



## CITY OF VANCOUVER

### POLICY REPORT SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Report Date: May 10, 2005  
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TO: Vancouver City Council

FROM: Director of Social Planning, in consultation with the Manager of the  
Sustainability Group

SUBJECT: Definition of Social Sustainability

#### RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council adopt the proposed definition of Social Sustainability, as described in this report and attached as Appendix A, to be used for developing the social component of the City's sustainability objectives.

#### GENERAL MANAGER'S COMMENTS

The General Manager recommends approval of the foregoing Recommendation to support the City's interest in addressing the three components of sustainability, namely, economic, social and ecological. This definition of social sustainability supports the work staff is currently undertaking to develop an overall social development plan for the City which will be reported shortly. Staff is also discussing the importance of culture in conjunction with the new City Creative Task Force and will report back to Council regarding cultural sustainability.

#### COUNCIL POLICY

On April 23, 2002 City Council adopted a definition and principles for sustainability as a basis for City actions and operations.

## PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The City's definition of sustainability notes that there are three components to sustainability: economic, social and ecological. This report provides a definition of social sustainability to clarify what it is and what steps need to be taken to ensure it.

In April 2002, Council approved the following definition of sustainability, and endorsed sustainability as a guiding principle for future development:

*A sustainable Vancouver is a community that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is a place where people live, work, and prosper in a vibrant community of communities. In such a community sustainability is achieved through community participation and the reconciliation of short and long term economic, social and ecological well-being.*

In April 2002, City Council directed staff to, "as a matter of ongoing program improvements, review existing policies and programs with a view to applying the City of Vancouver's Principles for Sustainability throughout the City organization." The definition of social sustainability proposed in this report further enhances the City's ongoing work towards a sustainable city. In April 2005, Council further requested that staff bring forward a definition of sustainability.

The City's commitment to sustainability reflects the growing awareness that actions taken by governments must conserve resources and minimize negative impacts on the environment and community. Social sustainability deals with complex issues such as quality of life, health, equity, liveability, and social inclusion. The overall objective of social sustainability has significant implications for the long-term health of communities and citizens. A common definition and understanding of social sustainability principles are important to move forward. This report responds to Council's request for clarity regarding social sustainability and builds on previous information presented to Council in 2005.

## DISCUSSION

The definition presented in this report builds on the GVRD's Social Issues Subcommittee (SIS) definition of social sustainability that was developed from a number of sources including local experience and expertise, global literature on social sustainability, and the ideas generated at a GVRD June 2002 forum on social sustainability. The GVRD-SIS definition encompasses commonly held themes and concepts and has been used as a basis for the following definition:

### **Social Sustainability - a definition**

For a community to function and be sustainable, the basic needs of its residents must be met. A socially sustainable community must have the ability to maintain and build on its own resources and have the resiliency to prevent and/or address problems in the future.

There are two types or levels of resources in the community that are available to build social sustainability (and, indeed, economic and environmental sustainability) - individual or human capacity, and social or community capacity.

Individual or human capacity refers to the attributes and resources that individuals can contribute to their own well-being and to the well-being of the community as a whole. Such resources include education, skills, health, values and leadership.

Social or community capacity is defined as the relationships, networks and norms that facilitate collective action taken to improve upon quality of life and to ensure that such improvements are sustainable.

To be effective and sustainable, both these individual and community resources need to be developed and used within the context of four guiding principles - equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, and adaptability.

Staff propose that this definition be adopted as the basis of our work towards the City fulfilling its sustainability goals. The following components and principles are intended to expand on the definition presented above and provide a more detailed context for the City's work.

Social sustainability encompasses three components:

- 1) basic needs such as housing and sufficient income that must be met before capacity can develop;
- 2) individual or human capacity or opportunity for learning and self development; and
- 3) social or community capacity for the development of community organizations, networks that foster interaction.

The above components are underpinned by four guiding principles:

- 1) equity,
- 2) social inclusion and interaction,
- 3) security, and
- 4) adaptability.

A further explanation of the components and guiding principles is provided in Appendix A. These components and principles help to clarify and guide the use of the social sustainability definition.

This social sustainability definition was tested last year in the Official Development Plan for Southeast False Creek. The definition proved to be very useful in clearly identifying aspects of the plan that were critical to ensuring the community was sustainable.

The social sustainability definition also helped to demonstrate the inter-relationships with the other two components of sustainability. For instance, urban agriculture was presented as an environmental initiative, while the community garden version of urban agriculture was included as an example of community development, one of the components of social sustainability.

#### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications with approving this definition.

#### **SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Within the municipal mandate, the City contributes extensively to the maintenance and enhancement of the social environment. Application of the social sustainability definition to City actions will help ensure they are continuously done in a way that enhances and supports the social infrastructure of the city.

#### **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

The City's sustainability definition and principles provide a general guide for sustainability. However, as policies and programs are being developed and reviewed for their sustainability, and specific sustainability initiatives are being developed, a more precise definition of each of the three components of sustainability is required. The proposed social sustainability definition provides a framework for the City's efforts in ensuring overall sustainability and, in particular, supports the social aspects of community life.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The definition of social sustainability (including the guiding principles and the list of required components based on the work of the GVRD Social Issues Sub-committee) can and should be used to guide the City's work on sustainability.

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## SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

### 1. Definition:

For the purpose of the City's work, the following is the definition of social sustainability:

#### **Social Sustainability**

For a community to function and be sustainable, the basic needs of its residents must be met. A socially sustainable community must have the ability to maintain and build on its own resources and have the resiliency to prevent and/or address problems in the future.

There are two types or levels of resources in the community that are available to build social sustainability (and, indeed, economic and environmental sustainability) - individual or human capacity, and social or community capacity.

Individual or human capacity refers to the attributes and resources that individuals can contribute to their own well-being and to the well-being of the community as a whole. Such resources include education, skills, health, values and leadership.

Social or community capacity is defined as the relationships, networks and norms that facilitate collective action taken to improve upon quality of life and to ensure that such improvements are sustainable.

To be effective and sustainable, both these individual and community resources need to be developed and used within the context of four guiding principles - equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, and adaptability.

### 2. Required components of social sustainability

Social sustainability can be understood to be made up of three required components and four guiding principles. The three components of social sustainability are (1) basic needs, (2) individual or human capacity and (3) social or community capacity.

#### 1. *Basic needs* of residents can continue to be met through:

- Appropriate, affordable housing, with flexibility to meet changing needs - the needs of those on low and moderate incomes, the needs of those with special circumstances such as physical and mental illness, and the needs of all as they age
- Appropriate, affordable health care available in the community
- Locally produced, nutritious food that is affordable
- Jobs that enable people to be productive and utilize their skills and abilities
- Sufficient income for people to be able to financially support themselves and their families
- Safe communities and workplaces

#### 2. *Individual or human capacity* can be maintained and enhanced through:

- Opportunities to develop and upgrade skills

- A variety of local employment opportunities throughout the region
  - Opportunities to develop and make use of creativity and artistic expression
  - Appropriate, affordable formal and informal life-long learning
  - Appropriate, affordable recreation, leisure and cultural facilities and programs
  - A range of opportunities for individuals to contribute to the health and well-being of the community
3. *Social or community capacity* can be maintained and enhanced through:
- Support and encouragement for community economic development
  - Community “identity” is reflective of community diversity
  - Involvement in public processes and their results, and in government
  - Opportunities and places for social interaction throughout the community
  - Opportunities, resources and venues for a variety of arts, cultural and community activities
  - Support and encouragement for community organizations and networks

### 3. Guiding Principles of Social Sustainability

There are four guiding principles that are referred to in the definition and direct socially sustainable work. They are described as follows:

1. *Equity* - when individuals have access to sufficient resources to participate fully in their community and have opportunities for personal development and advancement and there is a fair distribution of resources among communities to facilitate full participation and collaboration. Inequities can be minimized by recognizing that individuals and groups require differing levels of support in order to flourish, and that some individuals and groups are capable of contributing more than others to address disparities and promote fairness of distribution. Lower levels of disparity in societies result in longer life expectancies, less homicides and crime, stronger patterns of civic engagement and more robust economic vitality.
2. *Social inclusion and interaction* - both the right and the opportunity to participate in and enjoy all aspects of community life and interact with other community members; where the environment enables individuals to celebrate their diversity and react and act on their responsibilities. Social exclusion limits the levels of involvement and impedes optimal healthy development of individuals and the community as a whole.
3. *Security* - individuals and communities have economic security and have confidence that they live in safe, supportive and healthy environments. People need to feel safe and secure in order to contribute fully to their own well being or engage fully in community life.
4. *Adaptability* - resiliency for both individuals and communities and the ability to respond appropriately and creatively to change. Adaptability is a process of building upon what already exists, and learning from and building upon experiences from both within and outside the community.