

The Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu): Measuring *ouR View* and tracking our progress towards sustainability

Clare Mochrie, the project manager for RVu, shares the focus, desires, and activities of the global sustainability knowledge network.

THE LAST THREE DECADES HAVE WITNESSED a fundamental transformation in the economic, social, and environmental contexts in which we live. Advances in information technology and communications have altered traditional concepts of space and time. We have experienced unprecedented increases in global warming, species extinction, and desertification. The gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' has widened and our communities have been enriched by increasingly multicultural populations.

Leading experts in all the relevant fields agree that humankind now has the resources, technology, and knowledge to develop a way of living that could be economically healthy, socially equitable, and ecologically sustainable. And yet, we continue to struggle with how to establish this balance in practice. What sustainability means in one context to one person differs completely from what it means to someone else. How to manage population growth in a way that recog-

nizes these different perspectives but still provides a healthy, respectful safe, and economically viable environment for their citizens is possibly *the* fundamental challenge of our future.

Our cities stand at the forefront of this sustainability challenge. Massive urbanization is currently underway across the globe, and based on trends of the past fifty years, it is expected that virtually all the population growth between 2000 and 2030 will be concentrated in urban areas. By 2030, 60% of people in the world will live in cities, and by 2050, urban populations around the world are expected to double in size. In Canada, our three major urban centres will absorb 75% of our population growth over the next generation. For cities, therefore, more than anywhere else, the principles of sustainable development are quickly becoming a survival mandate. In an effort to help cities accept and deal with this reality, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) estab-

What is RVu?

The **Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu)** is a project based at Simon Fraser University and grounded in the urban community of regional Vancouver, British Columbia.

RVu is engaged in a process to develop a set of indicators that relate to today's environment, reflect the priorities of Vancouver region's residents, and can track our progress towards the Vancouver that we would like to realize in the future.

RVu is part of the global network of local observatories organized by UN-Habitat on the premise that better information builds better cities. Independently and together, these observatories from around the world operate to improve the worldwide base of urban knowledge by helping governments, local authorities, and civil society organizations develop, gather, and apply policy-oriented urban indicators, statistics, and other urban information. They believe that better indicators and information, grounded in the issues and ideas that matter most to citizens across the region, can help the local community reach its highest goals.

lished a network of Global Urban Observatories.

Established in 1997, the purpose of the network is to build a knowledge base related to sustainability to equip cities with the information they need to make better decisions and track their progress. Currently, the network consists of over 80 observatories in cities around the world. Each of these observatories independently develops and tracks measures of urban sustainability. They also work together to benchmark their progress, share lessons, and build capacity.

In the fall of 2004, Vancouver joined this expanding network. The purpose of the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu) is to contribute to the worldwide urban knowledge base through the development and distribution of policy-oriented urban indicators and statistics. Its goals are to:

- Connect and coordinate critical indicators for the region
- Capacity-build through partnerships with existing partnerships and networks
- Communicate the process and its results to local decision makers and others

The initial phase of the RVu project focused on research into other local and global indicator and sustainability initiatives. In the fall of 2005, RVu began to reach out to the broader Vancouver community.

Guided by a board of advisors with expertise in sustainability indicators, this public engagement phase of the project was launched with a workshop called *Focusing our View* on October 24, 2005. This event brought together over 100 individuals from different communities

throughout the Vancouver region to express and explore their diverse perspectives and priorities, hear presentations on the indicator research process, and work towards a common purpose: better measures and targets for our development and progress. Participants' ideas were clustered into eight general focus areas, and some individuals committed to a six-month study group process to examine, explore, and recommend what the measures should be in each of the following topic areas: mobility, community building, food systems, economic and social development, urban development, the environment, governance, and culture.

In April 2006, the groups will come together to share their indicator recommendations. The results of their process will be published in *Counting on Vancouver: Our View of the Region*. These indicators and related trends will also be presented at the third World Urban Forum, being held in Vancouver in June 2006.

Feedback gained through the Forum will provide critical direction for the longer-term monitoring, engagement, and research activities of the Observatory. The information will inject new energy into the ongoing dialogue around sustainability indicators in the region. It will also provide decision makers with critical input, helping to support better urban policies and clearing a path to a more sustainable future. ■

To learn more about the RVu project and to get involved, visit <www.rvu.ca>