ANDREA REIMER

Vancouver City Councillor and Chair of the Planning and Environment Committee
A BRIGHT, GREEN FUTURE

With a genuine passion for the wellbeing of Vancouver, its citizens and the environment, City Councillor Andrea Reimer talks candidly about her views on the Canadian political system, her ambitious plans to achieve Greenest City status and aim to integrate and empower the city’s important minority groups.
Could you discuss your background and how it led you to take up your two important roles – Vancouver’s City Councillor and the Chair of Vancouver’s Planning and Environment Committee?

I was eager to lobby governments to change their environmental laws, so it seemed easier to become a part of the government working to address such concerns. A huge catalyst in this decision was Gregor Robertson, who was prepared to run for Mayor, and who offered me a once in a lifetime opportunity – he was not ambitious about becoming Mayor, nor did he grow up wanting to be a political leader, but he certainly has high expectations for Vancouver and its community. It’s rare to find someone with the right skillset and résumé, who is not driven by power but by change. It felt like the right time for me to move into these roles.

When we were elected, I asked Mayor Robertson not to take on a leadership role, because I wanted to learn more about the processes involved first. But he was confident that I would succeed as Chair of Vancouver’s Planning and Environment Committee. And he was right as it turns out!

What responsibilities do you have both as City Councillor and Chair of the Committee?

My roles cover a broad scope; it would be so much easier to perform them under one job title! We only have two committees in Vancouver, the other being the City Finance and Services Standing Committee, and although I lobby for budget funds, I’m not responsible for developing the city’s budget or financial framework. However, for nearly everything from engineering, urban planning, citizen engagement, social planning and economic development, I am ultimately responsible for reporting to the Mayor on the progress made in those areas.

Which environmental issues are taking precedence in Vancouver and across Canada?

We saw a transition during the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, where biodiversity preservation was the central concern – oceans, freshwater management and large-scale wilderness sites that people were hoping to protect. In the mid-2000s that focus shifted towards cities and their potential role in sustainability. Partly, that was a response to intractable federal and provincial governments and those responsible for large-scale wilderness protection, but also a global shift in the way we think. With Al Gore, among others, encouraging further thinking on subjects like climate change and toxins, as well as peak oil and water, cities – where decisions (positive and negative) have the most immediate and far reaching impact on people’s daily lives – became a central concern.

In Vancouver, 85 per cent of us live in cities, but I was amazed by how little urban focus we had in Canada. In Europe, for example, there has been a longstanding focus on such environmental issues, although the continent doesn’t have the same opportunities to preserve large wilderness areas like Canada.

Presently, the main concern across the country, and the one which unites us, is the use of energy and fossil fuels. Natural resource management used to be more important in the 1990s, with forest policy and access to wood at the helm, but we are now focused on coal, liquid natural gas and the tar sands in Alberta.

In 2007, Al Gore chose you to deliver a presentation on his award-winning documentary film An Inconvenient Truth. What were the main points raised during this speech? Has anything changed since this groundbreaking event?

I was surprised to be asked to become involved with Al Gore’s work. Although I have worked on a range of different environmental issues over the years and knew about the urgency of climate change prevention and adaptation, I never thought that I would be asked to take up this task.

This experience relayed to me the importance of addressing climate change and the negative impacts associated with this phenomenon. You cannot outrun climate change and we must all take responsibility to better understand the implications – both on a personal and policy level. During my five-year involvement with the Al Gore project, I saw increasing amounts of frustration from people who recognise the scale of the problem but see limited response from government.

As a political activist and strong advocate for open government reforms, what do your current activities involve?

There is a basic foundational need to ensure that everyone has access to information; it sounds simple but it is not always distributed equally – there may be language and educational barriers, time constraints or meaningless data, for example. Therefore, much of our work is aimed at building community capacity and a human interface. This involves forming relationships on all levels.

Think of Vancouver as a bicycle wheel with spokes; if the city is the hub in the middle of the wheel, then every citizen needs to be a spoke. This is difficult as a massive hub would be required to ensure the city is in a position to respond to its 650,000 spokes. However, we can look to the outside of the wheel as the main structure connecting us, which allows information to be distributed, conversations to arise, ideas to develop and the city to hear those ideas.

We recently completed the one-year Engaged City project, a task force comprising 22 volunteers, to increase community engagement and the ways in which the city connects. They are coming to Council with their final report in a couple of weeks, but what they have achieved in such a short space of time is quite brilliant. There are many different communities in Vancouver – urban Aboriginal and LGBTQ, for example – that we can give a seat or a committee, but that does not necessarily ensure such minorities will feel empowered or involved. We are exploring innovative ways to integrate these groups and encourage them to talk to one another. This means reviewing everything from benches in public spaces to reforming our campaign financing rules.

Could you expand on the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan, and why Vancouver is a prime place to bring about...
change? How do you intend to bring councils, residents, businesses, organisations and levels of government together to achieve this goal?

I had a meeting with the Lord Mayor of Copenhagen almost two years into the Greenest City project, and he told me they had a lot to learn from us. I thought that he was incredibly polite, because they are almost 30 years ahead in environmental policy, but they had been observing our efforts in this area and were inspired by how many groups and individuals we had engaged. We started with a small team who outlined the goals and targets, but over time we bought together thousands of people who were deeply engaged in achieving these goals. We had 35,000+ residents (about 5 per cent of our population) and over 180 stakeholders involved (academic institutions, businesses, non-profits, etc). Cities don’t have the legislative authority of national governments, and therefore can’t force you to take action – we can build a compost bin behind your house or install a bike lane, but we can’t make you use these services. If we don’t have you engaged from day one, our ability to service and respond to needs is very limited.

Have you had a good response from the Action Plan so far?

Our biggest challenge after the first six months was how to take all of the demands, collaborations and partnerships and honour them. We didn’t have an existing structure to work from – the city has not always been heavily involved in external collaboration – so it has not only driven Greenest City collaborations, but completely changed the way we work with the community across all city departments. Our citizens see the value in those community partnerships.

How are you collaborating with others to create an environment that supports green economic development in the City of Vancouver?

Greenest City is an environmental policy document, there’s no question, but it’s also a document that details the future of Vancouver. Perhaps more fundamentally, it responds to the questions of whether we want to be a city that is owned by the future (because we didn’t forebode potential concerns), or a city that owns the future.

When the project began in 2009, people were apprehensive. It’s easy to perceive change in our own lives, but to understand that 7 billion other people on the planet are affected is more difficult. If you cannot anticipate global change, you cannot get ahead. So why not try to predict these changes and figure out how to be resilient in the face of them?

We knew back in 2008-09 that the green economy was outpacing any other economic growth, and if you want to own the future economy, you have to be at the forefront of that growth, and ensure that you are branded a friendly environment to implement clean tax or green building technology, for example. Ideally, other cities see you as friendly, but more importantly, as a critical partner in the work they are conducting and that amplifies their own brand and efforts. We celebrated the fifth anniversary of Greenest City last month and are now recognised as a leader in the green future.

What plans are in place to protect ecosystems – a key objective of the 2020 Action Plan?

It’s been challenging. We are the smallest major city on the continent so we have a lot of people in a very small space. However, there are remnants of the ecosystem for which we do hardware in protection. For example, we are looking at how to re-establish the salmon streams that were once here. We daylighted a stream recently and had salmon come back for the first time in over 100 years. 2,000 people came to see these salmon. We have also restored a herring habitat island, which has brought back herring into the ocean, and whales as a result.

These are relatively modest efforts, what I would consider demonstrations, but it does inspire people to see the potential. We recently sponsored a Museum of Vancouver exhibit called Rewilding Vancouver, which attempts to provoke people into thinking about the city in its natural historical state and what it could become in the future; for instance, what if over the decades we were able to reintroduce a salmon fishery? How does that contribute to our sense of wellbeing and the health of the city? It’s a painfully slow process but looking back at what has been achieved, we have already implemented over 125 policies and a substantial amount of change.

Looking towards the future, where will you be focusing your efforts? Do you have any exciting plans ahead?

It’s election year in Vancouver. I’ve been elected for two terms on Council and one term on the school board now, and so it was a difficult decision to run again. I don’t subscribe to the model of politics as a career, I think everyone should have a shot at public office.

I have been working with minorities to build their voices in the community. Every social indicator points to how disempowered these groups are. The history of Aboriginal colonisation has left a tremendous amount of damage. We have come a long way in the last few years, but one year is not enough to change this, and I would like to continue working with the city’s different groups to build trust and power.

In addition, Greenest City is not yet complete, even though the Action Plan is laid out in full. Five years ago, becoming the greenest city in the world would have been perceived as a crazy idea, but now it’s completely mainstreamed. People have an absolute expectation that we will become the greenest city. The next step will be to figure out how to scale this project up globally. We engage with a lot of cities – well over 1,000 – on Greenest City, or our policy agenda, but thinking about developing a network of cities globally could push the plan into an international framework.