

SOLVING THE GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE NETWORK COMPLIANCE BOTTLENECK (2024)

Issue

New developments in all of BC, especially in the Metro Vancouver area, are severely delayed due to the required environmental review assessment at the provincial level. This exacerbates the housing crisis as housing is not built to meet the demand of an expanding population. The municipal environmental review process can be expedited with more staffing at the provincial level and the re-establish of an environmental review committee with municipal staff, provincial regulators, and industry representatives.

Background

The process of obtaining approvals for residential and commercial development projects is notoriously slow, and a significant part of the delay can be attributed to the intricate web of regulatory requirements that developers must navigate at various levels of government. Specifically, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) at the federal level plays a crucial role in this process, as it is tasked with the protection of Canada's aquatic ecosystems and the management of fisheries resources. This responsibility often translates into stringent environmental assessments and consultations to ensure that development projects do not negatively impact waterways, fish habitats, and the marine environment.

At the provincial level, developers face additional layers of regulation in tandem with federal guidelines but also include province-specific requirements aimed at protecting local ecosystems and fisheries.

Municipal governments further compound the complexity with their own set of bylaws and approval processes, which can include zoning, local environmental protections, and community impact assessments. Together, these regulatory frameworks create a multifaceted and often time-consuming approval process that developers must navigate, leading to significant delays in the commencement and completion of residential and commercial developments.

In Surrey specifically, there is a Green Infrastructure Network (GIN), which connects the city. The GIN is 3,900 hectares of interconnected natural areas, green corridors and open space and is central to the BCS. The GIN was developed through the 2011 Ecosystem Management Study¹ and helped to inform the BCS Habitat Suitability Map.²

Environmental review processes were originally undertaken by the Federal Government at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). In order to streamline the regulatory process, the

¹ <https://www.surrey.ca/sites/default/files/media/documents/EcosystemManagementStudy.pdf>

² https://www.surrey.ca/sites/default/files/media/documents/BCS_HabitatSuitabilityMap_8X11.pdf

position was terminated, and all environmental reviews for land were passed to the provincial Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRORD).

Some cities had an environmental review staff person who would work with developers to ensure they were abiding by the regulations set by FLNRORD. However, this resulted in the same burden that was alleviated when the Federal Government DFO position was terminated. In Surrey, for example, the city staffer was put in a new role, and developers are now working with planners. Once approved by planners, the environmental applications go to FLNRORD. However, the approval delays by the province due to staff shortages cause significant delays in construction.

There also used to be an Environmental Review Committee comprised of municipal staff, provincial regulators, and some industry representatives in Surrey. This group ensured that plans were aligned and provided a forum for municipalities to voice their concerns. Since its termination, there has been no direct line for municipalities to provide input on regulatory inefficiencies and potential remedies.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Ensure an adequate level of service, provide required level of staffing at the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development to review environmental applications based on level of service needed by cities and the private sector.
2. Encourage municipalities to re-establish an environmental review committee with municipal staff, provincial regulators, and industry representatives.