

Growth is a choice, not Vancouver's destiny

Vancouver can lead the way by bending the population curve

BY GORDON GIBSON

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The currently received wisdom is that Vancouver should be the greenest place on earth. Very good. Hold that thought. But then dig further and consider real green leadership.

The underlying motive from this point of view is the limitation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. It goes without saying, though it is hardly ever said because it is so politically incorrect, that the basic driver of human-caused greenhouse gases is the number of people. Fewer people, less gas. More people, more gas.

In particular, more people in the developed world means way more gas because of our higher standard of living. Each new resident of Vancouver is going to use a lot more carbon than a new resident of China or Egypt.

The United Nations says that the world population is going to grow another 50 per cent before peaking out (maybe) at nine billion. Any way you slice it, that is going to mean a lot more greenhouse gas. It is obvious: a way needs to be found to deal with population growth.

Now, most of this population growth is not coming in the developed world. Europe and Japan are actually shrinking in natural growth and the United States is barely holding its own. The less developed world is exploding both in numbers and in carbon use per capita. There is where the real greenhouse challenge lies. Our little Canadian contribution is hardly even a rounding error.

There is a real exception to the growth patterns of the developed world and it is right here in Metro Vancouver. Our high-carbon population is growing very quickly. Is this a "green" contribution to the world? Hardly.

Add up all of the above and it is as simple as this: We are going to have find ways to change the fundamental growth assumption of recent civilization and invent a viable path to an economically and culturally sustainable

steady state world. Why shouldn't Vancouver do that?

Inventing a "soft landing" response to growth cannot be done in shrinking Japan, or Sweden or Russia. It is too late. The population changes there pose terrifying challenges, both in financing the care of the old and maintaining the dynamism of the young.

But because we are still on an upward path in Vancouver, we could realistically plan ways to gradually bend the population growth curve down to a steady state over the next few decades without building a demographic time bomb.



Photograph by: Ric Ernst, *Vancouver Sun*

Showing that kind of leadership would mean starting now, and it would mean a plan—because it would not happen by itself. Left to current trends, current philosophies, our growth curve will continue rising. And that has serious implications.

Anyone who travels out of Vancouver on the Trans-Canada Highway cannot but be awed by the scale of the

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work being done on that route. Anyone who watches TransLink agonizing over how to finance the response to growth has to worry. Anyone looking at the scale of condominium development in Metro Vancouver has to be astounded. Anyone looking at the recent announcements on new hospital financing and extrapolating to the future has to be some worried. Bending the growth curve down makes financing much, much easier.

Metro Vancouver continues to grow—and gas emissions with it—but there is still time to slow growth to safer levels.

However, it also has industrial implications so important that it will have to be done gradually. We are a region hugely dependent upon construction employment. That will need to slowly change as younger workers gravitate to Alberta or to different occupations. But if we plan this well, current tradespeople need not lose.

Most construction work, by definition, is not “steady state.” We—the private sector mainly, but incited by governments—are going to have to develop new sorts of production and employment if we truly want such a world.

None of this means challenging the “green” thinking of the current crop of politicians in control of metro city halls. Rather it calls upon them to think much more deeply and much further into the future—bending down that growth curve—if we want to show real leadership.

Who particularly needs that? Not the developed world, which will increasingly be faced either with the unpleasant problems of actual population decline, or such major immigration as to change the shape of their societies and again bump up greenhouse gas production.

It is the developing world that could use such an example, because—for different reasons than Vancouver—they are early enough on the greenhouse curve that a comfortable bending down of growth remains an option.

It comes down to this: With our municipal control over zoning and density, population growth is a choice, not a destiny. It is something that we must control, or it will control us. It is time to replace green lite with deep green. ■