this process so that we could provide some commentary on them.

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Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback on the High Level Review. We hope our feedback can be taken in the spirit of constructive criticism - and with a view to trying to make an important project the best that it can be.

Submitted Respectfully On Behalf of the Vancouver Public Space Network.

Yours truly,

Adam Vasilevich

c.c Paula Huber, Project Planner  
Debra L. Bodner, Planning Assistant

Central Area Planning City of Vancouver  
Central Area Planning City of Vancouver



Box 2754 Station Terminal  
349 West Georgia Street  
Vancouver, BC, V6B 3X2