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December 3, 2019 – 20-Minute Presentation

“Going Urban in Downtown Surrey”

INTRODUCTION – 3 minutes

Most of you will know that I am from Vancouver and have spent a good part of my life on the transformation of the neighbourhoods and inner-city of Vancouver. But over the years my attention has been increasingly drawn to what is happening here in Surrey – especially here in your downtown. As the title of my short talk tonight highlights, you are “going urban” – and for me, that is forever fascinating. You have wave after wave of change, which has put you in the vanguard of important city-building here in our region.

For you, this is a time of big moves and opportunity – you have your universities; you’ve got a great shopping precinct; you’re getting rapid transit; you’re intensifying and diversifying to create a genuine downtown (look at

this great hotel and the housing and workplaces around it); and, it is all coming together as a real and compelling place. It is exciting to see.

But, as Downtown Surrey becomes a central place for this whole region – a place that others will definitely emulate – you will also find that you have to take on responsibilities that you have not faced in the past. You will face urban challenges as well as opportunity.

Using what I call my “city lens”, it is those challenges that I want to talk about tonight.

Let there be no mistake, everywhere in the world, cities are in a time of restructuring and disruption for the people who live and work in them – and for the people who invest in them and manage them.

So, for tonight, I have drawn my perspectives from two sources. First, of course, I am mindful of our own Vancouver experience – there are a lot of lessons there for Surrey. You can explore this in detail in my new book,

“Vancouverism” (which, by the way, is on sale here tonight). But, secondly, my eyes have popped open from my work around the world over the last decade, where I have seen the hottest urban issues at play – there is no doubt that these issues will hit Surrey like everywhere else. You can tap into my world-wide survey of this in my first book, “Ecodesign for Cities and Suburbs”.

Let’s start with **LESSIONS FROM VANCOUVER.** – 5 minutes

A decade ago, we thought we knew where we were going and had to go with our city. Let me illustrate this with a bit of nostalgia.

- I was recently given an old copy of Canadian Geographic Magazine from mid-2006 – here it is, all beat up (seemingly lifted from Air Canada) with an article about Vancouver called “Futureville” by Charles Montgomery.

- It took me back to the past – it reminded me that from the mid-80’s through the first decade of the new century (say from Expo ’86 to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games) we dramatically changed Vancouver, based upon a paradigm that was the cutting edge for

our generation – **liveability, competitiveness, beauty, sustainability** – all in a new way, with **density and diversity** – we called it our “**living first**” strategy.

-The article certainly confirmed that the results were pretty good, we were quite proud – most liveable city; community satisfaction (*Montgomery later wrote a great book, “Happy City”, based on his inspiration from these times*).

Now, scroll forward a decade and what do we see? It turns out things are not quite what they seemed to be just a decade ago. No question that the original themes remain relevant – and I commend to you their continued importance as you shape Downtown Surrey. No question that we moved smoothly from these themes in pursuit of the green agenda, so we are way ahead of the pack in North America – I commend to you that Surrey needs to be a top leader on this front.

But out of our very success, some worrisome realities are starting to hit Vancouver hard that I want to warn you

about, because I have no doubt that you will ultimately face those here in Surrey as well – let me highlight just **2 big ones** tonight.

-First, there is the increasing **loss of relative affordability**, which is putting everything we have achieved in Vancouver in jeopardy. So I urge you not just to be comfortable with market housing but also to put in place a clever plan for all kinds of housing at all kinds of densities – social housing is obviously more important than we ever thought, but in the future to make Downtown Surrey resilient, you will also need a secure middle-income housing sector. You will also need to find ways to make independent retail work and to offer affordable workplaces. This affordability issue can be a killer if not taken in hand.

-Second, Vancouver is experiencing a **breakdown of civility** that is souring the civic image in a harmful way – drop in maintenance, increase in homelessness, indications of personal alienation – the New York City experience shows that civility is secured or lost with simple things – they called it the “broken window” syndrome. This will sneak up on you. While you manage positive growth, from the

beginning, you have to also have programs and measures in place to cope with this social side – and I hope you can do much better than Vancouver has been able to do so far.

-So, my first message, which you can see writ large just down the road, is to **think of future downsides as you build your current upsides** here in Downtown Surrey. Most of all, **do not be complacent** about the kinds of problems that will hit you as you grow big and strong as a prime downtown – be ahead of those problems.

That's the message from the home front, but, now, let's look beyond our little corner of the world to what I call **WORLD URBAN TRENDS** – 10 minutes

Here we find some big surprises. These new trends have become so profound that we do not call them “trends” anymore; we call them “disruptors” – which means that they are fundamental game-changers. How do you tap into these big changes for their cool benefits or manage

them for their worrisome impacts? **Let me highlight 5 of these major disruptors.**

First, **Spontaneous Migrations** – world is footloose, world drama of the haves and havenots (US politics, 3rd-world-destabilizations) = affordability problems everywhere; social contract challenged (Australia); immigrant integration difficult (the Netherlands). I think in Canada we look at this trend very differently.

-I get excited by your giant and vibrant South Asian community, just to use one example, which has already made Surrey a world-focus of immigration. There is such amazing opportunity in the international networks as well as the character and flair of this community for your vision of Downtown Surrey? I recently did a vision for the future of Brampton, Ontario, which enjoys a similar community and we found innovations in everything from housing types to retail diversification to culture.

-In Canada we not only have immigrants from everywhere, but we are among the best in the world at integration and harmonious living – here are some

recent statistics that tell the story. I know you want Surrey to be identified as a leader in this, not only in the cultures you tap but also the services and supports you provide and the economic linkages you forge. That is a forward view.

Second, **Generational Shifts in Consumer Preferences** – people are not following the old ways; they are avidly developing new lifestyle patterns (for Millennials, home ownership no longer as a pension plan or legacy strategy; – gig work, particularly in the high-tech industries) – older people not following expectations (early retirement, new careers, downsizing).

-Maybe our definitions and separations of land-use are no longer helpful – maybe work/live needs to be merged – maybe our building forms are too complex and non-adaptable – maybe we need new housing tenures.

-Because Downtown Vancouver is so expensive, I think Downtown Surrey could become a real leader in innovation on these fronts. You have a unique potential to connect with these new consumers, for

major market and cultural growth – and engendering a contemporary image and lifestyle for Downtown Surrey that is not only uniquely competitive but also fulfilling to people in the new ways they want. You can be the curators of these new lifestyles with all kinds of offerings that just were not in the traditional downtown equation (inspiration: Saskatoon’s plan to repopulate downtown with the “new urbanites”; the fascinating trend of the urban family with children – is Downtown Surrey designed for children?).

Third, the **Explosion of Digital Society** (the “on-line” world) – there are major economic, social, personal implications – social forms and even mores will shift – urban form will shift – ‘smart-city’ technologies are coming on fast – retail patterns are already shifting (big growth in on-line shopping).

-Public space plays a big role in this new digital world, as the prime place of gathering – as a place to put a face to the digit? So, the urban design of Downtown Surrey is much more important than we used to think. This is all about special placemaking both in terms of the design of the place and

programming – and how it all comes together to be a powerful draw that people can't wait to come to. You are so lucky to have the Downtown Surrey BIA to take this in hand because they have proven to be effective hosts, managers, and marketers of this new kind of urban placemaking. What can you do to help them succeed? The big message is that the on-line world will only be managed if the real world is more compelling and more interesting to come to.

Fourth, the **Share Economy** – not just Air B-N-B and Ubur but **sharing everything**. In Finland, there is now a neighbourhood currency for bartering – this is the new front for household affordability – not just home prices have to be managed, but everything that a household consumes has to be examined for cost savings – we waste so much right now. Look at the success of share bikes and share cars (Greater Vancouver is among the top users in North America).

-Look at the move toward shared housing – household definitions are wrong – shared housing is not legal yet lots of people want to share housing – such as seniors, students, families (*reference Nordic*

trends) – multi-generational homes are not legal almost anywhere in Canada (*reference work in Brampton*) – “mingles suites” are desperately needed so that two independent people can find a way together through the affordability barrier – can you model these kinds of changes in the housing offering here in Downtown Surrey?

-An incredible possibility for your BIA is in the neighbourhood currency and other platforms and places for borrowing – this could offer a unique relevancy for consumers, and as agents of the shared economy, you would set Surrey ahead of everybody in this region.

And, lastly, **New mobility** – most disruptive of the coming years for cities – autonomous driving, new forms of low-impact motorized movement, virtual movement (drones), new ways to integrate modes in one-payer digital systems. We are on the verge of ride-hailing here in B.C. – We will thrive or be shocked by these new technologies – what does this mean for Downtown Surrey?

-Your city will be enhanced or ruined by decisions being made about these new travel modes that you, so far, have nothing to do with and have no say in – I know Surrey Council is starting to challenge that and that is a very good thing.

-Let me use the example of **autonomous driving**. There are two futures: (1) introduce through the free-market and see public space overwhelmed by cars; or, (2) introduce through shared-driving only and see space actually freed up for other uses – imagine what that means to everything you are trying to create here in Downtown Surrey.

-In a favourable scenario, I argue that 50%+ of public space might be taken away from self-driving cars and other modes have to be managed within an essentially pedestrianized district – parking will become less relevant – this will create space for your BIA to choreograph, curate and manage for so many good purposes – the possibilities are endless, from relaxation, to merchandizing, to food-and-beverage – imagine changing this to this.

FINAL THOUGHTS – 2 minutes

So, cities have a big agenda. Tonight, I have talked about just some of the most fascinating, even troubling, trends and disruptors that I am sure Downtown Surrey will have to respond to in the coming years.

I have no doubt that you will be bold in making the right decisions for the good of this community. I am only a soothsayer – **but you are the people who must grab this future for Surrey and leave it better than you found it.** I wish you well.

-Thank you – and all the best to you and your families for the holidays.

Going Urban in Downtown Surrey

Short Description: This presentation offers a short list of the most significant new urban directions and disruptions being embraced both in this region and by cities around the world. It highlights what might be suggested as essential or cool innovations for Downtown Surrey.