

Vancouver: The Challenge of Becoming the Greenest City

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In early 2018, the mayor of Vancouver Gregor Robertson had to decide if he would run in the upcoming elections in October, after almost eight years holding his position. Since 2011, he had led a very ambitious sustainability program for the city as part of his strategy and political positioning. The project focused on transforming Vancouver into the greenest city in the world by 2020. Environment and health had always been priority concerns for Robertson; before entering politics, for example, he had founded Happy Planet, a Vancouver-based socially responsible company that produced organic juices and promoted health and nutrition.

Robertson had adopted a specific strategy for the Vancouver Greenest City initiative and actions had been taken at all levels. Although the strategic plan had allowed Robertson to reach the mayor's office in 2011 with absolute majority and become reelected in 2014, he no longer held this majority and opposing parties were closing in by criticizing his plan. Given the short time left before the next elections, Robertson reflected on the true value of the plan as a vehicle for improving the quality of life of Vancouver's inhabitants and a tool for attracting votes. Should he run for mayor again? And if he did, should he maintain the plan for transforming Vancouver into the greenest city in the world? Or should he take advantage of the occasion to redefine the city's strategy? With some progress made, but many goals still far from being reached by 2020, could he consider the plan to make Vancouver the greenest city on the planet a success? Mayor Robertson had to make some important decisions, and make them soon.

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Vancouver

Vancouver is located in the southwest corner of British Columbia, the westernmost of Canada's 10 provinces, and only 38 km. from the U.S. border (see **Exhibit 1**). The city is on a peninsula in the Fraser River delta, bordered to the north by the Coast Mountains and surrounded by water on the other three sides. It is home to Port Metro Vancouver, the busiest and largest port in Canada. The abundance of hydro energy is a major contributing factor to Vancouver having the lowest carbon emissions per capita in North America.¹

With a population of around 2.5 million (in Greater Vancouver, with 600,000 in the city),² Vancouver is Canada's eighth largest city, accounting for more than 7% of the country's population.

Vancouver's Economy

Traditionally, resource industries like mining and forestry had been the main economic areas in Vancouver. In 2010, 12 of the top 100 B.C. firms ranked by revenues were in mining, all based in Vancouver. Eleven were in forestry, most also Vancouver-based.³ Still, in 2013 more than 22% of the working population was dedicated to trade, transportation and utilities, followed by education and health services. (In fact, the University of British Columbia was the biggest employer of the city, with more than 10,000 workers.)⁴ The port also generated an important share of income for the city, and around 10% of the people worked directly or indirectly for the port. Manufacturing, however, had been shifting outside the region's borders during the last 40 years, and the space has been reoccupied for residential development.⁵ Manufacturing accounted for only 12% of the city's GDP, compared with 14% in Montreal and 18% in Toronto.

The city is known for its information and cultural industries. It is the third largest foreign film production center in North America, after Los Angeles and New York, and is home to the biggest studio of the world's largest computer game developer, Electronic Arts. Venture capital is another of the strengths of the city: 20% of all Canada venture capital transactions are made in Vancouver due to the support of British Columbia government tax credits to finance small business R&D. In line with this activity, the University of British Columbia has spun off more than 125 companies since 1976.⁶

Vancouver receives around nine million visitors a year, tourism being an important source of revenue and employment - around 8% of the labor force.

The city accounts for around 6% of the country's GDP, although it isn't the preferred Canadian destination for big multinationals, which have a much larger presence in other cities such as Toronto. Average productivity in Vancouver lags behind the country average by 12%,⁷ mainly

¹ Hurrian Peyman, "Vancouver's Green Economy, Working Paper Number 1," ISIS Research Center at the Sauder School of Business, July 2010.

² Canada Statistics.

³ BCBUSINESS. "BCBusiness." BCBusiness. Last accessed February 15, 2021. <https://www.bcbusiness.ca/2010-top-100-companies-in-bc>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Euromonitor. "Vancouver City Review." Euromonitor International | Strategic Market Research, Data & Analysis. With data from 2011, last accessed in October 2012.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



due to the fact that Vancouver lacks the oil industry that is present in Alberta and other Canadian regions, or the financial services of Toronto.

Vancouver's Society

With 5,493 people per square kilometer, Vancouver is one of the most densely populated cities in the country. The city population is extremely diverse, with 52% speaking a first language other than English. In 2017, the Economist Intelligence Unit placed Vancouver as the third most livable city in the world, according to several criteria, such as culture, crime, education, environment, healthcare, infrastructure, public service and stability. It is, however, one of the most expensive places to live in Canada, housing expenses accounting for 28% of the total household budget, 20% more than in the rest of the country. Indeed, housing affordability is a major concern for Vancouverites. According to the Demographia research group, the city is the second most unaffordable market in the world (behind Hong Kong). This idea was confirmed in the results of a recent poll: 40% of respondents believed the provision of affordable housing was the single biggest issue facing the city, compared with 17% who thought it was transportation, 14% who thought it was poverty and 11% who said economic development was the biggest issue.⁸

In terms of mobility, while walking or cycling are preferred by a larger percentage than in other places (8% in Vancouver vs. 6% in Toronto and 7% in Montreal), Vancouver citizens spend the second largest portion of their income on transportation.

Although the city has consistently been chosen as one of the best places to live, Vancouver has one of the highest levels of low-income population compared with the rest of Canada. In fact, in 2011, 14% of the city households were among the poorest 10% in Canada.⁹ Although violent crimes have been reduced lately, there has been an increase in property crimes.

Vancouver Greenest City 2020

Right after winning the elections in December 2008, Mayor Robertson and a team of experts, including David Suzuki, a scientist and climate change expert, presented the Greenest City initiative, which was implemented in February 2009 with 44 quick-start recommendations. Robertson's team thought it important to get the initiatives under way before the city hosted the 2010 Winter Olympics. To make sure the plan moved at the desired pace, Robertson formed the Greenest City Action Team, comprising 16 members.

In November 2011, Vision Vancouver, the political party of Mayor Robertson, won eight seats in the election, ensuring them the majority necessary to bring all their proposals into effect over the next three years.

The Greenest City Action Team devised the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan (GCAP), which was Robertson's strategy to make Vancouver become the greenest city on earth. It was adopted in July 2011, with 125 projects already underway, and it generated strong interest. Sadhu Johnston, Vancouver's deputy city manager recruited by Mayor Robertson, had previously been in charge

⁸ For more information, Vancouver Sun. "Home | Vancouver Sun." [Vancouversun.ca](http://vancouversun.ca).- Last accessed April 2014.

⁹ Euromonitor. "Vancouver City Review." Euromonitor International | Strategic Market Research, Data & Analysis. With data from 2011, last accessed in October 2012.