

REAL ESTATE

# Time to make our cities livable

**Ex-Vancouver Mayor Mike Harcourt issues report for sea change in how our cities are governed**

By Ronald F. Wolf

If we want livable, sustainable cities we have to take action now.

"We talked enough; we've got to get on with it - we have to build cities with long term visions," said Mike Harcourt, former mayor of Vancouver, former premier of British Columbia, and chair of the Prime Minister's Special Advisory Committee on Cities that created the 'Restless Communities to Resilient Places' (RCTRP).

With the completion of the report Harcourt says it's time for all levels of government to start work.

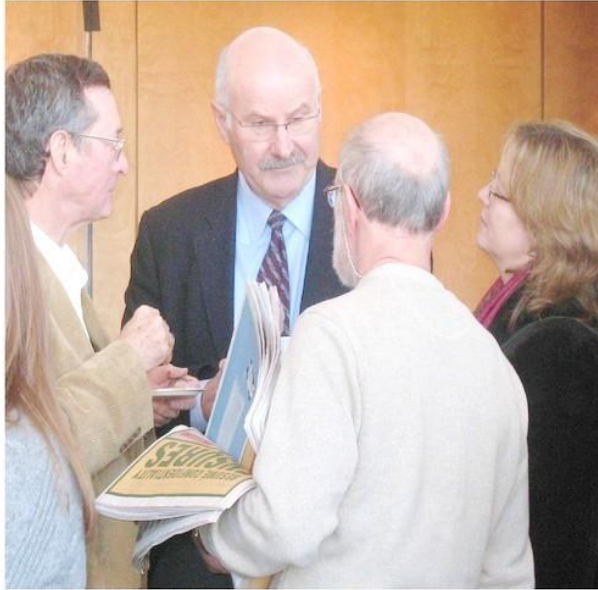
"There's a tremendous increase in resources from the national government to cities and communities," said Harcourt. "All the parties are committed to \$1.2 billion a year at least for infrastructure funding [\$12 billion over 10 years]", said Harcourt.

Harcourt's report calls for a sea change in how cities are governed - "a fundamental change in the relationship between communities and governments and a profound shift in thinking across government, business and the community."

Simply put, Harcourt is talking about 'power to the people' who live and work in a city - to give them the resources and authority to plan and make the changes their city needs.

We all know the problems faced by Canadian cities: the gutting of city centres as people and businesses opted to become part of the urban sprawl that requires more commuting and threatens green spaces and farmland. It's a problem that is a direct result of minimal or poorly conceived urban planning.

Add in the population increases we are currently experiencing and projections of our future growth and you're looking at an



Former Vancouver Mayor Mike Harcourt discusses what can be done about our cities.

environmental problem of global proportions.

Good urban planning on the part of the people who live and work in our cities will create a situation where, "people work at home (cocooning), live close to the workplace so they can exercise on their way to work (reducing health problems), or linking the regional growth centres with good rapid transit Go Trains," according to Harcourt.

One way to accomplish this is land recycling in city downtowns.

We are already seeing how well it works

locally.

Take the Kaufman Footwear factory in downtown Kitchener - a landmark 92 year old building that stood empty after the company closed up shop.

When developers transformed it into the Kaufman Lofts condos, it was a huge success, bringing people back to the downtown to live.

This is a powerful way of revitalizing a downtown core.

Encouraging upscale or unique restaurants and specialty retail establishments is also important. Destination eateries and shops

create a retail situation that people can't find in malls. Toss in tax refund incentives for those who opt for public transit and you're creating a climate that will promote a livable sustainable city.

Harcourt said the RTCRP dovetails nicely with the provincial government's Ontario Smart Growth Plan which identifies where urban growth should be intensified and where growth should be limited to protect green spaces and farmlands.

"It's a good start," said Harcourt. "I think it's the right direction we need to go - particularly the Golden Horseshoe and some other high growth areas like Ottawa."

Brenda Halloran, mayor of Waterloo, said "the Ontario Smart Growth Plan has led to initiatives that are most beneficial for the city of Waterloo; in particular 'Places to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.' In this report, Waterloo - specifically UpTown Waterloo; has been identified as an Urban Growth Centre."

"Our planners have been involved from day one in these initiatives and our council over the last few years has endorsed these provincial initiatives. Overall, the targets set for our city are in line with our own goals, and we are proud to be implementing these steps towards a more sustainable Waterloo," said Halloran.

But the RTCRP isn't just about revitalizing downtown cores, it is also concerned with urban governance and environmental sustainability.

The report talks about 'double devolution' - the need to move money and resources to the local levels of government as has been done in the European Union. The reason is simple: people on the ground know what problems and issues they face.

This also requires all levels of government to co-operate with each other and the private sector so that cities can be more competitive and environmentally sustainable. Those are concepts that Gary Goodyear, Cambridge Conservative MP, said his government understands and embraces.

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