

Vote for change? How much?

The theme of the U.S. election is “change” but whether we like it or not, change is upon us. With the pressures of population growth, our municipal politicians, planners and developers are asking Metro Vancouver residents to accept change in their communities in the form of higher density, expanded public transit and retail or commercial developments often in single family neighbourhoods or undeveloped “green” areas.

In response, communities are becoming increasingly vocal about the placement of such developments and the suitability for *their* neighbourhood. Over 80 per cent of Canadians living in urban cities feel their communities are just fine the way they are or are already overdeveloped, according to a survey by The Saint Consulting Group.

Sounds a bit like ‘Nimbyism,’ but residents often use quite compelling and articulate arguments to justify their positions, such as increased traffic congestion, damage to the environment, housing affordability and negative impacts on local businesses.

For example, during the past three years, the City of Vancouver has debated the appropriateness of large-format retailers such as Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire on S.W. Marine Drive. One side argued that such retailers would encourage more car traffic to the area while the other side countered that people already were traveling to other parts of Metro Vancouver to shop at such stores and having them located closer to their homes would reduce overall car trips. Opponents also contended that local businesses would suffer while others insisted that local residents should have access to more shopping options. The debate went on during several nights of public hearings.

In an era when community involvement often is measured by the latest voter turnout stats, it appears that community activism is reaching feverish levels. In some neighbourhoods, community associations have existed for decades to deal with various community issues. Now, more than ever, these associations are popping up specifically to combat development proposals. And with the assistance of technology, communities have found it easier to get their message out and organize troops to appear at public hearings and/or protests at City Hall. It is not uncommon for public hearings on development applications to carry on for several nights with speakers lists topping 100.

But do these groups represent the opinions and wishes of the broader community or the “silent majority”? Generally, individuals who oppose will protest eagerly and voice their opinion more than supporters will show their support. In the case of the recent Canadian Tire application on S.W. Marine Drive, despite vocal opposition at public hearings, random surveys of the neighbourhood and local businesses conducted by Mustel Group found that almost 80 per cent of both local residents and local businesses supported the application.

Obtaining project approval through political connections is a thing of the past for developers. Communities now are actively involved in the decision process and have significant influence on political decisions. In fact, the survey by Saint Consulting Group found that 87 per cent of Canadians rate a politician's stance on development important in how they cast their votes.

Another example that “people are thinking” and wanting a say in the changes that are happening in their communities. **VLM**

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How satisfied are you with the way issues are being addressed by your local government?

Very/somewhat satisfied	60%
Neither satisfied/dissatisfied	7%
Very/somewhat dissatisfied	27%
No Opinion	7%

Source: Mustel Group



Illustration by Bernie Lyon