

Social PLANNING, VANCOUVER

By Daniel Lauber

"Unique" is the only word that adequately describes the organization of planning in Vancouver. The city has two separate but equal planning agencies: the 82-person traditionally oriented City Planning Department and the very unconventional 13-person Social Planning Department. In the eight short years since it was created, the Social Planning Department has alienated the City Planning Department, gained the trust of local politicians, changed the face of planning in Vancouver, and been instrumental in killing urban renewal in all of Canada.

Created in response to both a recommendation from the City Planning Department for social planning in Vancouver's urban renewal areas and pressure from the United Community Services (now the United Way) for establishment of a city agency to coordinate and integrate social services planning into the planning process, the Social Planning Department proceeded to do an axe job on Vancouver's urban renewal program and has done little to coordinate social services planning. Instead, it has been actively fulfilling some of the functions outlined in the job description for the director of social planning: "To evaluate and report on the impact of programs on social problems, perceive the social implications of various government activities, and make recommendations thereon; study, evaluate, and report on proposals adopted by Council; guide the integration of social and physical planning; and coordinate and unify the approaches of a variety of civic departments and outside agencies at city and area levels."

These rather broadly defined functions have allowed the Social Planning Department to become what City Engineer Bill Curtis calls a "commando group" making sure that social concerns are considered. Peter Leckie, Director of Finance, feels that the Social Planning Department's function is to "act almost as a goad or needle to keep the rest of us honest on social aspects because the social aspects can be so easily dropped from consideration."

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Increased pedestrian traffic on Vancouver's Granville Mall has created a self-policing atmosphere that has driven out the seedier element.

Mayor Art Phillips believes that the Social Planning Department had done a good job of considering the social consequences of different planning activities. It has looked at such problems as housing and relocation without letting bureaucratic concerns color its efforts, and it has been very innovative in dealing with other problems.

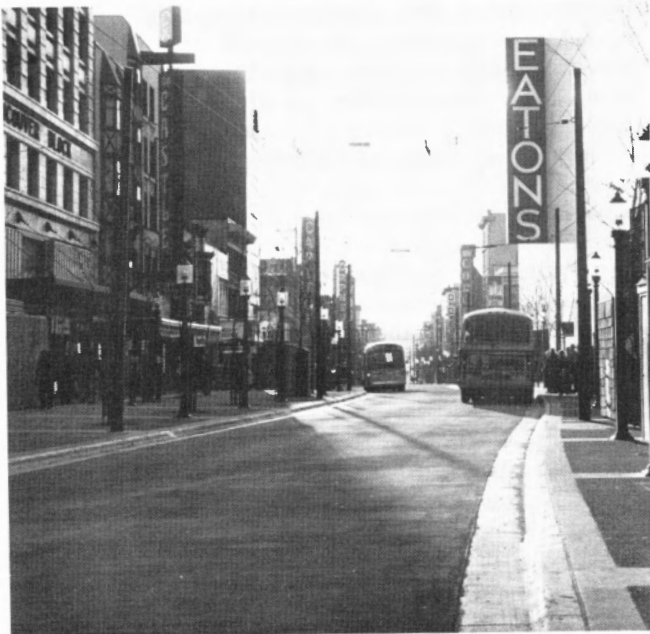
The Social Planning Department's role in the Strathcona urban renewal project supports the mayor's assessment. Strathcona is the residential portion of Chinatown and the only area in Vancouver where an individual who speaks only Chinese—the elderly and recent immigrants—can live as a self-sufficient individual. Many others choose to live there because of cultural ties and the other amenities the area offers. Socially it was (and still is) very stable and close-knit; physically it was in need of repair.

The City Planning Department spent three years preparing urban renewal plans for Strathcona. But when Robert Andras, federal minister responsible for housing, arrived in Vancouver in the summer of 1969 for the public unveiling of the plans for Strathcona's renewal, several Social Planning Department staff members carried him off to a secret restaurant meeting with 400 irate members of

the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association. Emerging from that meeting, Andras declared urban renewal to be dead in Canada. Shortly thereafter, the city council appointed Maurice Egan, Director of Social Planning, to head a new area-rehabilitation scheme with residents and government officials. This Strathcona Working Committee produced a report which emphasized the desire of Strathcona residents to stay in the area, to preserve their homes, and to participate in the upgrading of the community. Rehabilitation was to be the general goal for the area, and the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association was to be considered the citizen organization for Strathcona and would accept responsibility for involving and informing all other residents in the area. The committee, with considerable staff support from the Social Planning Department, drew up plans for the area, concentrating on a program to provide grants and loans for individual rehabilitation efforts varying with the work to be done and the income of the property owner. The Social Planning Department pulled out of this project only after it had laid out the basic guidelines for the Strathcona Rehabilitation Committee to follow. City officials all feel that the rehabilitation of Strathcona has been an unqualified success and that this may have been the most significant accomplishment of the Social Planning Department.

The Social Planning Department can enter activities at its own initiative, too, as it has done in the case of the provision of social amenities in new developments. Twice in the past year the Social Planning Department infringed on the City Planning Department's traditional domain by persuading developers of commercial property to include day care centers in their proposed buildings in trade for an additional floor and a reduction in the offstreet parking requirement. In the second case, the developer also agreed to include a small theater in his downtown building. Social Planning Director Egan would like to see legislation enacted that would grant density bonuses for social as well as physical amenities. But City Planning Director Ray Spaxman sounds a warning. He feels that comprehensive policy guidelines for the provision of social and entertainment/cultural amenities should be established to assure equitable treatment of developers. Herein lies a

Granville Mall was physically redesigned, oddly enough, by the city's social planning department to eliminate some severe skid row conditions.



major difference and source of conflict between Vancouver's two planning departments. The City Planning Department is more deliberate and slower in its work; the Social Planning Department attacks tasks with less deliberation and less long-term study and is much more responsive to the politicians.

Perhaps these factors contributed to the city council's choice in June 1973 of the Social Planning Department to coordinate the planning and construction of the Granville Mall. A year earlier the "reform" party, The Electors Action Movement (TEAM), wrested control of the city council from the longtime incumbent party, NPA. The nine to two TEAM majority desperately needed some physical monument to show the electorate that TEAM was achievement and action oriented. For several years merchants and shoppers along Granville Street, in the heart of downtown Vancouver, had complained about increasing crime, vandalism, harassment, and other undesirable behavior along the street. Prostitution flourished. Flophouse hotels provided an abundance of drunks and loiterers. Some merchants complained of fornication on the street. Drug pushers did a growing business. Merchants reported that they swept up syringes from in front of their shops nearly every morning.

The City Planning Department told the city council that considerable study would be necessary before Granville Street could be converted to a mall. Refusing to wait, the city council assigned the project to the Social Planning Department. Senior Planner Jonathan Baker coordinated the difficult task of persuading the majority of merchants along Granville to agree to a mall. Working with other city departments, the Social Planning Department completed the Granville Mall—modeled after Minneapolis's Nicollet Mall—within 13 months.

All the publicity and promotion for the new mall attracted sufficiently large crowds to create a self-policing situation which, together with an increase in police patrols and pressure on the flophouse hotels, drove out the undesirable elements. But, as Maurice Egan notes, the social problems were not really solved; they were simply shifted to other, less noticeable parts of the city. Still, though, the Social Planning Department once again had come through for the politicians.

Both the Strathcona and Granville Mall episodes help explain the strained relations between Vancouver's two planning departments. Members of the Social Planning Department, high city officials including Mayor Phillips, and City Planning Director Ray Spaxman all agree that many members of the City Planning Department feel "paranoid" about the Social Planning Department. Because the objectives and responsibilities of the Social Planning Department are so ambiguous, Egan can confidently say that "there is nothing that anybody in the city is involved in that we cannot get involved in." Egan's department has built close ties with whatever party dominates city hall. A social worker by profession, Egan was a two-time alderman in Ottawa before he became the first and only director of social planning in Vancouver. His staff initiated what now has become standard practice: direct individual contact with aldermen and department heads without going through bureaucratic channels. After having had three years of work on Strathcona thrown out because of the Social Planning Department's intervention and having had to stand by while the city council handed over the Granville Mall project to the Social Planning Department,



Bound in on three sides by mountains, Vancouver's housing can only go up. Yet, city officials and citizens alike are opposed to additional high-rises.

the City Planning Department might well feel paranoid.

The lack of coordination of the two departments' activities has occasionally resulted in duplication of effort. Some coordination may evolve from the new Development Permit Board, which includes the directors of both planning departments. But efforts to coordinate the activities of the two departments and reduce the strain between them are unlikely to receive much support from city hall. Mayor Phillips says he is "happy with the way the planning departments are set up." He wants no formal structure to exist between the two; he likes the element of conflict created by the absence of a formal relationship. Director of Finance Peter Leckie feels that the competition between the two departments is beneficial. Even Ray Spaxman, Director of City Planning, feels that the duplication of effort occasionally has been helpful, inasmuch as the two departments often will take different stands on an issue.

Spaxman would like to see a merger of the two departments on an equal footing. That he would accept the Social Planning Department on an "equal footing" is testimony to the effectiveness of the Social Planning Department. Lorne Ryan, City Manager, also would like to see a merger of the two so their activities could be coordinated and conflict eliminated. But Michael Seelig, assistant professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, and a frequent consultant to the Social Planning Department, feels that, because the Social Planning Department has been so effective and efficient, the City Planning Department is the one that should be altered. Rather than continue to expand its professional staff, Seelig says it should be reduced in size and should use consultants more frequently and more effectively.

But even Social Planning Director Egan feels there eventually should be only one planning department in

Vancouver. But there will always be a need for a troubleshooting agency, and the Social Planning Department has performed well in this role. If asked to establish a social planning capability in city government elsewhere, Egan still would establish a social planning department independent from the city planning department. Until such a social planning group is able to establish its identity and planning perspective, it would be overwhelmed by physically oriented planners in the city planning department. Once the function and perspective were established, a social planning department could hold its own when merged with a physically oriented city planning department. Egan, however, would recommend that formal relationships be established immediately between such departments. While the rather uncertain relationship of the two planning departments in Vancouver has not hindered the Social Planning Department, Egan would prefer to have some formal relationships established.

Vancouver's Social Planning Department has covered a wide range of fields since its formation eight years ago. It has dealt with the problems of urban renewal and day care, as mentioned above; in addition its activities have led it into such far-flung troubleshooting areas as quelling beach riots in 1972, studying the social effects of strict code enforcement on the residents of cheap hotels and the elderly, determining the social impacts of alternative highway alignments, and publishing a monthly *Urban Reader* "to spark the reader's interest in the pursuit of urban information." Its freewheeling style has permitted it to step on the toes of other city departments and, because it is the darling of the city council, to get away with it. Yet, its activities have gotten other city departments, particularly City Planning, to start considering the probable social effects of their actions and plans. And in the final analysis, isn't that what planning is really all about? □