



# A Waterfront for All

Notes and Reflections on Georgia Strait Alliance's first

## Waterfront Forum

April 9th, 2014

UBC Robson Square

Vancouver, BC



**Georgia Strait Alliance**  
*Caring for Our Coastal Waters*

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The document presents Georgia Strait Alliance's notes and reflections on the conversations and ideas that emerged from the Forum. Georgia Strait Alliance takes responsibility for any errors or omissions. Note that, as with all generative dialogues, not every resulting idea will reflect the views of all participants or of the Georgia Strait Alliance, its staff, funders and collaborators.

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# Contents

- Overview—Vancouver’s first Waterfront Forum ..... 1
- What Is the Waterfront Initiative? ..... 2
  - The Need for Action ..... 2
  - A Collaborative Response ..... 3
- What We Heard From Our Partners..... 4
  - Connections To The Waterfront..... 4
  - Imagining the Future of Our Waterfront..... 5
  - Building a Vision for Vancouver’s Waterfront..... 5
    - What Will Living on the Waterfront Look Like? ..... 7
    - What Will Flourishing Ecosystems on the Waterfront Look Like? ..... 8
    - What Will Access to Nature on the Waterfront Look Like? ..... 9
    - What Will Working on the Waterfront Look Like? ..... 10
    - What Will Transportation on the Waterfront Look Like? ..... 11
- From Vision to Reality ..... 12
- Appendix..... 13

# Overview—Vancouver's First Waterfront Forum

When we think about the waterfront, we often imagine a specific part or function of the waterfront: Some of us may think of a beach or the seawall. For others, a terminal, a home on the water or a marina may come to mind. The diversity of our waterfront is one of Vancouver's prime assets; it benefits our public life, our economy and our urban ecosystems.

For the first Forum of Georgia Strait Alliance's (GSA) Waterfront Initiative on April 9th, 2014, we invited an initial group of partners and stakeholders—representatives from different levels of government, industry and civil society—to take a high level look at how we use and manage our shoreline. The Forum was a great start to a creative thought process on how Vancouver can build a resilient and prosperous waterfront that benefits all.

Our partners imagined a future for Vancouver's waterfront characterized by many different kinds of shoreline uses, with spaces for nature, for living, for recreation, for working, and for transportation. But it was also a future in which the diverse parts of our shoreline were well connected and integrated. Forum participants clearly articulated the need to connect the dots, to make sense of the pieces, and to let the waterfront be more than the sum of its parts.

One of the most powerful ideas that emerged from the day for us is that the waterfront has the potential to connect our community, economy, and natural spaces. The waterfront wraps around our city and it could become a hub for transportation, a place to meet or to find new economic opportunities, and a corridor for plants and animals of our urban ecosystems. Yet, this is a potential that is currently unfulfilled.

To make the waterfront the link that connects our city, we need a collective vision for its future, and a plan that includes concrete tools and resources to get us there. GSA's Waterfront Initiative will help fill this void. Our first Waterfront Forum has started the conversation and we are committed to carrying it forward.

*The waterfront has the potential to connect our community, economy, and natural spaces.*

In this document, we share our notes and reflections on the Forum, summarizing the collective visioning that our partners embarked on to imagine our future waterfront as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with living, working and transportation on the shore and with how we access and protect nature on the waterfront.

*From green shores to container ships  
—the diversity of our waterfront is one  
of Vancouver's prime assets.*



# What Is the Waterfront Initiative?

## The Need for Action

Creating a vision and plan for a prosperous and resilient waterfront presents a great opportunity for our city—but there is also a sense of urgency. The waterfront is changing, be it a result of climate change or urban densification, raising questions that need answering: How, for example, are we going to accommodate another 1 million people moving into the region over the next 30 years, while maintaining space on the shoreline for nature and industry?

*We cannot afford to take for granted a waterfront that supports a vibrant community, a strong economy and healthy ecosystems.*

Industrial, residential and recreational uses are already competing for limited space on the waterfront, and as a result of this competition, marine industries and jobs could move out of the city. At the same time, rising sea levels are threatening structures and ecosystems on the shore. Some of the changes on the waterfront are rarely noticed because they happen along the Fraser, a part of Vancouver's shoreline that we often overlook.

Currently, the waterfront is affected by planning—policies, by-laws or plans that touch upon shoreline issues—but there is no plan for the waterfront that could address these challenges in an integrated way.

We cannot afford to take for granted a waterfront that supports a vibrant community, a strong economy and healthy ecosystems, GSA's Executive Director Christianne Wilhelmson told participants at our Forum.

The challenge and opportunity is to restore, revitalize and protect our waterfront so it can help us achieve these three goals and create a waterfront in balance, supporting all aspects of a healthy community.

Other maritime cities admire Vancouver for its Seawall, which now connects the Port, Stanley Park, False Creek and Spanish Banks as one linear, waterfront park. Vancouver City Councillor Andrea Reimer reminded the Forum in her opening remarks that the origin of this uniquely accessible urban shoreline can be traced back to the foresight of previous councillors who, 128 years ago, requested the Federal Government create Stanley Park—it was the first order of business of the newly incorporated City of Vancouver. One reason to care about GSA's Waterfront Initiative, Reimer said, was that it continued a tradition of planning Vancouver's growth together with planning the city's parks that provide so many benefits for residents.

Yet, "good planning doesn't happen by accident," Reimer stressed. And while the Seawall is one of the city's unique assets, Vancouver is running the risk of losing sight of a broader vision of an urban shoreline that includes recreational and residential use, economic activity and ecosystems.

Reimer recalled that the waterfront she grew up with in Vancouver was quite different from what we see today. She evoked the memory of sawmills operating on False Creek and other industries providing employment in the heart of the city. What is more, we tend to forget that Vancouver is not only a maritime city, but also a city on the Fraser River—one of North America's major salmon-bearing rivers. The task today, Reimer said, is to develop a plan that balances all uses of our waterfront.

*The Fraser River is an often overlooked part of our shoreline.*



## A Collaborative Response

Georgia Strait Alliance launched the Waterfront Initiative in 2013 after nearly a year of research and conversations with partners. To kick it off, we invited Roland Lewis, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA) in New York and New Jersey (. Lewis inspired his Vancouver audience with an account of how his Alliance built a network of now over 800 organizations and transformed the region's relationship with its waterfront. The impacts have been nothing short of extraordinary.

*No single organization, however innovative or powerful, can tackle a complex problem.*

The MWA has been instrumental in developing New York City's first Comprehensive Waterfront Plan in 18 years, successfully advocated for new ferry services, built Community Eco-Docks and engaged over 25,000 citizens across the region in its annual City of Water Day Festival, to name just a few of their accomplishments.

The commitment and ongoing collaboration of such a large and diverse group of partners and stakeholders collaboration is the approach that GSA is seeking to make a difference in Vancouver. As Wilhelmson pointed out at the Forum, GSA is an environmental NGO with a track record of looking for collaborative solutions and of working together with partners in government, industry and civil society to realize them.

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The Waterfront Initiative will not be another collaboration that develops a vision, but leads to no actions. Our commitment to the Waterfront Initiative is guided by the "collective impact" model. Collective impact initiatives are based on the belief that "no single organization, however innovative or powerful," can tackle a complex problem. What distinguishes collective impact initiatives from other collaborations is that they "involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants." (Kania and Kramer, Collective Impact, Stanford Social Innovation Review, 67, Winter 2011)

Through the Waterfront Initiative, GSA is committed to functioning as the "backbone organization" for creating a resilient and prosperous Vancouver shoreline. Around this central structure, we are building a strong network of partners and stakeholders that will continue to grow over the months and years to come.

We start with a focus on the City of Vancouver's shoreline. Building on success in Vancouver, the long-term vision for the Initiative is to bring this model to all of Metro Vancouver as well as to other waterfront regions around the Strait of Georgia.

## What We Heard From Our Partners

## Connections to the Waterfront

We reached out to as many organizations, businesses and individuals who have an interest in waterfront issues as possible—knowing the effort to connect with everyone who should be at the table will be an ongoing effort. On April 9th, the first Forum brought together a diverse group of people, including representatives from:

- First Nations
- The City of Vancouver (councillors, planners, Park Board staff)
- The Port of Metro Vancouver
- Metro Vancouver
- Tourism Vancouver
- Waterfront-based industries
- Planners
- Landscape architects
- Environmental NGOs

(a complete list of organizations represented at the Forum can be found in the Appendix).

Many of the participants had a very personal connection to the shore, having grown up fishing, playing or working on the water. Their hopes and ideas for the waterfront included conserving space for industry along the water, ensuring the health of the Fraser River or establishing a walking trail from Hope to Tsawwassen.

Forum participants arrived with different backgrounds, perspectives and interests, but when it came to imagining the future of Vancouver's waterfront, there was an astonishing level of agreement. They envisioned a waterfront that was thriving, sustainable, vibrant, balanced, safe and fun. The words that we heard most often were diversity and integration.



Participants felt that the different parts of the waterfront should maintain their uniqueness and give us a sense of place. But they also imagined a shoreline where this diversity is connected and integrated, a shoreline that links ecosystems, places to work, live, and play.

Diversity was understood as ecological diversity, as well as diversity of uses. They envisioned a waterfront where public and private activities are well integrated, where flourishing ecosystems, thriving industrial areas and attractive recreational spaces can co-exist and where human activity harmonizes with nature.



*What is our connection  
to the waterfront?*



## Imagining the Future of Our Waterfront

We asked participants to imagine themselves 20 years in the future; in a future that is very positive and satisfying regarding our waterfront. Participants evoked images of a place with:

- prominent First Nations presence,
- space for arts and culture,
- room for people to gather and connect, and recreate with access to the shoreline and a place to learn about its history and ecosystems.
- a well-protected and restored waterfront, home to abundant fish, bird and other animal populations, providing wild spaces as well as a basis for robust fisheries.
- a dynamic waterfront with a revitalized, industrial sector that provides sustainable economic and job opportunities;
- a waterfront that offers new transportation solutions, helping to move people across the region.

Some questions were raised around climate change and adaptation. Will our shoreline still be accessible in 2034? Will sea level rise have been addressed by building new dykes or moving the Seawall? As a result, participants imagined an adaptable waterfront with a clear plan for addressing the effects of climate change, which includes softer profiles that are more resilient to change.

## Building a Vision for Vancouver's Waterfront

GSA had many conversations with our partners during the months leading up to the Forum about what was important to them when it comes to the future of the waterfront. From these conversations, five broad themes emerged that we asked participants to explore further:

- Living on the waterfront,
- Working on the waterfront,
- Flourishing ecosystems on the waterfront,
- Access to nature on the waterfront, and
- Transportation on the waterfront.

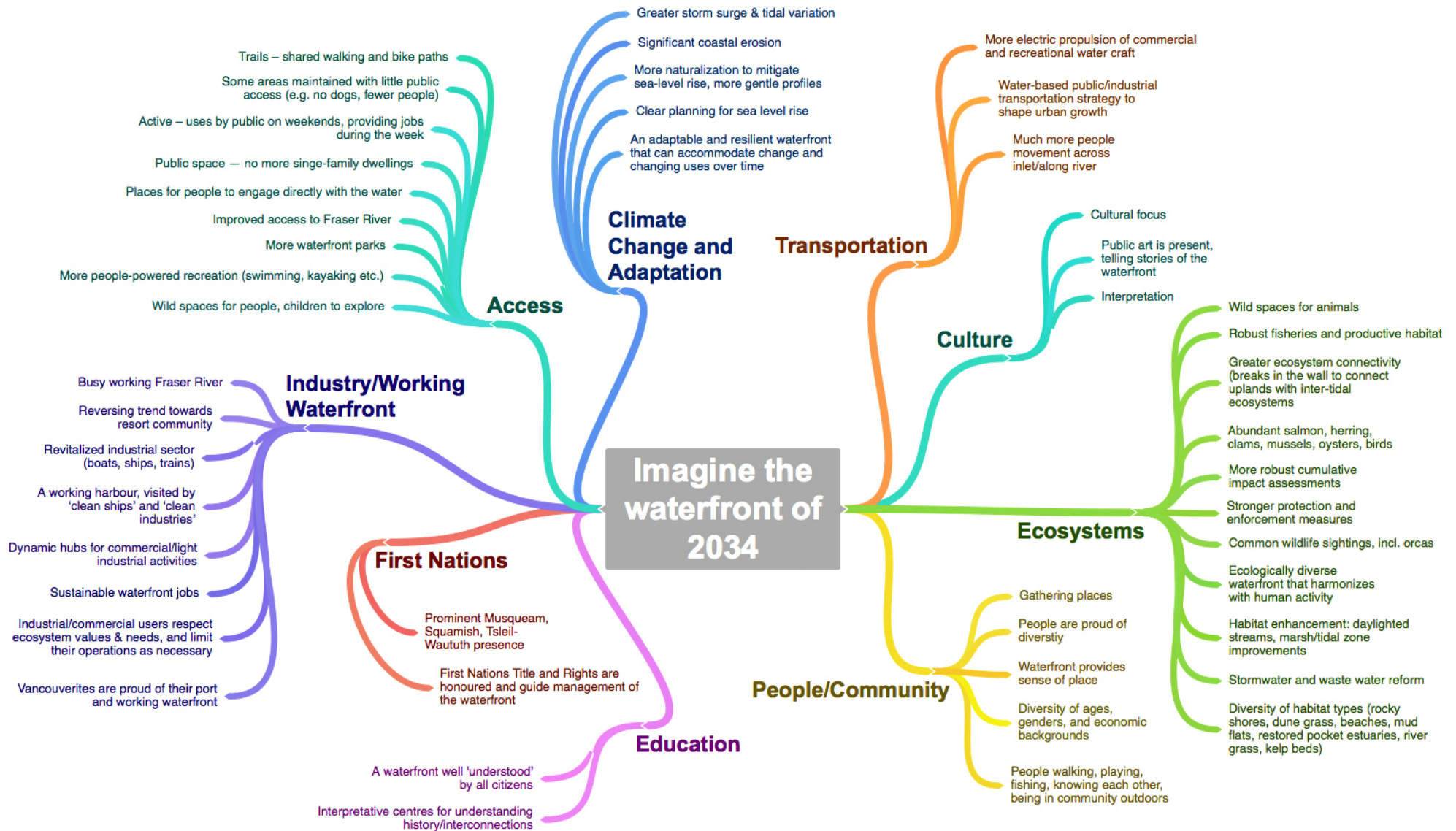
These five themes capture most of the ideas and issues that came up during the visioning exercise; although some of them, such as climate change and adaptation or education, are relevant for more than one theme.

Digging deeper into what the future of the waterfront holds, our partners identified opportunities as well as some challenges associated with the five themes.



*Ideas flowed freely during a day of rich dialogue.*





# What Will Living on the Waterfront Look Like?

Participants stressed that space on the shoreline is limited and must be managed well in order to satisfy competing needs—including, but not limited to, the need for residential areas. The waterfront can play a crucial role in shaping our community and how we plan for growth and change.

The shoreline could drive urban growth by providing not only living space, but also transportation and economic opportunities. Planning for the waterfront should look at where our city's future strategic nodes will lie and how they could benefit from water-based transportation.

The way we live has important implications for how we access the water. Residential and commercial uses compete for access in some areas, whereas for many community members living on the water is unaffordable.

Flooding events will become a bigger challenge as a result of rising sea levels. Vancouver should look closely at the experience of other coastal cities, both in terms of how they were affected by flooding and how they responded. Increasing the “setback,” i.e. the distance between water and built structures, is a way to make the shoreline more adaptable to change and rising sea levels. Another way is to shift towards building infrastructure that is flexible and can adapt not only to changing sea levels, but also the changing needs of communities or ecosystems.

When talking about how we live on the waterfront, we should not limit our thinking to human inhabitants. Planning for living space on the water should go hand in hand with restoring and protecting ecosystems.





# What Will Flourishing Ecosystems on the Waterfront Look Like?

Participants felt it is time to re-think some of our existing approaches to ecosystem management, protection and restoration.

We need a better understanding of the city's natural capital and the many biological and physical processes under way at our shores.

Important physical processes include erosion or sand depositing and are driven by wind, rain, tides, waves or currents. These processes nurture important habitats, but they can be interrupted by construction along the shoreline. "Softer profiles," i.e. beaches instead of walls, can help restore and protect ecosystems—but they also tend to be more adaptable to sea-level rise.

Paying greater attention to traditional knowledge and re-visiting the tools we already have in place should play a role in our understanding, but so should collecting new data and information.

Ambassador species offer a strategy to raise awareness and appreciation of natural areas. Ambassador species, such as "salmon in the city", could help communicate how ecosystems function, how they are connected and how our activities affect them in the urban environment.

Consider "softening" conceptual boundaries around how we manage ecosystems. Do we want to redefine what a "park" is? Should we limit access or specific activities in certain areas to help ecosystems recover? How can we create "rights of ways" for animals to connect ecosystems? Can "eco-engineering" help industrial and natural areas co-exist? How can we start seeing storm water as a resource rather than waste?





# What Will Access to Nature on the Waterfront Look Like?

Access to nature plays an important role in enabling people to recreate, but also to learn about their environment. And the way we access nature is closely linked to the state of our urban ecosystems. The idea of being more creative in how we think about parks was a common thread in the conversations around access to nature:

Keeping our shores clean and accessible is a shared responsibility for the public, governments and industry.

There are multiple ways of accessing nature: through our visual sense, through smelling or listening. Taking into account the different senses that we use to interact with nature could enable us to have richer experiences.

Future parks could create opportunities to interact directly with nature in some areas, while other areas may only be accessible via boardwalks, lookouts or by kayak, thereby reducing the direct impact of visitors on the environment.

Some parts of our waterfront could be “re-wilded”, while other park areas could be more maintained and managed. Integrating the built environment with nature or “bringing the waterfront into the city” by uncovering lost streams and restoring pocket estuaries could be another way of improving access to nature.



# What Will Working on the Waterfront Look Like?

Forum participants from very different backgrounds agreed that waterfront and maritime industries are integral to Vancouver's economic well-being, reaching from container traffic and cruise ships to log-operations on the Fraser or recreational boating and tourism. These industries provide jobs and economic opportunities close to where people live, but they also give Vancouver its "colour" or "flavour" as a waterfront city. However, this aspect of Vancouver's identity is not always on people's minds or, if it is, is a source of contention.

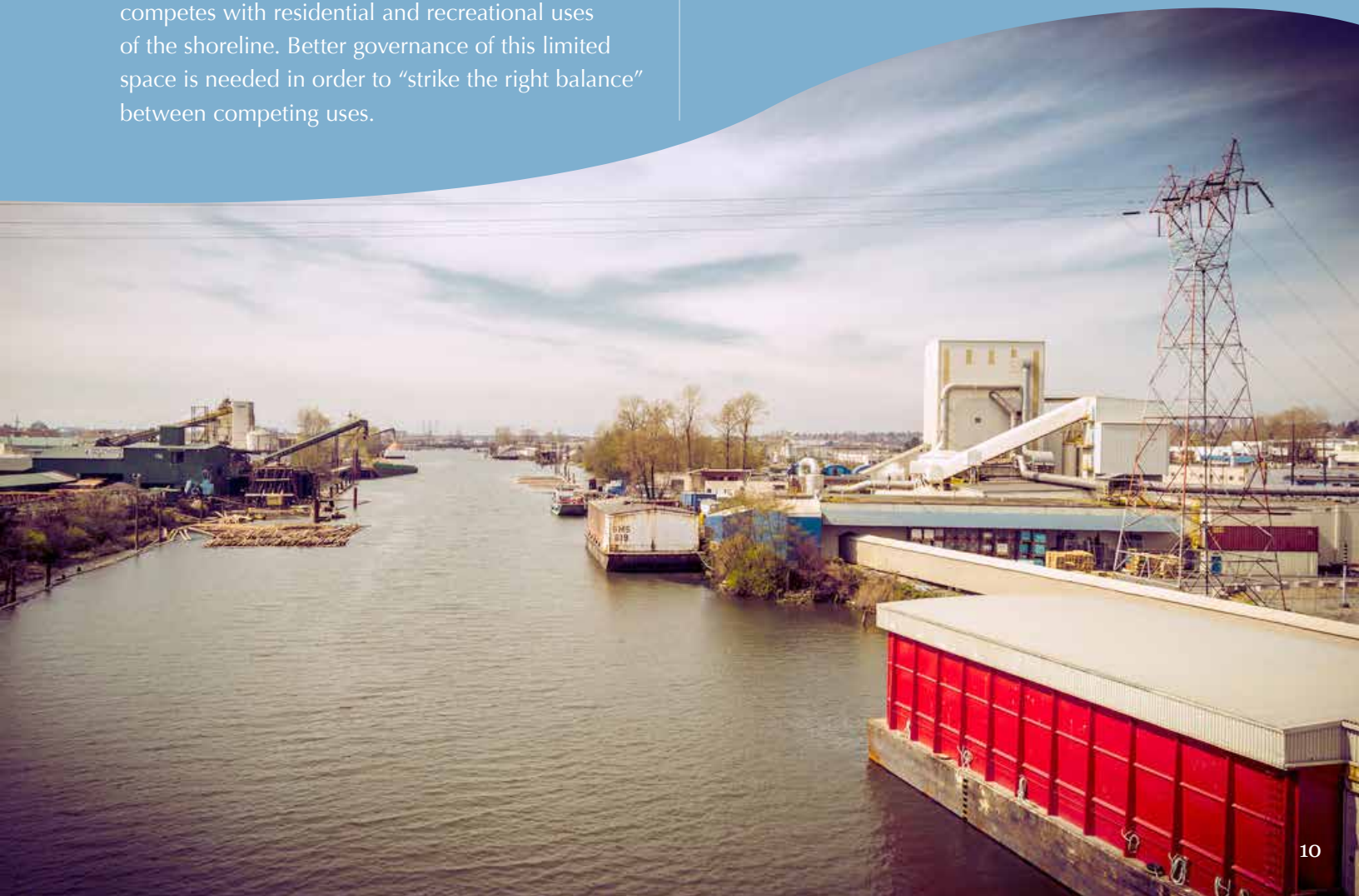
We need opportunities to learn about past and present waterfront industries, and greater interactions with the public could help strengthen this identity and build awareness for the importance that a working waterfront has for our community. In turn, greater awareness and support from communities might be an incentive for marine industries to stay on the city's waterfront.

Space on the waterfront is increasingly limited as a result of urbanization, and industry often competes with residential and recreational uses of the shoreline. Better governance of this limited space is needed in order to "strike the right balance" between competing uses.

Multiple jurisdictions and fragmented governance can pose challenges, as do limited capacities of businesses to navigate the regulatory frameworks and processes.

There is a need for collaboration to help preserve space for waterfront industries, alongside and integrated with communities and natural areas.

Tools to attract businesses to the waterfront—or keep them there—should include reduced fees, expedited permits.





# What Will Transportation on the Waterfront Look Like?

When it comes to transportation on the waterfront, the conversation often centers on container ships and tanker traffic. While these are important aspects of the conversation, the waterfront also has a lot of unused potential for moving people and goods around the region.

Vancouver's sea and aqua buses are already very popular transportation options. New commuter ferries could connect communities along the Fraser River and Burrard Inlet.

Examples from other jurisdictions show how shorelines can be utilized to improve public transit: Brisbane has an extensive ferry system and New York/New Jersey have added new ferry services over the last years to relieve the road-based transportation network.

Electric ferries and an increased share of other electric watercraft on the water could limit our carbon footprint.

Short- and medium-haul cargo traffic on the water has a lot of untapped potential: shift some of our goods-movement from trucks to boats and barges could help reduce carbon emissions and congestion of our road system.

Using the transportation opportunities on waterfront requires a long-term vision and a collaborative response that engages different levels of government and stakeholders.





# From Vision to Reality

The process of creating a vision for Vancouver's waterfront is now under way. But to further develop and expand this vision, we will continue the conversation with a growing network of partners and the public about what it is they value in their waterfront and what they want its future to look like. In October 2014, GSA will be hosting the first Water's Edge Day, which will offer citizens a range of different ways of engaging with the waterfront.

The way forward for the Waterfront Initiative is not only to continue the conversation, but to establish a strategic partnership and a process for collaboration. In addition, Forum participants identified key actions for moving towards making the vision for our waterfront a reality (see Table 1). They stressed the need for a better understanding of the waterfront and of the tools available for shoreline management.

To measure success, we need reliable and current information. Creating a State of the Waterfront Report as a way of establishing a baseline and measuring progress is a key component of our plan for Waterfront Initiative. This report will outline what we know, map the knowledge gaps, and revisit existing plans

to learn from past successes and failures. And it will further include indicators to evaluate efforts to revitalize and protect the shoreline.

GSA will continue to convene the Waterfront Network to develop an action plan to make our common vision for the waterfront a reality. This plan will define activities and projects that the Network as a collective can undertake. Plus, it will identify steps that members can undertake to make their ongoing work mutually reinforcing.

To produce concrete results and tangible outcomes, Forum participants recommended a pilot project that demonstrates the benefits of collaboration, such as the restoration of an urban ecosystem. In the longer run, partners saw greening marine transportation as a focus area where the initiative could affect positive change.

The rich conversations at the first Waterfront Forum demonstrated there is both a need and a willingness to work together towards a resilient and prosperous Vancouver waterfront. GSA is looking forward to continue the process of collaboration and expand the reach of the initiative.

*Table 1: Key actions identified at the Forum*

Action	Time Frame	First Steps	Resources	Roles
<b>Establish baseline</b>	now	Collect existing information/ knowledge	Technical resources University connections	Business stakeholders/ interests
<b>Strategic partnerships and process</b> (involving all levels of government, industry, NGOs)	0.5-1 year	Create vision Build guiding principles Implement pilot project that illustrates benefits to stakeholders: Small in scale/doable; possible focus on restoration (Beaver Creek?) or public engagement; possible link to ecosystem repository (see next step)	Long-term funding	Backbone organization Key partners
<b>Mapping terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems</b>	3-5 years	Build repository of existing data	Funding for synthesizing information	Network, sub-committee Champion/dedicated position
<b>Greening transportation:</b> • Short sea shipping • Commuting • Tourism	10 years	Identify barriers/opportunities Revisit past plans Build business case Identify benefits	Multiple jurisdictions Champion? City of Vancouver/Metro Vancouver?	

# Appendix

**GSA has reached out—and continues to reach out—to a broad network of organizations and individuals to engage them in the Waterfront Initiative. Below is a list of organizations who were able to participate in our first Waterfront Forum:**

Blue Lantern Studio  
Bullitt Foundation  
City of Vancouver  
City of Vancouver Park Board  
Fraser Riverkeeper  
Hemmera  
Light House Sustainable Building Centre  
Metro Vancouver  
Port Metro Vancouver  
PWL Partnership  
Rivershed Society of British Columbia  
Simon Fraser University Urban Studies  
Stanley Park Ecology Society  
Stewardship Centre for British Columbia  
Tides Canada  
Tourism Vancouver  
Tsleil-Waututh Nation  
Vancouver Maritime Museum  
West Coast Environmental Law  
Western Log Sort and Salvage Co-Operative

*If you would like to know more about the Waterfront Initiative and ways to get involved, please contact our Waterfront Initiative Lead Sebastian Merz at [sebastian@georgiastrait.org](mailto:sebastian@georgiastrait.org) or 604-633-0530*

## Waterfront Network Forum Agenda

Wednesday, 9 April 2014, Vancouver, BC, 8:00 am - 2:00 pm

UBC Robson Square, HSBC Hall, 800 Robson St, Vancouver, BC

8:00-8:30	Registration
8:30-8:50	Opening
8:50-9:00	Welcome message from Councillor Andrea Reimer
9:00-9:15	Welcome message from Christianne Wilhelmson, Executive Director, Georgia Strait Alliance
9:15-9:30	Introductions and connections to the waterfront
9:30-10:10	Visioning exercise: Imagining our future waterfront
10:10-12:30	<p>Small table sessions</p> <p>Theme: A sustainable and prosperous waterfront for everybody in Vancouver —what will it look like?</p> <p>Three rounds of small table sessions, participants will have the opportunity to participate in dialogue on at least two of the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) What will <b>living on the waterfront</b> look like?</li><li>2) What will <b>flourishing ecosystems</b> on the waterfront look like?</li><li>3) What will <b>access to nature on the waterfront</b> look like?</li><li>4) What will <b>working on the waterfront</b> look like?</li><li>5) What will <b>transportation on the waterfront</b> look like?</li></ol>
12:30-13:00	Lunch
13:00-13:40	<p>Think tank session: How do we get there?</p> <p>What steps can we take to create a prosperous and resilient waterfront?</p> <p>Who should play which role?</p>
13:40-14:00	Closing