

Case in Point

The Making of a Sustainable Community: The Case of Northeast Coquitlam

Abstract

The City of Coquitlam is developing one of its last large tracts of greenfield land. This development won the Energy Aware Award in 2000 (Community Energy Association 2000) and is at the cutting-edge in terms of sustainable development: featuring efficient use of transportation networks, compact residential lots, and the inclusion of a town centre that provides necessary amenities to the local population while reducing the entire development's impact on the natural environment.

The City of Coquitlam, a suburb of Vancouver BC, is located 45 minutes east of downtown Vancouver.

Image Source:
http://www.realestatefoundation.com/publications/innovationarticle_june04.pdf



Background

Nestled between two major river systems and next to provincial and regional parks, the Northeast Coquitlam development is located in a unique environment where residents can have easy access to outdoor recreation and the enjoyment of nature. With one of the last large developable tracts of land in the region and a shortage of affordable housing options, this area is an area of opportunity. These are some of the many reasons the Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan strives to create a development more sustainable than the conventional suburban approach.

The Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan (NECAP) proposes to house up to 24000 new residents over 1400 acres in approximately 7500 residential units of mixed densities, complete with schools and a neighbourhood town centre (Land and Water BC, 2003). This complete community will also reduce emphasis on the automobile through providing a variety of transportation options. The NECAP was adopted by council in 2000, and is based on seven guiding principles.

These principles are:

- Protecting the environment
- Ensuring a natural connection with a network of interconnected green spaces
- Creating a complete community
- Creating the heart of the community
- Building a transportation network
- Supporting the community
- Preserving heritage

(Wesbild Holdings Inc, 2006)

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Background - Continued

The northeast sector of Coquitlam is located in a designated Growth Concentration Area, as prescribed in the Greater Vancouver Regional District's (GVRD) Livable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP) (Community Energy Association 2000, see also "Box #3: A Hierarchy of Plans"). Council recognized that "land use and transportation planning, site planning, neighbourhood and building design can have profound effects on energy efficiency and energy-related air-emissions" (Community Energy Association, 2000). City Council made a formal commitment by adopting its Official Community Plan (OCP) to make Northeast Coquitlam a sustainable neighbourhood.

Key Stakeholders

The development of this area is quite complex, as there are several stakeholders involved in the planning process. The land is currently held by multiple owners, including the City of Coquitlam, Wesbild Holdings Ltd., and numerous private owners. These and other stakeholders are described below.

City of Coquitlam. A major land owner in this development, the City of Coquitlam seeks to ensure that Northeast Coquitlam meets its planning goals of becoming a sustainable community. Coquitlam's role is to work with the various stakeholders to achieve a common vision for the future.

Wesbild Holdings. Wesbild Holdings is a development holdings firm that has acquired significant land holdings in Northeast Coquitlam from the provincial government and other purchases. It is working closely with the City of Coquitlam to help achieve the development of a this sustainable, complete community in Northeast Coquitlam.

Private Owners. There are a number of private owners who own acreages in the area and are anxious to develop their land. Many of them are concerned about stream setback regulations which may affect the value of their property and their potential to develop.

Box #1:

Features of Coquitlam's Sustainable Suburb

- One walkable village centre serving as a focal point for the area's employment, shopping, educational, recreational, and social uses and for future direct transit service between Northeast Coquitlam and Coquitlam's Regional Town Centre;
- A mix of transit-supportive land use types and densities within the proposed village centre;
- A concentration of residential land uses within a ten minute walk of the village centre;
- An inter-connected transportation network and grid accommodating the need for cars, transit, bicycles and pedestrians;
- Protection of areas of high environmental sensitivity; and,
- A network of active and passive parks and leisure opportunities

(Source: Community Energy Association, 2000)

School District 43. Due to the sheer scale of the development the need for multiple educational facilities, School District #43 (SD43) has become a key stakeholder in acquiring land for elementary, middle and high school sites. SD43 will work in cooperation with the City of Coquitlam to create joint school/park sites.

Neighbouring Municipalities. The sheer location and scale of the development will have significant impacts on neighbouring municipalities; in particular Port Coquitlam and Port Moody. Examples of impacts include future land use, transportation, watershed, and service planning. The City of Coquitlam recognises the implementation of this development will require close cooperation with neighbouring municipalities.

Other Stakeholders. Ranging from individual residents to the Burke-Mountain Naturalists to the Northeast Coquitlam Ratepayers, there are a multitude of interest groups and individuals that have a stake in the development of Northeast Coquitlam.

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The Planning Process

It begins with an idea...

In the early 1990's, the City of Coquitlam council directed that planning for the future development of Northeast Coquitlam be based on more sustainable principles than previous development in the city. Accordingly, city staff undertook a number of background studies to assist in the preparation of the NECAP. One example included utilizing a GIS-based system to evaluate different livability and resource efficiency indicators, while another was to undertake a comparative analysis between the sustainability efficiencies of Northeast Coquitlam development and those of a conventional development built in Coquitlam 20 years earlier. It was found that when Northeast Coquitlam is built out it will be significantly more sustainable than a conventional neighbourhood (City of Coquitlam 2000). A summary of the results of the comparative study appears in Box #2.

“The process to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan includes these stages: Background Information and Analysis; Exploration of Land Use Alternatives; Preparation of a draft Neighbourhood Plan; and Council consideration of the Neighbourhood Plan as a proposed amendment to the Citywide Official Community Plan – Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan, which involves a Public Hearing.”
(City of Coquitlam 2006).

The City has gone a step further and has made a commitment to involve the public through more than a public hearing. It has made its information accessible to the public through the City website and at City Hall, and has hosted a number of public open houses allowing the public to comment on the development. Furthermore, Wesbild has made available on its website recent developments and news releases relating to Northeast Coquitlam and even allows people to subscribe to an email newsletter. Both the City and Wesbild have made a concerted effort to keep the public informed about the various stages of development. Below is an example of how the City communicates its information at public open houses.

Box #2

Key sustainability benefits of the proposed land use plan for Northeast Coquitlam over the more conventional suburban approach:

- 30% lower infrastructure capital and operating costs
- 24% lower CO2 emissions
- 20% less land covered by streets
- 70% less travel distance to shopping
- 20% increase in household proximity to parks and open space
- 250% increase in the number of key community facilities and amenities
- 400% increase in local job opportunities

(Source: City of Coquitlam, 2000)



A Mixed-Use “Main Street”
Source: City of Coquitlam 2000, p. B-18



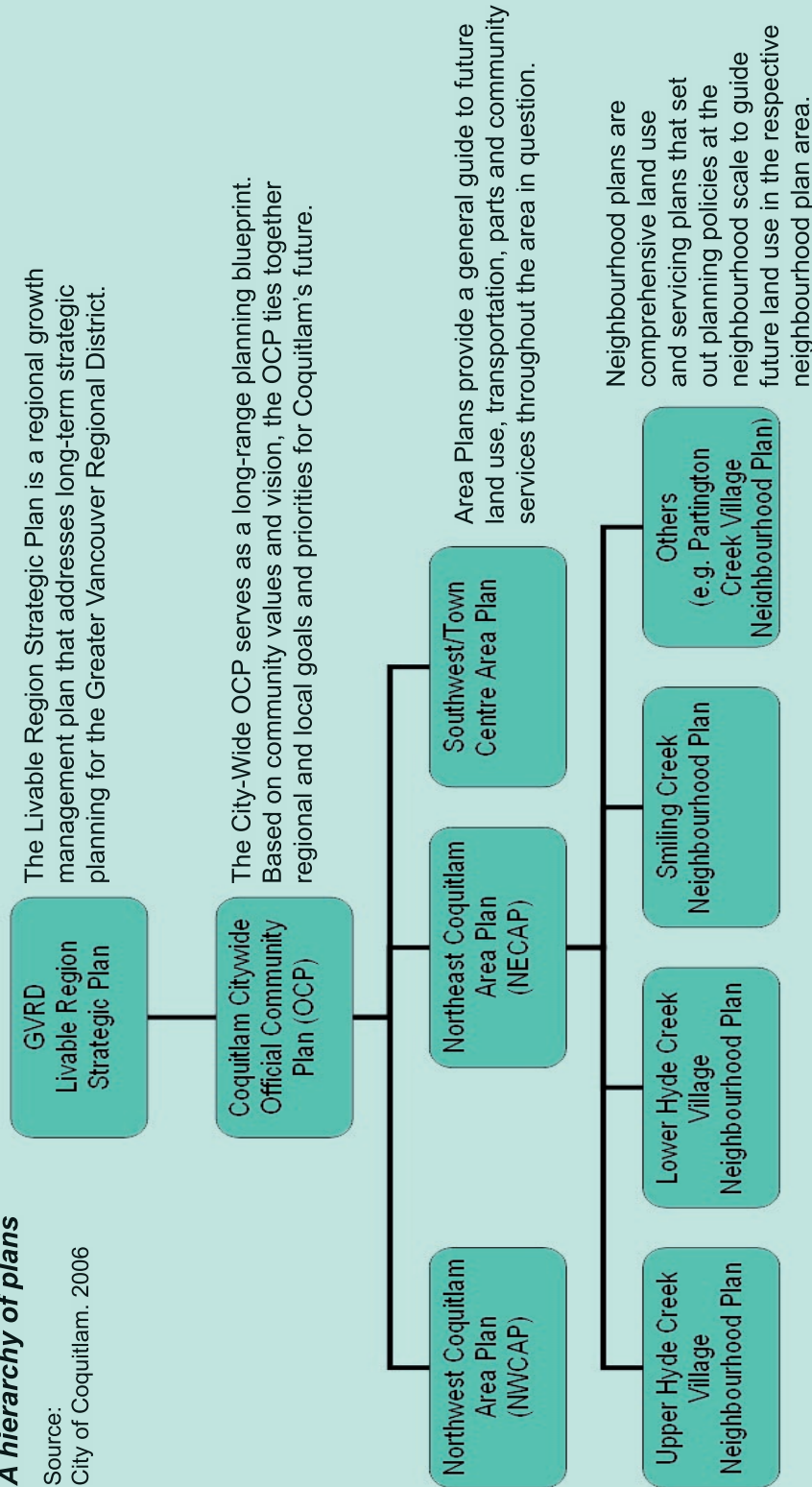
Pedestrian Oriented Environment
Source: City of Coquitlam 2000, p. A-12

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Box #3: A hierarchy of plans

Source:
City of Coquitlam. 2006



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The Challenge

There are numerous challenges that can affect the successful outcome of this development. From physical constraints to social concerns, staff at the City of Coquitlam need to take many factors into account. Geographically speaking, Northeast Coquitlam is a unique environment. It is surrounded by two major river systems, is adjacent to regional parks and a neighbouring municipality, and is situated on part of Burke Mountain, with its salmon-bearing streams, steep terrain, and west coast rainforest.

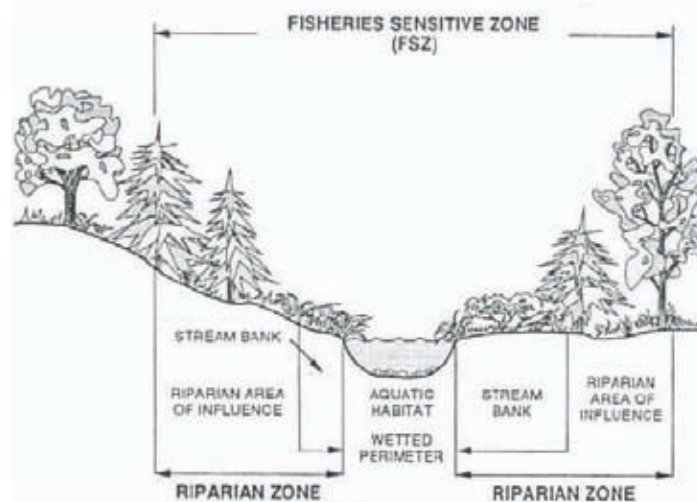
Coquitlam and its neighbouring municipalities are working in cooperation to achieve long-term development goals of mutual interest such as future land use, transportation, watershed, and service planning. It is Coquitlam's special goal to minimise negative environmental impacts from this development by maintaining slope stability, capturing rainfall on-site, and reducing overland stormwater flows through the use of low impact development guidelines and retention ponds. The City's goal is also aimed at preserving the integrity of salmon-bearing streams and other environmentally sensitive areas. It is this last point which has been especially controversial with local property owners and has been widely publicised in local newspapers.

The Province of British Columbia has recently enacted the Riparian Area Regulation (RAR) to help protect streams and aquatic habitat. The regulations are used to determine the setbacks required for development next to riparian zones. Prior to the enactment of the RAR, the City of Coquitlam adopted a set of regulations, known as the Streamside Protection Regulations (SPR). The SPR is more restrictive than the RAR for development. Members of the public are now lobbying council to adopt the RAR because the SPR allegedly reduces property owners' development potential and thereby lower property values. Environmental groups, however, support the SPR because of the added protection given to environmentally sensitive areas. At the time of completion of this report, this issue has not yet been resolved. (Robb February 22 2006, Robb March 9 2006)

Future Direction

With the recent approval and adoption of two neighbourhood plans, the Northeast Coquitlam development is on its way to becoming a sustainable community. The next steps will be to approve other neighbourhood plans, rezone, subdivide and issue development permits for construction to begin. The development will occur in phases with full build-out anticipated for 2031. Perhaps a post-occupancy evaluation would be a recommended future step to assess the success and popularity of this innovative development.

As this is the last large area of developable land in Coquitlam, and population growth is expected to continue beyond what Northeast Coquitlam is projected to accommodate, the City will continue to explore how to concentrate development within its boundaries. With the advent of the Evergreen rapid transit line coming to Southwest Coquitlam and the Town Centre, the city has developed plans to concentrate growth near transit stations following the principles of Transit Oriented Developments (TOD). A recent article from a local newspaper indicated that there will soon be pressure to redevelop other areas of Coquitlam (www.tricitynews.com). The city website has also announced a policy review on duplex applications in the Southwest area of the city.



Riparian and Fisheries Sensitive Zones
Source: City of Coquitlam 2000, p. B-35

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Lessons Learned - What Works

There are a number of strategies that have made the Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan as successful as it is. First, city council set clear, well-defined goals for development in Northeast Coquitlam –development that markedly improves on conventional neighbourhood design. With seven simple yet poignant guiding principles, the direction of the development has been set. Second, the options for the sustainable development were well-researched. Measuring indicators using available technology and undertaking comparative studies between the Northeast Coquitlam plan and a conventional development plan built 20 year earlier provided the City with the necessary information to make sound decisions about future development. Third, the City formalized its commitment to Northeast Coquitlam through adopting the NECAP as a part of the City-Wide Official Community Plan. The NECAP embodied the seven planning principles, and expanded upon them through additional policies and guidelines for land uses, transportation, services and utilities, and neighbourhood plans (City of Coquitlam 2000).

The City is also actively involving Northeast Coquitlam stakeholders in the planning for future development. From cooperating with different levels of government such as neighbouring municipalities and School District #43, to involving private landowners, special interest groups, and the public at many stages along the way through meetings, public hearings, open houses, and other means in an accessible and transparent manner. Finally, it is important to follow through on these commitments. Coquitlam has done this by developing and recently approving the first two neighbourhood plans, both of which are consistent with the goals, policies and guidelines of the NECAP and the Citywide OCP. These steps are critical to the success of the development, which will be observed in coming years as development in the area proceeds.

About the Planners

Stephanie Long is completing her Masters of City Planning at the University of Manitoba, and is focusing her research on adapting existing neighbourhoods to facilitate aging in place.

Andrew Young is a community planner with the City of Coquitlam and is the primary contact for the Northeast Coquitlam development.

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