

From Brown to Green?

**Planning for Sustainability in the
Redevelopment of Southeast False Creek**

Don Alexander

This report was originally produced for the Assessment and Planning Project, organized under the direction of Dr. Bob Gibson at the University of Waterloo. To see other case studies produced as part of the project, see the ASP web site at <<http://ersserver.uwaterloo.ca/asmtplan/>>

The Southeast False Creek case report, *From Brown to Green?*

Southeast False Creek (SEFC) is an area of largely derelict industrial land close to the downtown core of Vancouver which is currently being planned as a model “sustainable community.” The initiative has evolved over the past decade as the result of policy initiatives undertaken by the City and pressure brought to bear by environmental and social justice activists and concerned design professionals. To date, the City has developed a set of policies for the site and is creating an Official Development Plan. With many interested parties, both inside and outside the municipal bureaucracy, the project has been subject to a tug of war over how “sustainable” the end product should be, and whether the land should even be turned into a mixed use community or devoted to some other purpose, such as a park. In the current conception, both a community and a park are envisioned. The case is analyzed in terms of the three dimensions of urban sustainability (ecological, social, and economic), and the substance and process achieved thus far are evaluated from the vantage point of an “ideal” urban sustainable planning process (SEED). Factors that have contributed to the foregrounding of sustainability in the planning process thus far are also considered.

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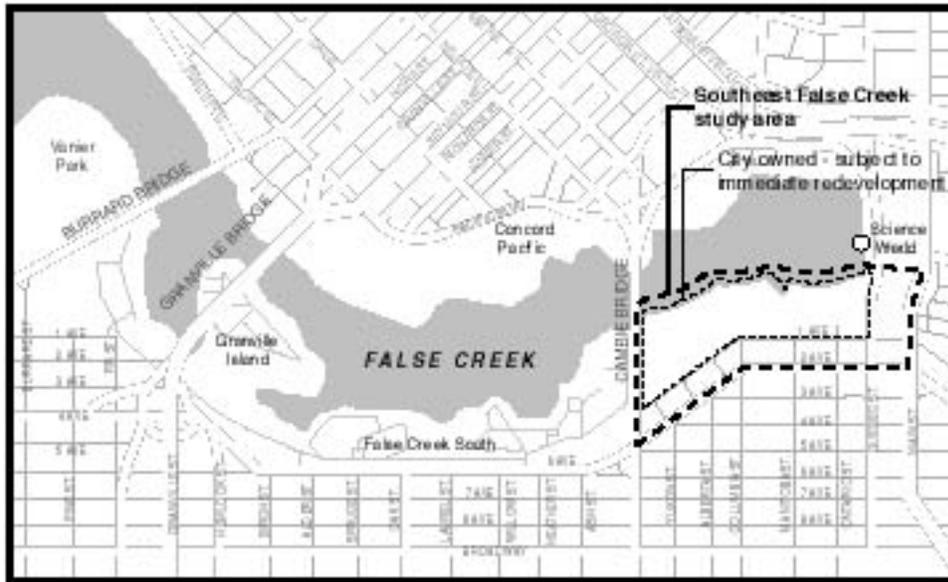
Introduction

In the early 1900s, after millennia as a tidal marsh, False Creek developed into the industrial nerve centre of Vancouver. But its fortunes declined as the century wore on and as the air and water of the Basin became increasingly polluted. By the late 1970s, False Creek's industrial era was mostly over and, despite widespread residual contamination, parts of the area were being redeveloped for residential and commercial uses. Today, that process is nearly complete. What remains is the southeast portion adjacent to Vancouver's Science World, currently derelict industrial land and partial site of the annual Molson Indy car race. This is the site for what may possibly become the first model "sustainable community" in Canada.

For planning purposes, Southeast False Creek (SEFC) consists of 80 acres of land bounded by Cambie Street in the west, Main Street in the east, Second Avenue in the south, and the shoreline of False Creek in the north. Slightly more than half of the land is owned by the City [see **Figure 1**]. Given its close connections to transit service – Skytrain, bus and streetcar – and to employment and cultural centres, the site has the potential to become a vibrant, urbane new part of the downtown core. More importantly, it has the potential to become a demonstration project for a more sustainable approach to development, one that could become a model for other parts of the city and region.¹

What makes the planning process for Southeast False Creek special is the public commitment of Vancouver City Council and the City's Planning Department to ensuring the site is redeveloped as a "model sustainable community." This approach both reflects and has intensified efforts by community activists and outside professionals to realize the objectives of urban sustainability through municipal land use planning. It is an interesting case because the City's commitment in this regard has been uneven, and significant difficulties have emerged from surprising sources. However, even with all the twists and turns of events, the SEFC case holds important lessons for how to approach the sustainable redevelopment of urban brownfield sites.

¹ As Perks and Van Vliet note, "[t]here are two essential purposes to a demonstration (pilot) project. One is to *experiment* with new forms of physical environments and to innovate with a planning-design process by which sustainability can be effectively achieved at a scale of a residential community. A second and indispensable purpose is public education: to show 'what can be done' and 'what it's like' – by actually building a sustainable community that can be seen and experienced as a living place – and to monitor and evaluate it over time in much the same way that any R and D project is conducted. Gordon Perks and David Van Vliet, "Sustainable Community Design: Restructuring and Demonstration," *Plan Canada* (November 1993): 30.

Figure 1: Map of Southeast False Creek

The future contours of Southeast False Creek will not be decided once and for all. Rather, the case involves an evolutionary process with key defining “moments.” These include decisions about policies for the site, creation of an official development plan (ODP), and the actual rezoning. With each step, the destiny of the proposed community becomes more circumscribed and “set,” for better or worse. In 1999, the City has recently completed the policy process for the site, and it is now working on the ODP.²

The evolution of the case so far illustrates the aptness of analytical frameworks that explore the tensions among the ecological, social and economic aspects of urban sustainability.³ Ideally, the three aspects are interconnected parts of a seamless whole, but in current planning reality, they often become the focal point for struggles between contending forces. For instance, Campbell, sees a “resource conflict” occurring between the imperatives of environmental protection and overall growth and economic efficiency.⁴ This emerged in the Southeast False Creek case when a development consultant hired by the City, and representatives of the City’s Real Estate Services division, argued that developing the site as a model sustainable community would fatally compromise the project’s viability.⁵ More recently, the project’s critics have argued that the market is too flat at present to permit the development to succeed.⁶

² Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, personal communication, 8 January 2001.

³ See Scott Campbell, “Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities? Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development,” *American Planning Association Journal* (Summer 1996), pp. 296-312; British Columbia Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, *State of Sustainability: Urban Sustainability and Containment* (Victoria, BC: Crown Publications, 1994); Trevor Hancock, “Healthy, Sustainable Communities: Concept, Fledgling Practice, and Implications for Governance,” in *Eco-City Dimensions: Healthy Communities, Healthy Planet* ed. Mark Roseland (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1997), pp. 42-50, and T. O’Riordan and H. Voisey (eds.), *The Transition to Sustainability: The Politics of Agenda 21 in Europe* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1998).

⁴ Campbell, p. 298.

⁵ Shawn Blore, “The S Word,” *Georgia Straight*, 25 July-June 2, 1998, pp. 17, 19-22, 25.

⁶ See Ian Mulgrew, “False Creek Lands Review Pressed,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 October 1999, pp. A1-A2.

Campbell's framework also identifies a "development conflict" between the imperatives of environmental protection, on the one side, and social justice, economic opportunity and income equality, on the other.⁷ This was manifested in a conflict over whether Southeast False Creek should become an ecologically innovative housing development with mixed use, or be made entirely into a park to service the park-deficient neighbourhood of Mount Pleasant which surrounds it. It has also figured in discussions within the activist community about whether to focus efforts on ecological design or affordable housing.⁸

Finally, Campbell sees a "property conflict" occurring between the imperatives of economic growth and efficiency, and the aforementioned social issues.⁹ In the Southeast False Creek case, while the original development consultant's report determined that high-tech industrial development would be the most profitable use for the site, Council has insisted that housing be made the priority.¹⁰ However, faced with the costs of remediating the site, a generally conservative Council has been reluctant to boost the affordable housing component above the standard 20 percent for major inner-city redevelopments, despite demands by activists to do so.¹¹

To make the tripartite framework more useful for the Southeast False Creek case, Campbell's definition of social sustainability needs to be broadened to include issues of livability and sense of community in addition to those of equity.¹² In this context, the City and its planners have determined that, to be economically viable and to fit with existing policies for the inner-city core, the development must have a density approaching that of the highly dense north shore of the Creek. This is to be achieved by including towers of up to 25 storeys, despite their possible incompatibility with social objectives for the area.¹³ This has led to grumbling by sustainability activists, whose visions for the site have ranged from near-pastoral images of "eco-villages" to the medium-density ground-oriented housing of South False Creek created in the late 1970s and early '80s.¹⁴

As the story unfolds, we will see that each of the various sustainability dimensions, however narrowly construed, has had its advocate. The "plot" of the case study has been about their respective posturings, maneuvers, and compromises, with the fate of the project ultimately resting with the elected City Council.¹⁵

⁷ Campbell, "Green Cities," p. 299.

⁸ The principal activist organization has been the Southeast False Creek Working Group, a coalition of social justice and environmental NGOs. For an overview of its aims and perspectives, see Ga Ching Kong, "Southeast False Creek: Council's Next Challenge" (Vancouver: Social Change Institute, 1997).

⁹ Campbell, "Green Cities," p. 298.

¹⁰ Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, talk given to "Urban Issues and Solutions" (URB 601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

¹¹ "What Do You Think of the Southeast False Creek Development?" (leaflet produced by the Southeast False Creek Working Group, 1997).

¹² For an excellent exploration of social sustainability, as it relates to policy for Southeast False Creek, and how well the City of Vancouver fares with respect to its various components, see Denise Taschereau, *Urban Social Sustainability: Opportunities for Southeast False Creek* (Research Report 220, School of Resource and Environmental Management, Simon Fraser University, 1999).

¹³ Karenn Krangle, "Last portion of False Creek gets okay for housing, park," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 October 1999: A:1.

¹⁴ For background on the vision of some of the activist proponents, see Don Alexander (editor), *False Creek: Past, Present and Future, An Anthology* (Vancouver: Social Change Institute, 1997).

¹⁵ Council members in Vancouver are elected "at large," which some people argue makes them less accountable to specific neighbourhoods and more beholden to well-to-do west side property owners who have a higher propensity to vote. Until the most recent municipal election (November 1999), all eleven councillors were members of the relatively conservative Non-Partisan Association (NPA).

Reconciling the Three Aspects of Sustainability

To be realized successfully, urban sustainability projects must reconcile, as fruitfully as possible, the conflicts among the ecological, social and economic aspects of sustainability. If a development project is accomplished in a way that neglects the interests of the disadvantaged, or that is not replicable because of its failure to pay for itself or return a profit, then it will be little more than a noble experiment that does not garner widespread “buy-in” or achieve market emulation.

There is unavoidable tension among the three components of sustainability. However, synergies can be sought and blatant conflicts can be avoided. The relative emphasis to be given to each of the three aspects is ultimately a political decision, and how it should be done depends to a large degree on one’s ideological viewpoint. Social justice activists argue that the affordable housing crisis in the city is so severe that the usual 20 percent target of affordable housing for a megaproject is not good enough, whereas the dominant faction on Council sees anything more as excessive interference in the market and an undue strain on the City’s budget.

In addition to this balancing act, realizing as many of the goals of sustainability as possible must be weighed against the legitimacy of the process that enables citizens and communities to adopt the project as their own. From a substantive point of view, it is better that Southeast False Creek be “made flesh” as soon as possible, and incorporate as many of the qualities of a fully sustainable community as are economically and politically feasible. In this way, it can serve as a powerful model for other municipalities and regions. However, if this victory is achieved at the cost of a sizeable disgruntled opposition, which feels that the details were worked out by planners, politicians and a narrow range of interest groups without a full, open discussion about what was truly needed on the site, then the victory will be a hollow one and will polarize rather than galvanize efforts for sustainability.

This report, then, evaluates the progress made to date from three vantage points: the extent to which sustainability considerations have been successfully embodied in the planning process, the extent to which the three facets of sustainability have been reconciled and synergized, and the degree to which substantive gains have been balanced against procedural ones. The analysis of Southeast False Creek here is based on a review of Council policies, reports to Council by the City Manager and various consultants, materials produced by the Planning Department, and personal communication with key actors, supplemented by my own participant-observation.¹⁶ As well, the evaluation involves comparing the actual planning practice in the Southeast False Creek case to a model planning process that is being developed by myself and Sue Roppel.¹⁷

¹⁶ Individuals consulted include: Ian Smith (senior planner, Central Area Planning, Vancouver Planning Department), Mark Holland (formerly rezoning planner, Vancouver Planning Department), Ian Theaker (engineer, formerly with The Sheltair Group), Ga Ching Kong (Urban Youth Alliance; former coordinator, Southeast False Creek Working Group [SEFCWG], and former member of the Policy Advisory Group [PAG]), former graduate students Eva Riccius (SEFCWG/ PAG) and Denise Taschereau (SEFCWG), activist and graduate student John Irwin (SEFCWG/ PAG), and Sean McEwen (Lower Mainland Network for Affordable Housing). In addition, I have been intermittently involved with the Working Group, having chaired its inaugural meeting and later a conference where it established its direction. I have also attended, and given presentations at, a number of the meetings described in this document.

¹⁷ See Sue Roppel and Don Alexander, “A Strategy for Effective Ecological Development (SEED): A Model Sustainable Planning Process,” *Teaching in Architecture Proceedings* [UK conference, 9-12 July 2000, Oxford Brookes University] (available from the author).

The Broad Context of the Case

Regional Context

Southeast False Creek is an inner-city “brownfield” site not far from the Central Business District of Vancouver. It is located in one of the fastest-growing regions in Canada. The governance body for this region, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (hereafter GVRD) is attempting to manage growth through its Livable Region Strategic Plan, which mandates that the bulk of new development will be directed to the already existing urban core areas and regional “town centres.”¹⁸ The Central Area of Vancouver – which encompasses the downtown peninsula and both sides of False Creek – has been targetted as a growth area and is slated to receive an additional 50,000 residents by the year 2021, some portion of which has already been accommodated by megaproject development on False Creek’s north shore.¹⁹

To date, the City’s dominant strategy to accommodate growth has been to redevelop industrial lands in False Creek and in Coal Harbour (adjacent to Burrard Inlet), because these lands have few, if any, neighbours, and therefore cannot incite the usual NIMBY protests that smaller-scale densification efforts attract in established residential neighbourhoods.²⁰ Arguably, this redevelopment strategy results in a polarization of the urban fabric into “too dense areas” in the downtown core and “not dense enough” areas in the periphery. Because of this tacit policy of packing in as many people as possible into brownfield sites, the quite successful model of South False Creek²¹ – with its largely ground-oriented medium densities – has been overlooked in favour of the more recent, high density models on the north shore of False Creek, and at the east end where the CityGate complex was established.²²

As the population of the Vancouver region grows, its automobile fleet is growing even faster. The resulting gridlock and air pollution have become the region’s number one planning problem.²³ In response, the Greater Vancouver Regional District has developed a *Livable Region Strategic Plan*, which aims to minimize urban sprawl, in part by promoting more “complete communities” designed to minimize reliance on the private automobile.²⁴

¹⁸ Greater Vancouver Regional District, *Livable Region Strategic Plan* (Burnaby, BC: Strategic Planning GVRD, April 1996), p. 16.

¹⁹ This development, most notably Concord Pacific, occurred on lands that were originally used for the Expo ‘86 world’s fair, and which are still in the process of build-out. For statistics on projected population growth in Central Area, see “Central Area Growth Statistics: Fact Sheet [Central Area Communities, Growth Projections 1997-2021]” (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1998).

²⁰ Chris DeMarco, transportation planner, GVRD, talk to “Urban Issues and Solutions” (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 26 January 2000.

²¹ For an overview of the enlightened planning that produced South False Creek, see Ron Phillips, “The Evolution of an Urban Village,” *Cascadia Forum* 1, no. 1 (October 1993): 11-15.

²² According to the Planning Department, South False Creek has a “floor space ratio” of 1.3. Floor space ratio (FSR) is calculated by taking the total floor space of a building or complex and dividing it by the building or complex’s “footprint.” North False Creek has an FSR of 3.0, and CityGate has an FSR of 3.75. The current projection is that Southeast False Creek will have an FSR of 3.0, with the density being “stepped down” from the east side of the site to the west. Somewhere between 2000 and 2500 units will be accommodated at final build-out. See Planning Department, *Southeast False Creek Policy Statement: Toward a Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood and Major Park in Southeast False Creek* [adopted by Vancouver City Council, October 1999] (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1999), p. 10.

²³ D. Wood, “Here They Come,” *Georgia Straight*, 4-11 June 1998.

²⁴ GVRD, *Livable Region Strategic Plan*, p. 2.

Biophysical Context

Biophysically, the context for the site is characterized by extensive soil contamination (a legacy of decades of industrial use), poor water quality in False Creek, and a shortage of viable habitat for fish, waterfowl and small mammals. The latter situation was dramatized in 1997, when the herring returned to spawn for the first time in seventy years, and laid their eggs on the creosote-laden pilings of Science World. None of the eggs survived.²⁵

Heavy metals are a problem in soils and groundwater in the Southeast False Creek site, and PAH contamination is extensive in the benthic sediments in the Creek as a whole. Also, as a result of receiving the outflow from eight combined sewer outfalls and other sources, fecal coliform levels in False Creek are three times above safe levels for swimming. Moreover, most of the natural shoreline has been removed and replaced with concrete and rip rap.²⁶

Driving the need to clean up the contaminated soils and groundwater are two relatively recent pieces of provincial legislation: the *Waste Management Amendment Act, 1993*, and the *Contaminated Sites Regulation, 1997*. Because of high levels of toxic materials found on the site, the City has already been directed to begin a partial clean-up.²⁷

Social Context

The social context consists of a shortage of family-oriented housing in the central area of Vancouver, and a decline in the availability of affordable or social housing in the nearby Downtown East Side and other adjacent neighbourhoods that are overwhelmingly poor, multicultural, and oriented towards rental accommodations [see **Table 1**].²⁸ There is also a large disparity in access to green space between the east and west sides of the city.

The shortage of family-oriented housing in the central core has led Council to require such housing in new developments. However, Council has not adequately addressed the serious erosion in low-income housing stock in the Downtown Eastside.

²⁵ Fred Mah, Friends of False Creek, personal communication, 2 February 2000.

²⁶ Fred T.S. Mah, "An Ecosystem Approach to Restore False Creek: A Discussion Paper" [unpublished, 1998].

²⁷ The Sheltair Group, Inc., *Visions, Tools and Targets: Environmentally Sustainable Development Guidelines for Southeast False Creek* (submitted to the City of Vancouver, 18 April 1998), p. 114. For an analysis of some of the issues associated with the legislation, see Julian K. Greenwood (consultant), "Assessment of Contaminated Sites: A Review of Current Law and Practice" [prepared for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, September 1996].

²⁸ Most new developments in the downtown core cater to higher-income professionals. However, because of the strong need for affordable housing, and the lack of senior government funding, the City has been requiring that 20 percent of the land in all downtown megaprojects be set aside for housing for "core needy" households. However, the challenge has been getting the money to build the housing once the land is made available. John Jessop, housing planner, City of Vancouver Housing Centre, talk given at a forum on "Philosophies for Planning: The Case of Affordable Housing," sponsored by Simon Fraser University's City Program, Harbour Centre, Vancouver, 17 September 1998.

Table 1: Demographics of neighbourhoods adjacent to Southeast False Creek (as of 1996)²⁹

	Mount Pleasant	Downtown Eastside	Strathcona	Fairview	Vancouver (as a whole)
Population	23,695	4,956	11,645	26,625	514,008
Avg. Household Size	2.0 persons	1.2	2.1	1.6	2.3
Families w/ single parent	25.3%	16.7%	25.5%	15%	16.5%
Med. household income	\$26,485	\$8,748	\$12,143	\$40,229	\$35,544
Persons in-low income households	43.7%	80%	64%	20%	31%
Individuals not having English as a first language	42.6%	47.4%	64.9%	25.8%	48.2%
Dwellings rented	72.5%	99%	90%	67.6%	58.1%
Green space (ha./ 1000 persons)	0.43	0.2	2.0	0.42	1.12

The Carnegie Community Action Project and Urban Youth Alliance have estimated that 5,900 single room occupancy (SRO) units in the downtown core were lost between 1970 and 1996, with a further 700 lost in 1997 alone.³⁰ Given this fact – along with the generally low-income, rent-oriented demographics of the surrounding neighbourhoods – activists in the Working Group have argued for raising the social housing component of the Southeast False Creek development from 20 percent to a minimum of 50 percent.³¹

Economic Context

The economic context involves two particularly difficult issues. The first is whether the project should have to cover the cost of remediating the soil and groundwater. Activists have argued that a “sustainable” project should not have to pay for the legacy of other people’s irresponsible practices, because this would afflict it with an unfair handicap that would bias its financial performance. They won a victory when the staff report on the policy statement for the site, subsequently approved by Council, made it plain that clean-up and remediation would not be an internal cost of the project.³²

²⁹ With the exception of the figures for the Downtown Eastside and statistics for green space, which are from 1991 [Community Services Group, *Community Profiles* (Vancouver: Planning Department, 1994)], the figures in Table 1 are taken from Community Services Group, *Vancouver Local Areas 1996* (Vancouver: Planning Department, March 1999).

³⁰ “Homelessness in Vancouver: We Can Do Something” [pamphlet] (Vancouver: Carnegie Community Action Project/ Urban Youth Alliance, 1998). Since then, additional units have been lost, but these have been balanced by new social housing that has been created. Tom Laviolette, Carnegie Action Project, talk given to “Urban Issues and Solutions” (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

³¹ See Ga Ching Kong, “Southeast False Creek: Council’s Next Challenge” (Vancouver: Social Change Institute, 1997), and “What Do You Think of the Southeast False Creek Development?” (leaflet produced by the Southeast False Creek Working Group, 1997).

³² Ian Smith, *Policy Report: Urban Structure* [prepared for the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment], City of Vancouver, 29 June 1999, n.p.

The second issue has been the relative weight to be given to earning a return on the City's investment versus achieving various social and ecological goals. This has engendered a tug of war within the City's bureaucracy. At the end of the day, it seems that the City intends to recover its costs and make a modest profit, but is prepared to accept far lower profits than a developer would expect from the site.³³ The City has also been pressed by activists to adopt a full-cost accounting (FCA) approach to the development that would consider long-term operating costs and benefits (both social and ecological), as well as various spin-off benefits (for instance, the development as a showcase for a local green services and technology sector, and avoided off-site infrastructural costs). Such a model was proposed by the sustainability consultant hired to assist with the policy framework.³⁴ To the extent that the City has adopted aspects of this, it has helped change the internal "culture" at City Hall, a point that will be discussed later in the report.

Participation

Procedurally, in planning for Southeast False Creek, the City has had to deviate from standard practice. Normally, public participation processes have been far less extensive in relation to sites with few, if any, inhabitants. However, because of the widespread interest in this site, the City has had to expand its outreach programme. This has included establishing an advisory group to work with it on policy matters, holding a handful of public meetings, and consulting informally with adjacent neighbourhood groups and other interested parties. The consultative process has been positive in many respects.

However, opportunities for participation have fallen short of a truly open-ended dialogue. Examples of the inadequacy of the process include a lack of signage on the site to inform potentially interested citizens, a lack of outreach to the media, a lack of consistent mailings to members of a community contact list, and public meetings that have been sparse and not well-advertised.³⁵ These shortcomings have limited the extent of public awareness of the project and the breadth and depth of public consensus that has been achieved.

Planning for Southeast False Creek Redevelopment

As mentioned in the introduction, the story of Southeast False Creek so far has been about the emergence of different lobbies for the three aspects of sustainability. If we accept for the moment Campbell's identification of the economic aspect of sustainability with growth and economic efficiency, then the economic lobby for Southeast False Creek had its birth in 1975 when Council established the Property Endowment Fund.³⁶ The Fund's managers are responsible for managing City-owned real estate with a goal of generating a "reasonable" economic return, while supporting the City's public objectives. They work closely with the City's Real Estate Services division.

The role of the Planning Department as a self-appointed champion of social sustainability began in 1988 when City Council approved several policies for Southeast False Creek, as part of a series of documents entitled the False Creek Policy Broadsheets. These included

³³ Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, talk given to "Urban Issues and Solutions" (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

³⁴ See Sustainability Ventures Group Inc., "Appendix 2: Full Cost Accounting Framework for Southeast False Creek," in The Sheltair Group, Inc., *Visions, Tools and Targets: Environmentally Sustainable Development Guidelines for Southeast False Creek* (submitted to the City of Vancouver, 18 April 1998).

³⁵ There has been coverage by Vancouver dailies and community newspapers at key junctures, but this has been the result of media taking the initiative or being directed to the issue by activists and sympathetic academics.

³⁶ Campbell, by choosing this definition, bolsters the mainstream interpretation of economic "health," rather than questioning it. Economic sustainability might just as easily be equated with local economic control and empowerment, with meaningful work, or with efficiency in the use of natural resources.

- a continuous public waterfront walkway,
- development of the Basin as a predominantly residential area,
- a minimum of 20 percent of dwellings for core needy households³⁷ (50 percent of these being families with children),
- a minimum of 2.75 acres of park land per 1000 population, and
- adequate provision of community facilities and services.³⁸

This occurred after the province had sold the former Expo lands on the north shore of False Creek to Hong Kong financier and developer, Li Ka-shing, thus forcing the City to accelerate its planning process for the basin.

In the subsequent process of negotiating the megaproject developments in north False Creek and Coal Harbour, the portion of the Planning Department entrusted with inner-city development (Central Area Planning) developed a “template” for development that depended on synergistic, though not entirely conflict-free, collaboration with large developers. In this partnership, developers brought knowledge of project financial feasibility and marketability to the table. Planners saw their role as one of extracting amenities for the public realm (affordable housing, new community centres, parks, schools and public art). They also wanted to ensure that the resulting developments were “neighbourhoods,” and not just collections of buildings. At this time the City also developed the “technical committee” approach, whereby representatives of all relevant City departments (Engineering, Planning, Parks, etc.) were brought together to develop a common orientation to a given development, thus reducing the need for separate and redundant approvals.

Proud of their achievements in north False Creek and Coal Harbour, the planners were prepared to apply the same model when City Council designated Southeast False Creek as a “let-go” industrial area on July 26, 1990, and directed staff to develop a work plan for its eventual rezoning. This understanding of how inner-city development should be done was reinforced when the City's Real Estate Services hired Stanley Kwok, an architect and developer who had been the driving force behind the Concord Pacific redevelopment on the north shore of False Creek, as development consultant to conduct a study on the economic feasibility of various development options. Kwok and his associates were also asked to consider what a sustainable community might look like in this context, but their conclusions turned out to be remarkably like the model that they had been working with on the north shore.³⁹

So enthused did Kwok become with his assignment that he produced a full design concept for the site and a scale model, even though these had not been called for in his terms of reference. Adherence to the sustainability objective was claimed because the development cost levies would permit separation of sanitary and storm sewers (thus improving water quality), the proposed densities would use land efficiently, and the proximity to downtown jobs would reduce commuting.⁴⁰ This very constrained interpretation of urban sustainability would soon be challenged by the activist and professional design communities.

³⁷ “Core needy” households are defined by the province in terms of the quality and crowdedness of residents’ existing accommodations, in terms of total gross household income (which varies from region to region), and by whether more than 30 percent of household income is spent on housing. John Jessup, housing planner, the City of Vancouver Housing Centre, personal communication, 1 February 2000.

³⁸ Planning Department, *False Creek Policy Broadsheets* [approved by City Council, 3 August 1988] (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1988).

³⁹ Concord Pacific is a high density residential complex consisting mostly of towers and terraced high-rise buildings, with some retail and office uses on the main thoroughfare. The one major park – a vast expanse of unbroken lawn – lends the development a “tower in the park” feel reminiscent of Le Corbusier's monumental style. For more on Kwok's recommendations, see Stanley Kwok Consultants, *Creekside Landing: Southeast False Creek* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, April 1997).

⁴⁰ Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, talk given to “Urban Issues and Solutions” (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

The environmental lobby first weighed in in 1990 when Council adopted, with revisions and deletions, the *Clouds of Change* report that called for planning initiatives that would

- bring housing and employment closer together,
- increase housing adjacent to Vancouver's Central Area, and
- incorporate energy-efficient community design into the southeast shore of False Creek.⁴¹

The position of the environmentalists was strengthened on October 26, 1995. On this date, Council's Standing Committee on Planning and Environment voted to convert Southeast False Creek from industrial to mixed and residential uses, and to explore the potential for developing it as a model environmental sustainable community. At the same time, the Council committee approved a "Draft Ecological Framework" for the site with the following objectives:

- managing land consumption,
- managing landscaping,
- managing energy consumption,
- creating a livable community,
- managing water consumption,
- managing waste, and
- fostering ecological learning.⁴²

In the ongoing skirmishes between these three lobbies, the appointment of Kwok by Real Estates Services represented a victory for the conventional economics-oriented forces. With a budget of \$300,000, Kwok was charged with looking at the economic feasibility of different development options. The more ecologically and socially conscious lobby recouped its strength in April 1997 at a one day workshop, "Cents and Sustainability," which was sponsored by the Vancouver Planning Commission and the Simon Fraser University City Program. The workshop helped to cement a consensus amongst design professionals and activists around the necessity and desirability of making SEFC a model community.

Immediately following the workshop, Kwok delivered his report to Council on the economic parameters for the development. Thirty-two speakers, mostly activists and design professionals, addressed Council on the issue. Most were critical of the report because of its limited and skeptical interpretation of sustainability and its traditional approach to cost-benefit analysis.⁴³ After deferring a decision to its next meeting, Council accepted Kwok's report "for information purposes only," asking pointed questions about the report's assumptions and lack of sufficient attention to issues of sustainability. Council directed that policy planning begin for Southeast False Creek, and authorized a budget of \$80,000 for a consultancy that would more explicitly explore the meaning of sustainable development for the site, an increase from the original projected budget of \$30,000.

In late September 1997, the sustainable development consultancy was awarded to Sheltair Scientific, some of whose members had been involved with the Southeast False Creek Working

⁴¹ *Clouds of Change* was a report produced by a task force established by the City of Vancouver to look at municipal responsibilities in the wake of growing evidence of increasing global climate change. For more on its recommendations, see *Clouds of Change: Final Report of the City of Vancouver Task Force on Atmospheric Change, Volume 1* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, June 1990).

⁴² *Policy Report: Urban Structure* [prepared for the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment], City of Vancouver, 11 October 1995.

⁴³ At the time of his report, Kwok was of the opinion that there was no meaningful definition of sustainability on which all parties were in agreement. See Stanley Kwok Consultants, *Creekside Landing: Southeast False Creek* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, April 1997). The City Manager, for his part, said the concept remained "undefined." *Policy Report: Urban Design* [prepared for the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment], City of Vancouver, 2 April 1997, p. 5.

Group and Designers for Social Responsibility, two of the principal lobby groups for the ecological and social perspective. Shortly thereafter, a Policy Advisory Group (PAG) of local design professionals, property owners and activists was established by the Planning Department to provide feedback to the consultant and to City planners. PAG meetings, which occurred every couple of weeks, involved meetings with members of a Technical Committee (comprised of representatives of different City Hall departments) and Sheltair.

In October 1998, the Planning Department, with support from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, held a three-day charrette – an invitation-only event involving architects, landscape architects, planners and others – that aimed to produce design concepts for the site.⁴⁴ Around this same time, Art Cowie, a former City Council member and MLA, produced a proposal for turning the site into what he called “Festival Park,” an entertainment-oriented destination. This stirred up interest by other stakeholders who had been relatively quiet regarding possible alternative uses for the site.⁴⁵

A few months later, in the spring and summer of 1999, a major conflict erupted between the Council and the Vancouver Parks Board over the fate of Southeast False Creek. Both the Council and the Board are dominated by members of the Non-Partisan Association (NPA), the leading municipal-level political grouping in Vancouver, but they were deeply split over whether the Southeast False Creek area should be redeveloped for housing and associated community purposes or designated as park land. The Parks Board, along with a Mount Pleasant-based citizens’ group (Parkland is Sustainable and Supportable), favoured dedicating the entire site as a park, in view of the deficiency of park land in Mount Pleasant, and the East Side more generally.⁴⁶ This lobby presented the compelling argument that Mount Pleasant has only .43 hectares of park land per 1000 people, in contrast to the average of 1.12 for the city as a whole, and 3.27 in toney neighbourhoods such as West Point Grey.⁴⁷

In July 1999, the last of several drafts of the policy statement for SEFC was released by the Planning Department, and three public hearings before Council were held over the next three and half months. The policy document represented a crucial stage in the decision-making process, as it would set the envelope for the drafting of the ODP.⁴⁸ The new policy called for a significantly enlarged park component – over 26 acres out of 80, and comprising over 50 percent of the City-owned land. Over fifty delegations were heard, with the majority speaking in favour of a sustainable community option as against the all-park proposal. A small but vociferous pro-park group in attendance still advocated turning the entire site into park land. In the middle of this process, the *Vancouver Sun* weighed in and argued in an editorial that a compromise solution could be found.⁴⁹

On October 19, 1999, City Council approved the policy for Southeast False Creek, with the compromise inclusion of space for a major park. The decision, and the backlash from those wanting all park, dominated the headlines in the *Vancouver Sun* for the next two days. The refusal of Council to back down on its intentions of creating a sustainable community on the site can be attributed to a number of factors. Council saw an income stream coming from the sale of the land

⁴⁴ For more information on the results of the charrette, see Dr. Fiona Crofton [Orcad Consulting Group Inc.], *Southeast False Creek Design Charrette Synopsis* (Vancouver: Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, December 1998).

⁴⁵ Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, talk given to “Urban Issues and Solutions” (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

⁴⁶ Initially, the Park Board favoured converting two-thirds of the site into park and concentrating development on one corner of the parcel, but they later adopted an “all-park” position.

⁴⁷ Ian Smith [footnote 45]; Community Services Group, *Community Profiles* (Vancouver: Vancouver Planning Department, 1994).

⁴⁸ For the final version of the policy statement, see Planning Department, *Southeast False Creek Policy Statement: Toward a Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood and Major Park in Southeast False Creek* [adopted by Vancouver City Council, October 1999] (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1999).

⁴⁹ [Editorial], “Park, development can co-exist at creek,” *Vancouver Sun*, 6 August 1999: A18.

in the development option, and only costs associated with the all-park option. Going with an all-park option would also mean losing the demonstration and learning value associated with the proposed community that could become a model for other parts of the city and region. Moreover, a decision to disregard the development value associated with the land and go strictly for a public amenity would open the possibility that other options besides a park might be equally valid. Finally, the argument that a park at Southeast False Creek would remedy the deficiency of park land in Mount Pleasant was offset by research showing that few people will walk for more than five minutes to reach green space, thus putting the site out of the reach of most Mount Pleasant residents.⁵⁰

That the pro-park lobby was able to obtain as much land as it did for a park had to do with a felicitous convergence of factors. Around the time the issue was being debated, Real Estate Services staff reduced their estimates of the cost of cleaning up the site for housing. However, they also discovered that the extent of contamination was such that it would be easier to devote more of the site to green space, which would not have to be remediated to as high a standard. Thus, setting aside 26 acres of land as park became a “win-win-win” solution in many people’s eyes, permitting park and development to co-exist, and providing an income stream from development while lowering the costs of site remediation.⁵¹

Analysis of the Case Study

To date, the planning process of Southeast False Creek has produced a fairly advanced Council-approved policy statement that embraces many of the design features of environmental sustainability, but without making a lot of hard and fast commitments to carrying them out.⁵² It is relatively advanced because it is one of the only instances in Canada where sustainability features and targets have been considered at the neighbourhood scale. Despite these advances, the planning undertaken by the City of Vancouver still falls short of the urban sustainability ideal, both substantively and procedurally. In the next section, I will compare SEFC planning with a model developed by myself and Sue Roppel, which proposes an integrated approach to applying sustainable urban development principles at the residential site level, and identifies a strategy for creating appropriate site-specific development guidelines.⁵³

This integrative approach is applied in the context of ten areas of directly relevant to sustainable site design:

ECOLOGICAL

- 1) green space/habitat
- 2) energy, water and waste systems
- 3) transportation and air quality
- 4) urban agriculture/ soil

SOCIAL

- 5) equity

⁵⁰ Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, talk given to “Urban Issues and Solutions” (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Many of the proposed design measures are to be “explored,” or “may be considered” at a future date. See Planning Department, *Southeast False Creek Policy Statement: Toward a Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood and Major Park in Southeast False Creek* [adopted by Vancouver City Council, October 1999] (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1999).

⁵³ See Sue Roppel and Don Alexander, “A Strategy for Effective Ecological Development (SEED): A Model Sustainable Planning Process,” *Teaching in Architecture Proceedings* [UK conference, 9-12 July 2000, Oxford Brookes University].

- 6) livability
- 7) community

ECONOMIC

- 8) viability
- 9) community economic development, and
- 10) full cost accounting.

Table 2 provides a brief overview of the six steps in the process.

Table 2: Strategy for Effective Ecological Development (SEED): A Multi-Stage Sustainable Development Planning Process

Step 1:	Itemization of local and regional goals and challenges in the context of global ecological issues; derivation of sustainable development guidelines; initiation of stakeholder participation, an element that continues throughout all stages of the development planning process
Step 2:	Identification of site attributes, opportunities, and constraints, in light of local and regional ecological, social, and economic issues and existing policy contexts
Step 3:	Formulation and prioritization of site-specific sustainable objectives and strategies; determination of knowledge gaps and research to address these gaps; analysis and reconciliation of "trade-offs" in an effort to minimize goal and design conflicts
Step 4:	Determination of appropriate targets, indicators and other elements of a comprehensive assessment strategy, including monitoring at all stages of the development process
Step 5:	Creation of a Development Action Plan which extends traditional development plans
Step 6:	Implementation with monitoring and post-development assessment of project success; transfer of effective practices to other development projects and establishment of parameters for neighboring developments; sharing of project successes and failures with planning and development community and stakeholders; re-evaluation of existing policy and legislative barriers and identification of changes required in these contexts; identification of continuing monitoring requirements.

The following analysis considers the SEFC case in light of three considerations: how well the substantive issues have been addressed; how closely the planning process matches the idealized SEED process, and the extent to which public participation has been integrated at every step. Table 3 presents an overview of the substantive qualities of the Southeast False Creek planning work so far, as reflected in the approved policy statement. While the evolution of the case has gone through numerous twists and turns and is still far from complete, the October 1999 SEFC policy statement represents the best currently available indication of what will result in this case.

*Substantive Achievements***Table 3: Comparison Of Sustainable Planning Considerations [Adapted From The SEED Model] And How These Have Been Addressed To Date In Southeast False Creek**

SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS IN SITE DESIGN	EXTENT TO WHICH THESE HAVE BEEN ADDRESSED IN THE POLICY FOR SOUTHEAST FALSE CREEK
ECOLOGICAL: green space/ habitat	more than 50% of the immediately developable site will be devoted to open space, including a large 26 acre park; commitment to creating and enhancing both aquatic and terrestrial habitat, and “naturalizing” some of the open space.
energy, water and waste systems	commitment to energy efficiency and some deployment of energy alternatives (for instance, district heating), and system flexibility to incorporate future technologies; will attempt to optimize solar gain (orientation of buildings to take advantage of passive solar energy); openness to managing surface run-off on site through innovative methods, and keeping more of the site permeable; openness to water conservation measures, including metering, grey-water systems, rainbarrels and xeriscaping; openness to exploring on-site sewage treatment options; commitment to recycling, salvaging, and re-use of building materials and to avoidance of demolition and construction wastes; commitment to a significant reduction in residential and commercial waste volumes through recycling and composting initiatives, both for residents and businesses; proposed implementation of user-pay system; commitment to proper hazardous waste management.
transportation/ air quality	commitment to reducing automobile dependency (for instance, by having all units within 350 metres of shopping and services), close links to transit, reducing road widths, and creating a pedestrian and cyclist-friendly environment; commitment to minimizing emissions of air pollutants, greenhouse gases, and ozone-depleting chemicals; commitment to improving interior air quality in buildings.
urban agriculture/ soils	commitment to enriching local soils from locally generated compost; commitment to exploring opportunities for extensive community and rooftop gardens (with aim of some self-provision of food); commitment to remediating existing soils through a variety of techniques.
SOCIAL: equity	commitment to diversity of housing types (e.g. for youth, singles, families, seniors, artists, and special needs groups), with mixture of tenures, and some affordable housing.
livability	strong emphasis on livability, possibly vitiated by proposed densities; commitment to mixed use and walkability; commitment to ample community services and facilities (including retail, schools, and a community centre); commitment to a variety of public and open spaces; respect for historical context; retention of some heritage buildings; possible resources for the arts.

community	commitment to having distinct identities for each sub-area; commitment to community stewardship and participation (a provisional stewardship group is already in place); commitment to having elements of a learning environment.
ECONOMIC: cost recovery	commitment to development being able to pay for itself and yield a reasonable return, even with innovations and sustainability features, and thus capable of being emulated.
community economic development	support for live-work and work-live options, as well as demonstration projects of sustainable technologies with possible business spin-offs; exploration of job opportunities for youth.
full-cost accounting	have already employed some elements of full cost-accounting in evaluating the feasibility of the proposed community; suggested incorporation of same into ODP.

The types of ecological, social, and economic issues that one would seek to address through our model are covered quite thoroughly in the policy statement. However, the necessity of rendering them concisely may give an exaggerated impression of the extent of the City's commitment to their realization. While the City included some recognition of each of these matters in the approved policy statement, the statement provides much less detailed prescriptions than were in the Sheltair report (which has no policy status), and the extent of the City's commitment to energetic implementation is yet to be revealed.

A key issue is how well the three aspects of sustainability have been addressed. While the SEFC policy statement represents admirable progress in all three sectors, progress has been more significant in the ecological than in the social and economic realms. This is likely for two reasons: it is the area where the "policy community" outside City Hall has had the greatest consensus, and it is one where innovations are least threatening to the status quo. While the City has a fairly active social housing programme, this is not something for which NPA politicians traditionally have had great enthusiasm, especially given its cost to the City's coffers, nor have they given much attention to other issues of social equity. The City has virtually no track record in encouraging community economic development and the "green business" sector.

One significant difference from the 1970s and now is that the politicians are treating City-owned land much the same way a developer would treat private land: as having a fixed value based on potential future revenues. However, the City acquired the land over a period of eighty years at a relatively modest cost, not at today's inflated land prices. In writing about the innovative South False Creek (SFC) development, which also occurred on City-owned land, Phillips notes that the design of SFC was largely driven by citizen preferences, rather than conventional land values. He cites UBC architecture professor Ron Walkey, who argues that the SFC process represented a "very important reversal in the Vancouver traditional land development process: namely that the kind of community desire[d]...be determined first, followed then by the density at which it could thrive and finally, on this basis alone, [should] land value be set."⁵⁴ With South False Creek, citizens expressed a preference for medium over high densities. They would no doubt express the same preferences today, as the activists have done. Nonetheless, because of the perceived value of the land, these sentiments are being ignored by City Hall. This, in my view, reflects an over-emphasis on economic factors.

One area where the three facets have been brought together fruitfully is in the partial adoption of a full-cost accounting (FCA) approach for the development. This involves including within an economic framework benefits and costs that would not normally be counted – such as economic spin-offs in the "green business" sector, the operating costs of inefficient energy systems, or future big-ticket infrastructure costs that could potentially be avoided. By its very

⁵⁴ Ron Phillips, "The Evolution of an Urban Village," *Cascadia Forum*, 1, no. 1 (October 1993), p. 12.

nature, FCA can be seen as a means for bringing the three spheres into greater alignment, because it lends economic “value” to ecological and social costs and benefits normally treated as “externalities.”⁵⁵

Procedural Integrity

The planning process that Southeast False Creek has undergone is fairly typical of how other major sections of the inner city core have been redeveloped. The first step involved developing a policy framework for the site that relied heavily on the policies that had been developed for the False Creek Basin, and for the Southeast portion of it, over a period of a decade and more. This is the stage which has been completed, and which has taken a total of three years. The length of time can be attributed to an expanded public participation process, and to extensive intervention by various activist groups and the City’s elected Parks Board.

The next step, which is underway now, is the development of an ODP, which will take the policy statement a step further into an actual design concept with more detailed policies for specific aspects of the development. This was originally to have been completed by 1999, but will not likely be submitted to Council for approval until at least December 2001.⁵⁶ The third step is “sub-area rezoning,” where parcels of land will be rezoned and details of floor space, building heights, road widths, parking, and other features will become fixed. Then the land will either be developed by the City, or sold off or leased to developers, who will have to apply for development and building permits. The City is currently leaning towards selling off the parcels.

The next table (**Table 4**) compares the SEFC process that has occurred to date, and the process likely to occur in the future, with the SEED process outlined on page 16.

Table 4: Comparison Of The Proposed Strategy for Effective Ecological Development (SEED) Process With The SEFC Process To Date

IDEAL	SOUTHEAST FALSE CREEK
Step 1: Itemization of local and regional goals and challenges in the context of global ecological issues; derivation of sustainable development guidelines; initiation of stakeholder participation, an element that continues throughout all stages of the development planning process.	In the False Creek case, the starting point for developing policy was loosely based on a recognition of the need to reduce the City’s contribution to greenhouse gases, to accommodate the expected growth in the region in the already developed urban nodes, and to develop more inner-city family housing.
Step 2: Identification of site attributes, opportunities, and constraints, in light of local and regional ecological, social, and economic issues and existing policy contexts.	Some of these were tacitly recognized, such as the site’s proximity to jobs and to transit, along with the need for more family-oriented housing in the downtown core. The marketability of waterfront property was also acknowledged. However, because planning was largely constrained by pre-existing Council policies, no open-ended discussion of the “highest and best use” of the site in light of local and regional concerns was ever held.

⁵⁵ See, in particular, Appendix 2 in the Sheltair Report: Sustainability Ventures Group, “Full Cost Accounting Framework for Southeast False Creek” [see Note 34].

⁵⁶ The delay has resulted from a two-month strike at City Hall, and from difficulties the Planning Department has encountered in achieving a meeting of minds between itself and the development consultant, Stanley Kwok (and his architects) on how to translate the policies into acceptable urban design patterns. Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, personal communication, 8 January 2001.

<p>Step 3: Formulation and prioritization of site-specific sustainable objectives and strategies; determination of knowledge gaps and research to address these gaps; analysis and reconciliation of "trade-offs" in an effort to minimize goal and design conflicts.</p>	<p>The sustainability consultant's report, produced by the Sheltair Group, which served as an input into the development of the policy statement, did prioritize objectives, and means for achieving them. The consultant received feedback and assistance in this process from a hand-picked advisory group and from the Planning Department itself. They also, in the course of attempting to develop a robust policy framework, identified and filled many of the information gaps relevant to this effort. Information needs were also identified and addressed in an ad hoc fashion within the City's inter-departmental Technical Team, but this was not a process that included the public or interest groups in any significant way.</p>
<p>Step 4: Determination of appropriate targets, indicators and other elements of a comprehensive assessment strategy, including monitoring at all stages of the development process.</p>	<p>The Sheltair report created a comprehensive list of primary and secondary objectives, indicators, and targets. However, possibly because it was not part of its mandate, it did not suggest a comprehensive assessment strategy. The City's policy statement, however, recommends a multi-stakeholder stewardship group be created that would "develop indicators to monitor the neighbourhood's performance after it is complete" and to help "city staff achieve optimum levels of performance on sustainability objectives..."⁵⁷</p>
<p>Step 5: Creation of a Development Action Plan which extends traditional development plans.</p>	<p>Work is currently in process on an Official Development Plan. The Planning Department's policy statement is structured in such a way as to encourage future planning and development to use it as a foundation, and to go even further in the direction of sustainability.</p>
<p>Step 6: Implementation with monitoring and post-development assessment of project success; transfer of effective practices to other development projects and establishment of parameters for neighboring developments; sharing of project successes and failures with planning and development community and stakeholders; re-evaluation of existing policy and legislative barriers and identification of changes required in these contexts; identification of continuing monitoring requirements.</p>	<p>In addition to the proposal for a stewardship group to conduct post-assessment monitoring (now in the process of being formed), the Planning Department has viewed this project from the beginning as a potential "learning model" that could be emulated elsewhere in the city and region. Informally, planners have been spreading the word about the project to their colleagues, as have non-government organizations. Council has agreed to a loosening of City policies and regulations for the site and, if the project succeeds, this could lead to their revision in other contexts.</p>

While the planning process for SEFC to date is a major advance over "business-as-usual" planning, when compared with the ideal process it has not been as thorough or systematic. Even given the limited understanding of the importance of sustainability at the outset, a major reason for this is that most development planning at present occurs incrementally and decisions tend to be made based on "precedent."⁵⁸ Here the precedent consists of past Council policies, which accrete over time and become the basis for site planning and development. Rather than being able to start with a clean slate and incorporating a regional and global perspective, planning for sites (as parts of zoning districts) begins with established limitations on how their development or redevelopment may be approached based on decisions already made.

One of the significant victories/ innovations in the Southeast False Creek case is that Council made a decision (in instructing the Planning Department to continue its work after the Kwok report) to allow for policies that *deviate* from what had already been laid down in order to

⁵⁷ Planning Department, *Southeast False Creek Policy Statement: Toward a Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood and Major Park in Southeast False Creek* [adopted by Vancouver City Council, October 1999] (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1999), p. 78.

⁵⁸ I am indebted to Ian Smith for this analogy.

maximize the potential for doing something more sustainable. This is perhaps the first time in recent Vancouver history that Council has allowed this to happen.⁵⁹

Extent of Participation

While public participation in the Southeast False Creek process has been more extensive than would be normal for a site which has no residents, the process has fallen short of fully involving and consulting the relevant segments of the public. For instance, there has been limited outreach to those for whom English is not a first language, and limited outreach to youth. Moreover, despite the Planning Department's best efforts, the issue had a low profile with the general public until the park controversy erupted. Few formal public meetings were held, and the promised mailings to keep people "in the loop" were sparse. Moreover, there was no opportunity for activists and interested citizens to be involved directly in design work: participation in the one charrette held was by invitation only. The Policy Advisory Group itself had no formal power, and operated without a facilitator for its first several months of existence. One positive development, however, is that the PAG is being transformed into a stewardship group to continue to consult with the City through the official development plan stage and beyond.⁶⁰

Clearly, there are limits to the resources that the City can expend on each planning episode, but more extensive and open-ended public involvement might have enabled the City to avoid some of the last-minute major conflicts about whether the site should be a sustainable community or become all park. While the pro-park group may have saved its opposition to the last moment for tactical reasons, it is possible that it would have been won over to a compromise had it been involved from the outset in discussing regional and local issues and challenges, and the opportunities and constraints of the site. Because City Council had already deemed, over a period of a decade, that the site should be primarily slated for housing, a discussion of alternative uses was never allowed – except in the adversarial context of speakers coming to City Council meetings to criticize already drafted policies and proposals.

While it is good to have policies, and to build on them, there are times when prior policies should be set aside, or at least put on hold, so that a free and open discussion of how a site should be used can be held. This is especially true when the goal is to help build public consensus in favour of a more sustainable land use planning or community design.⁶¹

The Lessons of Southeast False Creek

Some of the lessons of SEFC are particular to the case, while others may have a more general applicability. Part of the momentum/ pressure for making Southeast False Creek a sustainable community came from recommendations contained in the *Clouds of Change* task force report, which were subsequently adopted by City Council. Whenever a quasi-official pro-sustainability resolution is adopted, it creates pressure for follow-through. Subsequent policy resolutions by Council strengthened this momentum and made it more difficult for the City to change course.

A second factor that has contributed to the ongoing resolve of City Council to keep to the sustainable high road has been the ability of the activist and professional design community to

⁵⁹ Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, City of Vancouver, talk given to "Urban Issues and Solutions" (601), Simon Fraser University, 19 January 2000.

⁶⁰ John Irwin, coordinator of the Southeast False Creek Working Group and PAG member, personal communication, 12 December 2000.

⁶¹ Allowing for flexibility to facilitate the achievement of more innovative and sustainable forms of development is very different from the usual ad hoc-ism often seen at the municipal level, where councils make a mockery of their own official plans and policies in order to accommodate developers.

apply pressure at key decision points when Council has been tempted to backtrack. This has been augmented by NGO and unofficial Planning Department efforts to give the project as high a profile as possible, thus creating a web of expectations that Council would find hard to defy. This will continue to be needed because pressure will undoubtedly be applied by developers to relax the policy envelope during negotiations over the actual rezoning.⁶²

Creating a consensus within the municipal bureaucracy, and amongst politicians, requires innovative forms of education and social learning with other members of the relevant policy community (e.g. developers and activists). In the Southeast False Creek case, the two most significant social learning opportunities that helped change the culture at City Hall, and galvanized the views of activists and design professionals, were the one-day “Cents and Sustainability” workshop and the design charrette.

The strength of these events is that they brought together a wide diversity of stakeholders and persons with different expertise where they could discuss issues face-to-face and solve problems. The workshop resulted in informal policy proposals, and the charrette resulted in a series of drawings that the planners felt represented a successful first test of the design feasibility and marketability of policies that had been developed in tandem with Sheltair and the advisory group.⁶³ The Policy Advisory Group has also performed this social learning function on a more ongoing basis.

The Technical Committee approach, whereby representatives of various departments were brought together at the front end of the policy and redevelopment process, helped to build consensus and clear logjams, enabling policies to be developed on a more comprehensive basis. This front-end approach to policy makes it easier for innovation to get through City Hall, and for the bugs to be worked out for the next innovative development.

The extent to which City Hall was persuaded by the sustainability consultant, and by activists and design professionals, to adopt aspects of a full cost accounting approach also smoothed the way for the Real Estate Services division to accept that a sustainable community could be a financially feasible option for the site.⁶⁴ This suggests that encouraging/pressuring for the adoption of alternative conceptual and evaluative frameworks is also a crucial part of changing “business as usual.”

The factors identified here can be described as necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for success. There is also the role played by serendipity and circumstance. Whether by design or by accident, Council and the City’s bureaucracy allowed a window of opportunity to develop whereby a different approach to urban development could be contemplated. Because the activist and design community saw the opening and pushed through it, we are – a decade later – possibly on the threshold of a new kind of development.

The role of the politicians has also been crucial. They are the ones who have to determine the final mixture of the three components of sustainability, thus providing the seat for the “three legs” of the sustainability tool.⁶⁵ They have to decide on the appropriate mix of vision and pragmatism. At the same time, they need a strong and aware NGO community to hold their feet to the fire.

As noted, Council has seemingly found it easier to allow greater progress in the ecological sphere than in the others, though progress has been made in all areas. In part, this is because

⁶² Ian Smith, senior planner, Central Area Planning, talk given to “Urban Issues and Solutions” (601), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 19 January 2000.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Sebastian Moffatt, Elisa Campbell, and Mark Holland, “Green Building in a Green Context: Specifying Environmental Performance at the Community Scale,” in *Green Building Challenge, Conference Proceedings, Volume 2* (Ottawa: Natural Resources Canada, 1998), pp. 166-173.

Sheltair was instructed to emphasize the ecological aspect on the assumption that Vancouver has a healthy economy and that the City's social planners would attend to the social dimension.⁶⁶ For Council members, the weight accorded to each of the three components depends, in part, on what actions in each component area are politically opportune. If ecological concerns, or at least provision of additional green space, is a very strong priority with the voters, then it will be easier to move in that direction. If there is strong pressure for the redress of social inequities, then that may get more attention. If the electorate is concerned about rising taxes, and keeping risky ventures to a minimum, then politicians may be reluctant to risk the City's money (or opportunity to make money) on something that doesn't appear to be tried and true.

Ultimately, the ability to move forward on a sustainability agenda depends on the degree of vision of the politicians, who must be prepared to take some economic risks; the determination and organizational capacity of the activists, and the level of maturity and "buy-in" by the public. If there is visionary political leadership, strong activist collaboration and widespread public consensus, then the cause of sustainable urban development can be pushed forward, with appropriate attention to its three components. In the Southeast False Creek case, the leadership has been there, but it has been halting. The activists have done a laudable job, with very few resources, to keep the City on track but at the cost of a handful of individuals making it a major focus for their lives and, in some cases, burning out as a result. Clearly, even small and halting changes take a very long time to bring to fruition, and this can test the patience and endurance of even the most committed activists.

On the positive side, in the struggle to define the vision for Southeast False Creek, the language of sustainability has become the "coinage of the realm," so to speak, and everybody is obliged to use its phrases. This is a good thing but, as with the concept of "justice," everyone interprets sustainability differently.⁶⁷ Debate about its substantive meaning will continue. But, by building an approximation of a sustainable community, the debate will be carried to a higher level. Through the actual process of building such a community, we will become clearer about its meaning and about the necessary trade-offs and possible synergies among its ecological, social, and economic aspects. Moreover, those of us who advocate it have to continue to try to get consensus on its most basic elements (for instance, arresting the degradation of the environment, and why this is necessary for human survival), and then encourage reasoning from the known (or agreed-upon) to the unknown. The systematic and logical nature of the Sheltair framework facilitated its acceptance and the spread of an urban sustainability perspective.⁶⁸ Moreover, a strength of the Sheltair report is that it made the tripartite conception of sustainability more concrete and useful by specifying categories, goals, objectives, indicators, targets, reference values, and precedents for each sector.⁶⁹

Finally, the opportunity to involve and educate the public about urban sustainability has not been fully tapped. This is partly because the Planning Department's outreach has been circumscribed, and because the activists, lacking the resources to do systematic community outreach on their own, have largely been limited to reacting to the City's agenda.

Conclusion

Eckhart Hahn and Udo Simonis' recipe for ecological urban restructuring provides an apt summary for the ingredients that are necessary to create momentum for sustainability, and that

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ John Irwin, coordinator of the Southeast False Creek Working Group and PAG member, personal communication, 12 December 2000.

⁶⁸ Moffatt et al. [footnote 66].

⁶⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the Sheltair report, see Don Alexander, "The Best So Far," *Alternatives Journal* 26, no. 3 (2000): 10-15.

have been only partially present in SEFC.⁷⁰ These are technology and design considerations and expertise (largely present); adequate grassroots democracy and environmental communication (only partially present), and an urban economy and political administration that is sending the right market and policy signals to the development community (again only partially present).⁷¹ Whatever its limitations to date, the SEFC experience is certainly an achievement that other jurisdictions and activists can build upon in their future efforts to achieve sustainability, and as such its further evolution will be monitored closely.

⁷⁰ Ekhart Hahn and Udo E. Simonis, "Ecological Urban Restructuring," *Ekistics* 348-349 (May-August 1991): 199-209. I came across the Hahn and Simonis article after the case study had been substantially completed. It may offer other researchers a useful framework of analysis. For instance, it has been taken up by David Van Vliet in his recently completed dissertation, *Sustainable Community Planning and Design: A Demonstration Project as Pathway, The Case of Egebjerggård, Ballerup, Denmark*. PhD Dissertation, School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, 2000.

⁷¹ Hahn and Simonis. For a more detailed analysis of the barriers to achieving sustainable urban development, and the corresponding opportunities, see Don Alexander, Guy Dauncey, Steven W. Peck, and Ray Tomalty, "Strategies for Overcoming Market and Institutional Barriers to Sustainable Real Estate in Canada" (originally presented at the 1999 Canadian Institute of Planners national conference, and available from the author).