



A Waterfront for All

Notes and Reflections from Georgia Strait Alliance's

Waterfront Initiative Citizens' Forum

January 28th, 2015

Creekside Community Centre, Olympic Village

Vancouver, BC



Georgia Strait Alliance
Caring for Our Coastal Waters

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Citizens Join Us in Building A Waterfront for All

A waterfront for all—Georgia Strait Alliance chose this title for the Waterfront Citizens' Forum to reflect what the Waterfront Initiative sets out to do: “a waterfront for all” stands both for a goal and an approach. The Waterfront Initiative aims to build a Vancouver waterfront that can be enjoyed by everyone in the city, by all citizens and all interest groups, and, not least, a waterfront that

In trying to build this waterfront, the Initiative invites everyone with an interest in the future of the shoreline to participate.

supports the many plant and animal species that call it home. In trying to build this waterfront, the Initiative invites everyone with an interest in the future of the shoreline to work together and be part of a collaborative effort to make the vision of ‘A waterfront for all’ a reality.

The participants of Georgia Strait Alliance's first Waterfront Citizens' Forum on January 28th, 2015 embraced the idea of a waterfront for all. And they made

it clear that they want GSA to continue to engage an increasingly diverse group of citizens and stakeholders to ensure that different perspectives can be represented in the work of the Initiative.

Almost 50 Vancouver residents came together on January 28th at Creekside Community Centre, Olympic Village—beautifully located on the water's edge—to envision what a positive future for Vancouver's shoreline could look like. Prior to the Forum, those who had registered to attend received a brief Discussion Guide that provided information about key facts regarding Vancouver's waterfront and ask questions to inspire the participants.

To start the conversation, the organizers asked participants how they imagined the city's waterfront in the year 2035. Participants then had the opportunity to dig deeper in small group discussions focusing on questions including:

- Who will be working on the waterfront and how?
- How do we want to move goods and people around on the waterfront?
- How do we want to interact with nature on the future waterfront?
- How do we want to protect and restore ecosystems on the future waterfront?
- How will we address sea-level rise on the waterfront?
- What will our shoreline parks look like?



When citizens were invited to imagine what a positive future for the waterfront looks like for them, their answers revealed a number of themes: In the eyes of many people in the room, a thriving and sustainable waterfront will be achieved through broad education and awareness about the past and present of Vancouver's shoreline. This includes a strong presence and recognition of First Nations history and culture. This shoreline would also provide a home for healthy ecosystems and abundant plant and animal species. Many of the residents who attended the Forum seemed to share a conviction that what makes Vancouver's waterfront special is the beautiful natural areas that thrive in the heart of the city while other urban activities happen all around.

The waterfront participants imagined a public place that is easily accessible to Vancouver residents. Their waterfront is not only a place for people to connect, recreate and interact with nature, but also reserves space for industries with a direct link to the water and includes quiet, re-wilded natural areas that are not disturbed by human activity. They imagined Vancouver as a place that takes the interconnectedness of issues facing the waterfront into account and reflects the city's "marine lifestyle" in all aspects of planning and decision-making. As one participant put it: "the way we treat the waterfront tells a lot about the kind of city we are building."

Participants envisioned a future waterfront characterized by strong connectivity between its history and present, which links the foreshore with upland activities. It's also a waterfront with community ownership, where citizens have a deep understanding of the water's edge and take part in restoring and protecting it.

Knowledge and education emerged as a theme in many conversations at the Forum. Participants noted that the community didn't have a good understanding of the history of Vancouver's waterfront, the role it plays for the community, or the plant and animal species that call it home. Key to protecting Vancouver's urban shorelines are well-informed residents, waterfront users and decision makers. As one participant put it: "to know is to love, to love is to protect—without better knowledge we will get nowhere."

Key to protecting Vancouver's urban shorelines are well-informed residents, waterfront users and decision makers.

The need for better education that participants identified applies to understanding both the ecosystems on the waterfront, but also the different uses of the shoreline. For example, some participants stressed that there should be a greater appreciation for the industries that have a historical place on the waterfront, as well as a deeper understanding of who works on the waterfront and how these workers contribute to the community and economy. Others asked whether the community-at-large had a good enough understanding and definition of the natural areas that need protection. What habitats exist along the waterfront? Estuaries, salt marshes, rock fish pools, eelgrass beds? What else? Which species need the most attention?

One of the objectives of Georgia Strait Alliance's Waterfront Initiative is to create a report on the state of Vancouver's waterfront that will serve as an important tool not only to inform the public and decision makers about the value of our shoreline and the challenges it faces but also to help measure progress towards a sustainable and prosperous waterfront.

As citizens called for a better understanding of the past and present of Vancouver's shoreline, they also recognized the need to adapt. To be better equipped to find solutions for current and future challenges, they stressed that Vancouver should be looking at other maritime cities and learn from their successes.



How Do We Want to Live, Play, and Access Nature on the Waterfront of the Future?

Living in close proximity to the ocean and river is a big part of what makes Vancouver special to many of its residents. According to City of Vancouver data, approximately 25,000 people live within 300 meters of the shoreline¹. Forum participants stressed the need to preserve or increase residential space within walking distance of the waterfront as pressure on land increases with economic and population growth.

At the same time, participants felt that open, natural spaces directly on the water's edge should be preserved for everyone's enjoyment and not sacrificed to achieve higher density. Some pointed out that they appreciated the West End and its combination of green space and high-density living near the water, but maintained that the more recent Olympic Village development relied too heavily on concrete structures on the shore. With rising sea levels on the one hand and continuing or increasing demand on available land, other participants suggested looking at creative ways to allow people to live near—or on—the water, such as the use of floating structures.

What should future buildings and infrastructure on the shoreline look like? Forum participants sent a clear message that they wanted to see less concrete and more permeable surfaces, green roofs and walls, bio-swales (i.e. landscape elements designed to remove silt and pollution from surface runoff water) and other structures that harmonize with their natural surroundings and help limit the city's impact on shoreline ecosystems. Uncovering or “day-lighting” some of the numerous streams that used to flow through the area that is now Vancouver but have since been paved over, was another need that was raised during the conversations.

Keeping the waterfront accessible to everyone was important to the participants of our Forum.

Because not all Vancouver residents will be able to live directly on the shore, keeping the waterfront accessible to everyone was important to the participants of our Forum. Keeping the Kitsilano foreshore natural and accessible, for example, was a concern brought up in different conversations. There was a strong sense that allowing people to access and experience nature on



the waterfront is a powerful way to contribute to the health and well-being of people in the city, but also to generate support for environmental protection.

Educating children, adults and especially those who are new to the city was emphasized as an important goal. As one discussion group put it: the goal should be to disconnect people from their devices and re-connect them with nature. And participants came up with a number of concrete ideas to achieve this and increase awareness and buy-in from different parts of the community. Suggestions included open-air community centres on the waterfront, a “False Creek Action Centre” that would engage the public in restoring this part of Vancouver’s waterfront and that would connect them with the organizations involved in the groundwork, “Creek Rangers” to help protect the environment and educate residents through regular nature walks, and field trips.

An important part of shaping the way people interact with nature on the waterfront is thinking about what Vancouver’s parks should look like in the future. Participants recognized the tension between increasing access to nature and limiting disturbances of fragile ecosystems on the shore.

One group concluded that “we have to trample a bit of nature to get support for protection.” At the same time, citizens echoed a theme that also emerged at previous forums: re-wilding and “silencing” parts of the waterfront. The idea here is that for ecosystems to flourish on an urban shoreline, there needs to be areas with little or no human traffic and disturbances from dogs, where collecting of plants or other things is not allowed, and where feeding animals is not permitted.

Limiting disruption of nature does not mean, however, that such areas would need to be completely off limits for people. Participants suggested that other ways of experiencing nature without touching it might include using other senses, such as smelling, listening and viewing from a distance. In this context, participants suggested the creation of marine parks that could host vibrant underwater ecosystems that are off limits for traffic, fishing or even touching by humans. Another discussion group suggested recognizing the value of wetlands as parks, which are by their nature more difficult to access.

1 City of Vancouver (2014), Talk Tankers: Trans Mountain Pipeline, Presentation by Deputy City Manager Sadhu Johnston, <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/trans-mountain-pipeline-open-house-deputy-city-manager-presentation-06242014.pdf>



What Will Our Working Waterfront Look Like in the Future?

The conversations around the future of Vancouver's working waterfront identified a disconnect between the city and the industries that rely on the shoreline as well as the people who work there, such as longshoremen and fishermen. Development and expansion of Port infrastructure are often highly contentious, which in turn diminishes appreciation for the shipping industry and its workers who have been and continue to be an important part of Vancouver's social and economic fabric.

There was a sense that even though more and more goods and people are transported on our waterways, there is little connection to the place and communities they are moving through. Participants saw a need to strengthen this connection and called for more education about the working waterfront as one step in that direction. Public tours of industrial areas and port infrastructure, for example, could help residents develop a better understanding of the industrial activities underway on the shore.

Participants seemed to agree that a vibrant waterfront needs to include space for industry. It was noted, however, during the conversations that not all current facilities on the shore actually rely on access to the water, such as bus barns or warehouses served by trucks. Many participants felt that industrial lands on the shore, should be reserved to operations directly related to the waterfront.

While the need for greater connectedness with past and present industries was raised, participants also asked how a working waterfront might adapt to changes in technology and in the way industries operate. A concern that was shared by many people in the room was finding ways to reduce the carbon footprint of moving goods and people on our waterways and the related land-based logistics, potentially including the increased use of electric propulsion for some of the community's transportation needs.



Addressing Sea-level Rise

The impacts of climate change and rising sea levels on Vancouver's waterfront came up during many conversations, not just the discussion group that focused on this issue. After all, sea level rise will likely affect all of the ways in which we use the waterfront. As a result, participants tried to take this into account when envisioning the future of the city's waterfront parks and ecosystems, residential spaces near the ocean and river, as well as shoreline-related industries. Since waterfront parks make up a large portion of green space in Vancouver, one group asked how we can ensure parks are "deep" enough, so they will not disappear with rising sea levels. Others suggested that parks should include landscapes that, like peat bogs and other forms of wetlands, can absorb flooding and adapt to changing sea levels.

How to Move Forward

The citizens who engaged in the discussions at our Waterfront Forum did not only generate ideas about what the future of Vancouver's shoreline could hold. They also raised the question of how the community can move forward towards shaping this future in a positive way. As mentioned earlier, education and engagement of all residents and waterfront users emerged as a way to achieve a diverse and balanced waterfront—a waterfront that supports the needs of the environment and the people who live and play on the waterfront or rely on it for economic livelihoods. Another strategy that was suggested during the discussions on shoreline ecosystems was to create legal tools that enshrine environmental restoration and protection in the community's planning and decision-making frameworks.

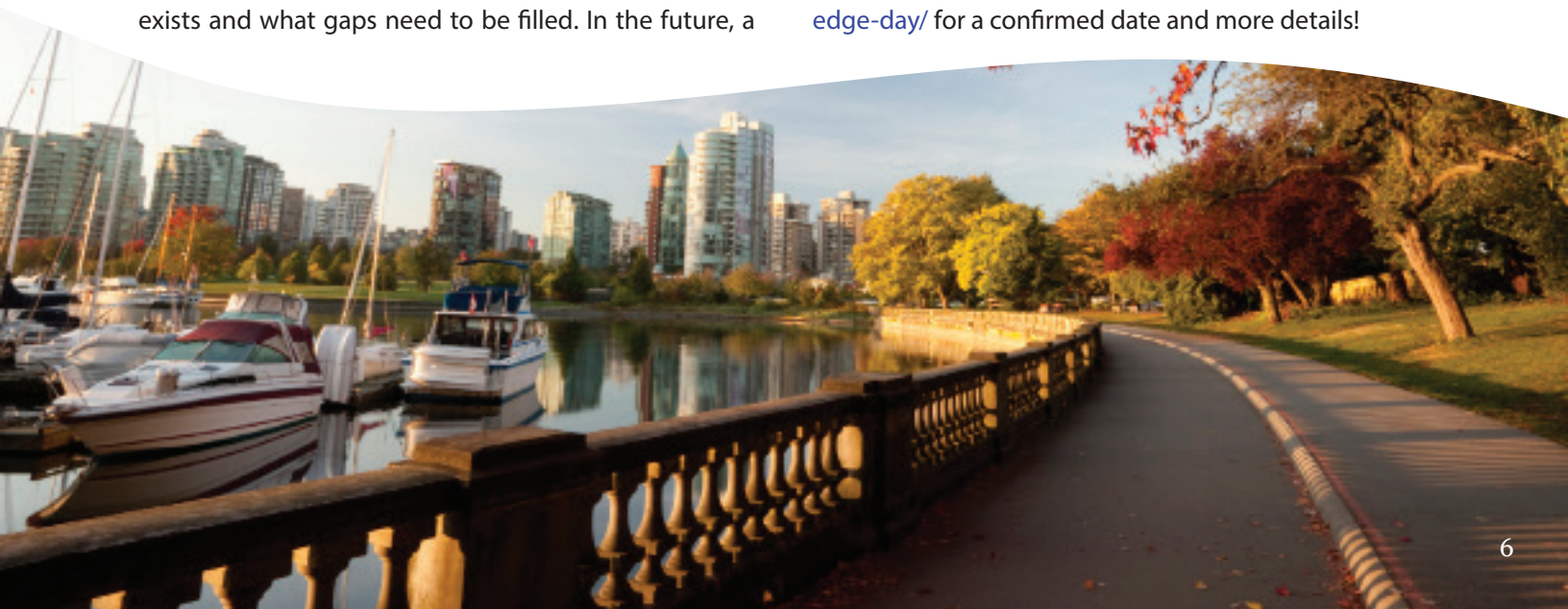
The central goal of Georgia Strait Alliance's Waterfront Initiative is to help create such a framework. Over the coming years, the people and organizations involved in the Initiative will work towards creating an action plan for the waterfront to be adopted by the members of the growing Waterfront stakeholder network. The action plan will include clear and tangible objectives to make the vision that the people of Vancouver have developed for the future of their urban shorelines. These objectives will be measurable, so the Initiative can track progress as it moves forward. In 2015, the Waterfront Initiative will begin the process of creating a State of Waterfront Report, mapping out what we know and don't know about Vancouver's waterfront, including what data exists and what gaps need to be filled. In the future, a

complete State of the Waterfront Report will provide a baseline and a measurement system to assess efforts to make the shoreline more sustainable and prosperous. Once a baseline is established, citizens will be invited to come together once again to help GSA define measurable objectives to work towards.

The action plan will include clear and tangible objectives to make the vision that the people of Vancouver have developed for the future of their urban shorelines a reality.

The conversations that have begun among citizens and stakeholders at GSA's Waterfront Forums are the start of a long-term process to engage the community in shaping the future of Vancouver's shorelines. An important part of GSA work will be to broaden the network of people and organizations involved in the Waterfront Initiative to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives and ideas.

The next public gathering will take place in Fall 2015 at the Vancouver Maritime Museum to celebrate the second annual Water's Edge Day. 2014 marked the inaugural event and drew in almost 1,000 citizens who enjoyed a wide range of fun, free, family-friendly programs designed to connect participants with their waterfront. Stay tuned to GSA's website <https://georgiastrait.org/work/waterfront-initiative/waters-edge-day/> for a confirmed date and more details!



Appendix A - Agenda

Waterfront Initiative Citizen's Forum

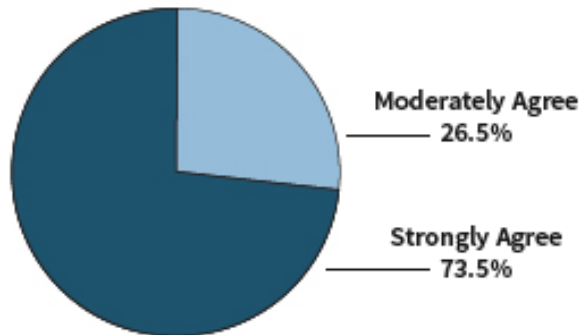
January 28, 2015 6pm-9pm

Creekside Community Centre, Room MP4, 1 Athletes Way (Olympic Village), Vancouver BC

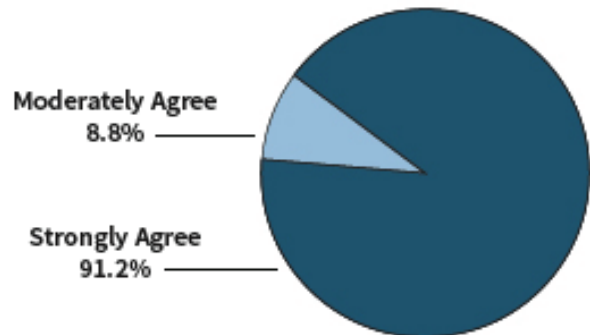
- ▶ Welcome
- ▶ Plenary: Envisioning Vancouver's Waterfront in 2035
- ▶ Presentation: Why are we here?
- ▶ Small group discussions:
 - ▷ How do we want to live on the waterfront of the future?
 - ▷ Who will be working on the waterfront and how?
 - ▷ How will use the waterfront of the future for transportation?
 - ▷ How do we want to interact with nature on the future of the waterfront?
 - ▷ How do we want to protect and restore ecosystems on the future of the waterfront?
- ▶ Plenary: Report out from small group discussions
- ▶ Prize draw, closing, evaluations

Appendix B - Evaluation

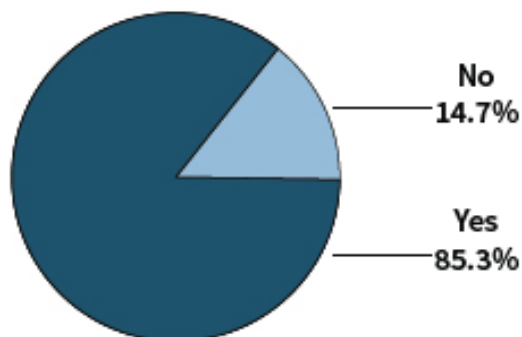
Overall, this event was worthwhile to me



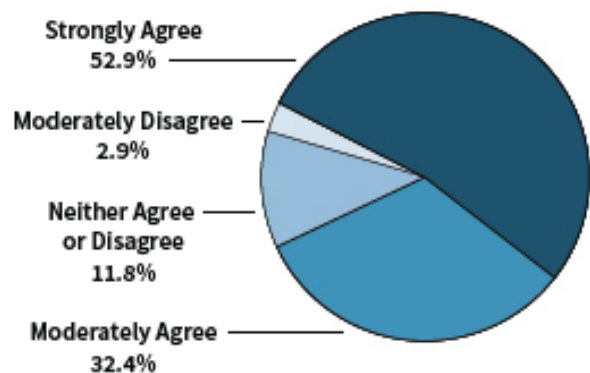
There was adequate opportunity for me to actively participate



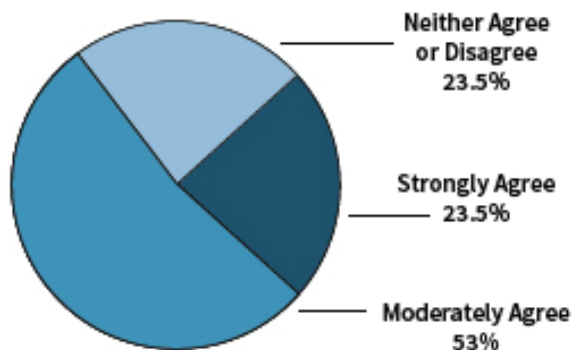
I read the Discussion Guide prior to the Forum



At the Forum, I learned interesting new information and perspectives on Vancouver's Waterfront



The Discussion Guide helped me prepare for the Forum



The facilitator provided clear explanations, guidance and support

