

Shaping Growth: Land Use as an Economic Engine – A Contrary Perspective

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Against the Grain?

I would like to sound a contrary note on 'Shaping Growth: Land Use as an Economic Engine.' Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution the notion of continuous economic growth has become an unassailable doctrine in societies around the world, beginning in Europe and North America. Over time this has been challenged by some. As early as 1848, noted British economist John Stuart Mill argued for a 'stationary-state economy.'[1]

In the 1960s and '70s, a host of economists and others – E.J. Mishan, Kenneth Boulding, Donella Meadows, Herman Daly, etc. began to argue there were *finite limits* to growth. They defined these limits in different ways. There were those who pointed to living and non-living natural resource depletion, and the unsustainable production of wastes and pollution.[2] Climate change is a manifestation of the latter with human-caused greenhouse emissions. Other commentators emphasized the dramatic decline in biodiversity. *The Swedish Resilience Centre* has identified nine planetary boundaries, six of which have already been exceeded by human activity.[3]

In this discussion, there was also a focus on the social drawbacks of growth – that social and economic inequalities were increasing, not lessening, and quality of life was declining, as measured by loss of and alienation from nature, diminished sense of community, and increased stress and social pathologies in the form of crime, addictions, and declining rates of civic participation.

Towards the 'Doughnut'

Related to the social and ecological costs of growth, it has been noted that Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the usual measure of economic 'success,' also measures the costs of cleaning up environmental disasters, fighting forest fires, dealing with pandemics like COVID, combating the opioid crisis and more. All these increase GDP without making society better off.[4]

One of the most recent thinkers in this field is British economist Kate Raworth who has published a well-known book on what she calls 'doughnut economics.'[5] She uses the image of a doughnut to illustrate the 'sweet spot' where societies do not exceed planetary boundaries – as represented by the outer rim of the doughnut – while not allowing citizens to fall into the hole in failing to have their essential needs met. For Raworth, it's not just about meeting essential needs, but also about enriching people's lives in myriad other ways.

Brundtland and Cities

In 1987, the UN *World Commission on Environment and Development* (WCED) – more popularly known as the Brundtland Commission after its chair Gro Harlem Brundtland (prime minister of Norway) – released its report, *Our Common Future*.[6] It supported growth and sustainability, which some saw as a contradiction in terms. One of its immediate effects was an explosion of interest in how sustainability might be applied to cities. Planners began to explore how cities could reduce their contributions to climate change and air and water pollution, could use resources more efficiently, and enhance the health and well-being of residents and ecosystems through the creation of biophilic urban environments. This also led to efforts to create model sustainable communities, such as the Olympic Village in Vancouver and Dockside Green in Victoria, and elsewhere. Throughout all of this, the increasing severity of the climate crisis proved a motivating factor.[7]

The Triumph of Neo-liberalism?

While work on climate and sustainability has proceeded apace in Canadian cities, more generally – at all levels of government, and as evidenced in all parties – these concerns have been increasingly superseded by a neoliberal agenda, so much so that robust climate measures are no longer a primary policy goal at the federal level or arguably at the B.C. provincial level either. Instead, oil and gas development, major mining projects, continued logging of old growth, and infrastructure development to facilitate megaprojects is the order of the day. This is fueled in large measure by the current economic turbulence caused Trump's trade war with Canada, his war with Iran, and by the erosion of people's earning power. As we have seen in the past, despite the urgency of climate change and other ecological concerns, faced with economic woes, politicians – faced with corporate and public pressure – default to giving pride of place to growth.

Where to Go from Here?

Rather than using land use as an economic engine for growth, planners could use it to promote qualitative improvement in local economies, in the ecological health of cities, and in the lives – individually and collectively – of urban residents. There are examples of this that might serve as a guide. In Vancouver, in pursuing various decarbonization options, city staff consider which ones will produce the greatest benefits for local businesses – for instance, in the green building sector.[8]

In addition to a robust network of community gardens (165 in total in the city), a non-profit – SOLE Food Street Farms – produces food for local restaurants on parcels awaiting development. In their words, "[a]s an employment program, we train and employ… community members… facing complex barriers to traditional work. Individuals are given the opportunity to work with living soil, grow fresh food, develop new skills, and spend their days in an environment that supports the healing of body, mind and soul."[9] In addition to promoting food security, the city is building a green technology hub in the False Creek Flats, which will produce more sustainable jobs, and doing extensive work to enhance terrestrial and aquatic habitat throughout the city.[10]

Implementing the measures described above is not a straightforward endeavor. For instance, staff at the City of Vancouver – planners, ecologists at the Park Board, and biologists in the Engineering Department – are all facing political headwinds with a conservative current city council, and a top-down provincial government currently dictating housing policy for local municipalities. It increasingly feels like the incipient paradigm shift from the '70s to the '00s in terms of various forms of sustainability, whether strong or weak, has been drowned out by a neo-liberal discourse at all levels of government, while staff continue to carry on their work as best they can behind the scenes. Who will win out in the long run remains to be seen.

There was a time when even Conservative politicians, such as Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, were champions for environmental action and fought for them at the global level.[11] Those days seem to be long gone, and some fringe groups even see efforts to make cities more accessible and less car-oriented, as with the '15-minute city,' as evidence of a plot to subjugate urban residents and take away their freedoms.[12] These are strange times indeed. However, a quote attributed to American futurist, Alvin Toffler, suggests that "when people are finally ready for major social change, the solutions have to already be at hand." Planners can help make these solutions readily available.

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[1]Mill, J.S., *The Principles of Political Economy* [digital edition, 2008], Project Gutenberg, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2022. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30107/30107-pdf.pdf

[2]For a good overview, see Caradonna, J. (2022). *Sustainability: A History*, revised and updated, Oxford University Press.

[3]Rockström, J., et al. Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. "Planetary Health Check 2025." https://www.stockholmresilience.org/publications/publications/2025-11-29-planetary-health-check-2025.html.

[4]"Climate Sustainability. Why is GDP not a measure of welfare," 4 July 2025. https://climate.sustainability-directory.com/question/why-is-gdp-not-a-measure-of-welfare/.

[5]Raworth, K. (2022). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, London: Penguin, 2022.

[6]World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future*. (1987). Oxford University Press.

[7]Letcher, G. (1990). *Clouds of Change: Final Report of the City of Vancouver Task Force on Atmospheric Change*. https://a100.gov.bc.ca/pub/eirs/lookupDocument.do?fromStatic=true&repository=EPD&documentId=4367.

[8]Interview with Danyluk, A., Mgr., Reconciliation, Equity & Climate Adaptation, City of Vancouver. (13 April 2026).

[9]https://www.solefoodfarms.com.

[10]Alexander, D. (2025). "Blue and Green Forays into Planning for a Resilient Future: The Case of Vancouver (Parts 1 & 2)," Strong Towns Nanaimo website, https://www.beautifulnanaimo.ca/articles.

[11]May, E. (2 March 2024). (26 February 2023.) "An Environmentalist Misses Brian Mulroney, All Over Again." *Policy Magazine*, 2 March 2024. https://www.policymagazine.ca/an-environmentalist-misses-brian-mulroney-all-over-again/.

[12]Baker, N. and Weedon, A. "What is the '15-minute city' conspiracy theory? *ABC National Radio*, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-27/the-15-minute-city-conspiracy/102015446.

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