

How to get from here to there



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Dave Biggs: 'We've got to realize that we have to make some choices. Is it more important to you to have clean air or a big yard? Is it more important to drive your car or to pay low taxes?'



IAN SMITH/VANCOUVER SUN

Dave Matychuk: 'We have to stay a small town. We have to stay impressed with celebrities and not be jaded, and I think Vancouver always will.'

From C2

ily, about the environment, about recycling, about living in "a stunning city" and not wrecking it.

"I don't believe in building more highways, building more and more stuff, getting more and more into debt," she said. "I don't see Vancouver being a huge metropolis. What can we do with what we have?"

That brings her to her frequent walks — rain or shine — through the woods in the Cleveland Dam area.

For much of the year, tonnes of fresh water spills over the dam, and Gould wonders why we don't use more of it.

"We have a gold mine in our backyard. We could sell our water and make money to make our city better, and we don't."

"If I took a hike today, there would be buckets of water going over that dam. But every summer I can't water my garden and I lose plants, and yet it rains eight months of the year. You know?"

The Greater Vancouver region is headed away from green concepts like sustainability and compact development, according to MetroQuest, the computer model that generated the maps with the accompanying story on page C2.

Without a change of direction, we're cruising towards the sprawl scenario, the one that shows dots and blotches of yellow and orange — low-density suburbs — all over the map of Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley.

But that same software — actually its cousin, called Georgia Basin Quest — reveals that when we are faced with the graphic consequences of our decisions, we can make tough choices and change the future, says Randi Kruse-Ferdinands, community engagement coordinator with the Georgia Basin Futures Project.

The Quest software has been more than a decade in the making with more than 70 people working on it from forestry, medicine, sociology, education and other fields at the University of B.C., Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria.

The data that went into it came from local, international and provincial sources, including the official community plans of every municipality in the region. It took five years just to compile the data base, and for the last two years, Kruse-Ferdinands has organized about 50 workshops with community groups, municipal planners, members of the public and various organizations.

"We use Quest as a discussion tool to provoke people to talk to each other and to think in ways and about issues that they haven't before," she said.

Participants are divided into groups and asked to come up with a consensus on what kind of community they would like to see, with choices involving everything from development patterns to transportation trends, economic alternatives, consumption of goods and services, tax rates, water use, agricultural practices, and others.

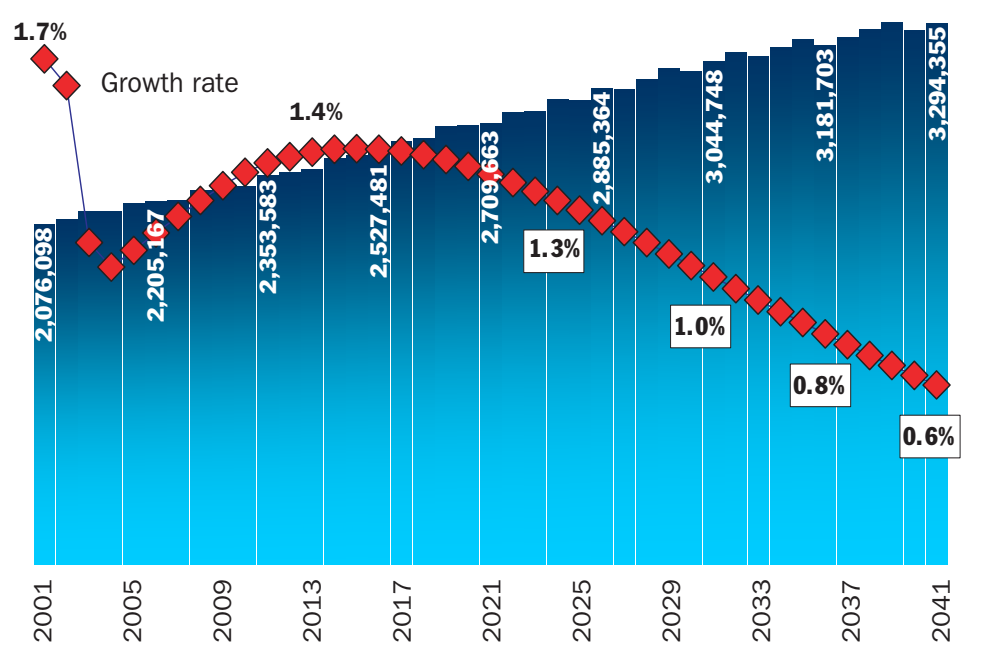
Their choices are entered into the software, and "we show them the results over a 40-year time frame."

They or lack of it is a huge factor in shaping the region, the researchers found.

"If we don't densify, it not only has an effect on

Population growth for the GVRD

Projected to reach nearly 3.3 million by 2041.



Source: Urban Futures Inc.

VANCOUVER SUN

park land and unprotected natural land, but also agricultural land," Kruse-Ferdinands said.

"We see the cost of living go up. We see greenhouse gas emissions increase, because it's difficult for public transit to be efficient in a low-density environment. Public transit options are less and less available if we sprawl."

Increase density, however, and the model shows we can retain green space, traffic congestion is reduced, public transit becomes more viable and people are able to work in the same communities where they live.

People are often taken aback by the region created by their choices. All they wanted was a quiet, pleasant suburb, and they get gridlock hell instead. Fortunately, Quest sessions allow them to make adjustments.

"You keep playing until you start to get a future that you like," said Dave Biggs, who has been working with MetroQuest, the commercial version of the Quest software, which is being marketed by his company, Envision Sustainability Tools.

"Once you've got a future that you like, you can go back and say, what choices did we end up having to make in order to make that future? Let's break that down."

One thing the software does is force decision-makers to think about a much longer time frame than the usual three-year election mandate or five-year community plan. They have to make economic, social and environmental decisions based on a 40-year result horizon.

People often start with unrealistic expectations, Biggs said.

"They want generous yards, pristine agricultural and natural land, they want low taxes, they want ungestored roads, they want a short drive to work, and good police services and good

schools and everything.

"We've got to realize that we have to make some choices, because we can't actually deliver all of those things simultaneously."

"So, is it more important to you to have clean air or a big yard? Is it more important to drive your car or to pay low taxes?"

"We need to elevate the discussion with stakeholders to the level where they're actually prepared to say, 'This is more important than that. I'm willing to make that choice.'"

And they do, Biggs said.

"After people play around with some alternative futures, they come to a consensus very quickly. They start to migrate to the kinds of policies that the GVRD is actually recommending."

But it's not just a matter of bludgeoning the public into embracing the GVRD's solutions, Carline says.

The region is going through a detailed examination of how it governs itself. For that matter, so is the provincial government. Some regional politicians are demanding changes, and when a GVRD or TransLink meeting dissolves into chaos, they get public support.

TransLink chairman, GVRD director and Surrey Mayor Doug McCallum is one of them.

McCallum, who champions more road- and bridge-building alongside transit development, says Greater Vancouver and its 21 municipalities are far too fragmented.

The solution, he says, is to divide the region into just four cities:

- The three inner cities, Vancouver, New Westminster and Burnaby.

- The south-of-the-Fraser communities, Richmond, Delta, Surrey, White Rock, and Langley city and township.

- The northeast sector: Port Moody, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Pitt Meadows, Maple Ridge as well as Anmore and Belcarra.

- The North Shore: West Vancouver, North Vancouver city and district, plus Bowen Island and Lions Bay.

Voters would elect their municipal councils and a regional executive committee of perhaps nine members who would deal with major cross-border services and issues like sewer, water, transportation and air quality.

Our notion of region may also change, McCallum says.

"I see a bigger picture of the region, from West Vancouver to Hope, or even from Squamish to Hope."

McCallum argues that the centre of this Lower Mainland region, geographically and administratively, will be Whalley, in north Surrey.

Whalley? Yes, he says, seriously. Stimulated by the extension of SkyTrain, Whalley is seeing "unbelievable" growth and development. "A lot of the new development is now heading south of the Fraser River, and I see that as the centre of the region."

The other thing the region needs is for some municipal leaders to start minding their own business, McCallum says.

That's a shot at the mayors of the inner cities, who don't want the Port Mann Bridge and the Trans-Canada Highway opened full throttle because that could turn their municipalities into parking lots, and encourage sprawl in the valley.

"Centres that just want transit, that's fine," McCallum says. "They can have that."

But those centres shouldn't be telling other centres that they don't need roads if those other centres need roads. That's the problem we have right now."

McCallum says the south-of-the-Fraser communities will get what they want — more road capacity — and that the region can still remain healthy.

"The only way we'll ever mess it up is if we don't listen to the residents of this region. I think it's very important that we listen to how they want to see the region develop, and that us as politicians need to stay out of that."

Others suggest more of us have to become involved in shaping the future.

"The answers are only going to come from you and me," says Andrew Ramlo of Urban Futures Inc. "They're not going to come from the Greater Vancouver Regional District or any other form of higher political bodies saying you should be doing this or that."

Like the participants in MetroQuest workshops, we have to acknowledge that our lifestyle decisions have consequences and that taken together, they determine the shape of our city and our region, Ramlo said.

Regional government faces a similar challenge, Carline added. The regional district, the transportation authority, the 21 municipal councils, the provincial government and all the agencies that provide utilities and services in the region will have to get on the same page rather than working at cross-purposes.

"I don't think we're going to have that luxury in the future." □