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Population: 578,041



The Talk Green to Us logo
Credit: City of Vancouver

Greenest City Action Plan

Summary

Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan (GCAP) sets out a bold vision: to become the greenest city in the world by 2020. The city deliberately chose a superlative to describe the action plan it adopted in July 2011. The GCAP has economic, greenhouse gas, waste, building, transportation, air, water and food targets.

Putting the plan in place involved more than two years of consultation with citizens, sustainability thought leaders, city staff, non-profit organizations, business leaders, academics, and more. In July 2011, a monitoring and reporting planner was hired to report on the city's progress in meeting the plan's targets. Departmental staff throughout the city are tasked with integrating the plan into their operations.

A unique aspect of the plan is its focus on making Vancouver an economic hub in the world's green economy.

Background

Since 2007, the *Economist* magazine's global ranking of 140 cities around the world has named Vancouver as the most liveable city. In 2011, the United Nations chose Vancouver as the third most liveable city in the world. With a 2006 population of almost 580,000, Vancouver also prides itself on being a green city.

In late 1988, the city launched one of the first-ever task forces in the world to examine the impact of atmospheric change on municipal planning and activities. The result was the June 1990 release of *Clouds of Change*, a report that described the goals set by Vancouver's Task Force on Atmospheric Change.

In 2003, the city launched the Cool Vancouver Task Force. Its recommendations led to the creation of two 2005 action plans: one to reduce emissions from municipal operations and a second aimed at reducing community-wide emissions.

During the 2008 municipal election, Vision Vancouver (VV) formed a coalition with two other progressive political parties to run candidates with strong environmental platforms. Mayor Gregor Robertson and seven VV councillors were elected to the 10-seat council that year. In February 2009, the mayor formed the Greenest City Action Team (GCAT) to set targets that would make the city the greenest in the world by 2020.

Project Development and Implementation

The 18-member GCAT included luminaries like Dr. David Suzuki. Its co-chairs were Mayor Gregor Robertson and David Boyd, an environmental lawyer and author of *Sustainability within a Generation*.

In May 2009, the GCAT released its *Quick Starts* report—a list of actions the City could undertake immediately. When it received the report, City council directed staff to create plans for implementing the recommended actions. Many of the quick starts were planned to be in place before the start of the 2010 Winter Olympics.

The three broad areas covered in *Quick Starts* were: jobs and the economy, greener communities, and human health. A sense of urgency was reflected in the Action Team's statement that, "we lag behind North American neighbours such as Toronto and San Francisco, and are far behind world leaders such as Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam." It was clear that Vancouver was taking its commitment very seriously.

The release of *Vancouver 2020: A Bright Green Future* in October 2009 set out 10 long-term goals and 13 targets for making Vancouver the greenest city in the world by 2020, and marked the start of a process to create actions that would reflect those ambitious goals. The city began working on ways to translate 10 visionary goals into actions that would achieve results:

1. Green Economy: Secure Vancouver's international reputation as mecca of green enterprise.
2. Climate Leadership: Eliminate Vancouver's dependence on fossil fuels.
3. Green Buildings: Lead the world in green building design and construction.
4. Green Mobility: Make walking, cycling, and public transit preferred transportation options.
5. Zero Waste: Create zero waste.
6. Easy Access to Nature: Provide incomparable access to green spaces, including the world's most spectacular urban forest.
7. Lighter Footprint: Achieve a one-planet ecological footprint.
8. Clean Water: Enjoy the best drinking water of any major city in the world.
9. Clean Air: Breathe the cleanest air of any major city in the world.
10. Local Food: Become a global leader in urban food systems.

The city also had a vision for interdepartmental collaboration. It set up 10 working groups — one for each goal — and assigned staff to sit on each one. Chaired by a senior staff member, the committees included departmental representation from sustainability, parks, social planning, solid waste, water, planning, transportation, communications, and the Vancouver Economic Development Commission. The chairs met at monthly steering committee meetings that provided a forum for offering guidance and sharing progress reports among working groups.

At the start of the process, an external advisory committee (EAC) was paired with each working group. The EACs were composed of academics, business leaders, non-profit organizations, professional associations, health practitioners, and others. They advised the staff working groups as they dug deeply into understanding what actions would be tagged to the 2020 goals.

Communicating the greenest city goals and gathering public input was a goal in itself, and one the city embraced as a parallel track to the working groups. From June to October 2010, Vancouver embarked on Phase 1 of its public engagement process.

"Talk Green to Us" sought to build momentum, generate ideas, and introduce discussions on how the city could achieve its Greenest City goals. Pecha Kucha (multiple slide shows at the same event) launched the Greenest City plan with Vancouver residents. Along with more conventional public events, Phase 1 included an "Ideas Slam", modeled after the TV show *Dragon's Den*, where residents pitched green ideas to the mayor and senior staff at a public event. Other Phase 1 features included videos shown online and at locations around the city, an online forum to collect ideas and comments, intense use of social media to encourage participation and staff lunch-and-learn events. Staff commented on and reviewed more than 700 ideas posted to the online forum. Many ideas from the consultations were integrated into the draft Action Plan.

The working groups used early feedback from Phase 1 to create a set of 15 targets (expanded from the 13 targets set out in *A Bright Green Future*) and actions for each target. As the EACs and working groups examined each target, they identified the challenges that were likely to arise in achieving them. This became part of a new challenge — being true to the original

goals while developing actions that were grounded in what was possible. At the end of this process, in January 2011, a draft Greenest City Action Plan was submitted to city council for review. Council then adopted the draft 2020 targets.

Phase 2 of public engagement spanned December 2010 to early March 2011. Dubbed “Talk Green Vancouver”, it involved a new online forum, continued use of social media, and almost 50 workshops and events designed to collect feedback on the draft action plans the working groups had developed for the 10 goals.

A final public event — the Greenest City Camp — sowed the seeds for implementation by asking citizens to describe how the plan could become reality. Staff then began work on a final report. City council adopted the Greenest City Action Plan in July 2011.

Results

- Since Council adopted the GCAP in July 2011, it has become the foundation for all other municipal policy work, such as the development of Transportation Plan 2040 (ongoing).
- Two thousand people attended the Pecha Kucha event that launched the GCAP. By making use of online and social media support to spread the word, the city engaged more than 35,000 people in web-based and face-to-face activities. At least 9,500 citizens had deep involvement in the action plan process.
- Vancouver hired a monitoring and reporting planner in July 2011. The planner’s role is to establish reporting tools, structures, and methods for both staff implementation of targets and for community involvement in meeting the plan’s targets.
- City staff were involved from the start and continue to play an active role. Eighty staff from seven city departments actively developed the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan and will be working to implement its targets. Better interdepartmental communication is a positive result of this process.
- More than 100 community groups sat on 10 EACs. At the outset, they advised staff on ways to refine the Greenest City targets. Later on, they suggested actions to include in the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan.

Lessons Learned

- **IT’S AN INSIDE JOB.** In creating the Greenest City Action Plan, Vancouver learned that “it really has to be an internal process.” According to Amanda Mitchell, now a public engagement specialist with the city (and the former Greenest City engagement coordinator), “it’s not a job for a consultant to do.” Having all the people that will be delivering the plan involved in creating the plan means there’s a much greater investment in making it happen, she said. As well, setting a high-level vision for the plan and having council involved in approving goals and targets was important.
- **VERSATILITY WORKS.** “The new (social media) tools and techniques we used were very useful, but you can’t do everything online,” says Mitchell. When the city held face-to-face events, this spiked online participation afterwards. “And when we had a TweetUp at a local hotel, social media helped seed in-person connections since many people recognized each other from their Twitter handles (names).”
- **DEAL WITH DIVERSITY.** The city actively tried to engage diverse cultures in the consultations. “We learned that it’s not okay to just translate materials,” says Mitchell. “You need to have conveners who can be ambassadors on the topic to their community. We are still learning how to do this well.”
- **GET THE MEDIA INTERESTED.** The city reached out and connected to citizens to make the GCAP a reality. “It would have been useful to nurture a more informed relationship with the media, to invite them into the process, and to write about it accurately,” says Mitchell.

Related and Future Initiatives

When work to develop the GCAP was underway, the city decided that it had to create a social media plan. This need arose after “trolls” (negative posters) emerged on the city’s first-ever Facebook page (The Greenest City). The social media plan will be in effect by early 2012.

As Vancouver develops its master Transportation Plan 2040, it plans to use public consultation methods similar to those it used in developing the GCAP.

Partners and Collaboration

The GCAP process was led by the Sustainability Department, and jointly implemented with Planning, Engineering, Communications, the Vancouver Parks Board, and the Vancouver Economic Development Commission.

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