

Health care, transportation top regional concerns

Urban Futures Survey shows shift away from pollution, crime

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 22, 2013



PlaceSpeak CEO Colleen Hardwick, shown with colleagues Yuri Artibise, left, and Justen Harcourt, said the Urban Futures survey is 'again echoing or cementing what we know about the region's perceptions about transportation.'

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

Air pollution was a huge worry for Metro Vancouver in the 1970s and early 1990s, but health care and traffic congestion have taken over as bigger concerns, according to the latest Urban Futures survey released today.

The 2012 regional survey, which replicates two surveys in 1973 and 1990, found health care was the most pressing challenge among 1,407 people surveyed, followed by traffic congestion, homelessness and increasing housing supply.

Air and water pollution, which held first and second place in 1973 and 1990, fell to fifth and sixth place last year. Concerns about crime also fell from No. 4 in 1972 to 11 last year.

Ken Cameron, director of PlaceSpeak, a new start-up that provides a virtual consultation forum, said the results reflect the work that's been done in the past 40 years to address the earlier concerns, as well as highlight what's needed to deal with rising issues like health care and transportation.

Health care had been ranked ninth on the priority list in 1973 and third in 1990. The survey suggests the change in ranking may reflect in part the aging population, as well as concerns over reliable service delivery.

"Health care may be a function of aging population but it's seen as a critical need," Cameron said. "I've got the feeling people are feeling the health care system is under stress."

Traffic congestion has also become a bigger issue — rising from sixth and seventh respectively in the 1973 and 1990 surveys — as a result of public policy to emphasize transit, walking and cycling over single-occupant vehicles.

But the survey found the significance of those issues varied across the region, and by the age of the respondents.

Those under 35, for instance, were less likely than the older demographic to see health care and transportation infrastructure as critical priorities and were more sensitive to socio-economic difficulties.

Housing supply, which may reflect the difficulty many encounter finding an affordable first home, and homelessness were bigger issues for the under-35 set than for those who were older.

Individual respondents in Vancouver also aren't as worried as those in the rest of the region about health care, ranking it "fairly consistently as the third most important issue in the region," behind

homelessness and housing, which were generally ranked third and sixth respectively in other municipalities.

Traffic congestion, which was No. 1 in most municipalities except Richmond and the Tri-Cities, was ranked No. 4 in the City of Vancouver.

"Now the emphasis is on transportation in this region," said PlaceSpeak CEO Colleen Hardwick, founder of New City Ventures, which is involved in the creation of the PlaceSpeak platform. "Whether it's TransLink, Metro or the mayors' council, this is again echoing or cementing what we know about the region's perceptions about transportation."

Cameron said the findings likely reflect the fact that people in dense urban centres have more access to transit than those in the suburbs, so they aren't stuck in traffic as often. But he noted it's interesting that most respondents said getting to work wasn't a particular problem, a response that hasn't changed much in 40 years.

The high rating for traffic congestion, he suggested, might be explained by an observation that drivers have experienced on non-work trips, or from news media.

"Given the overall interest in relieving traffic congestion, it should be somewhat disconcerting that Metro Vancouver residents have gradually viewed the car as more essential for their sense of freedom," the survey stated. "Individuals may be less receptive to alternative modes of travel, or existing choices are not effective at meeting their needs."

Transportation concerns, particularly improving public transit, ranked first and second on the policy question in the survey. Sustainability and environmental issues also ranked high in the survey, which may have influenced the main concern of providing better public transit.

Hardwick said residents should realize this data's importance.

"I don't know that people understand that data does affect outcomes," she said. "They feel disconnected from it, or feel it's going into a black hole. Certainly in 1990 when we collected that data it did impact outcomes."

Former Vancouver mayor and B.C. premier Mike Harcourt, chairman of New City Ventures, said the survey is a "gold mine of information to help policy-makers develop deep knowledge of the things that are important to residents of Metro Vancouver and to prepare appropriate responses."

The survey also found that most respondents agree with the view that individuals from many cultures enhance the quality of urban life. There was also a noticeable increase in the desirability of living in developed urban areas as well as acceptability of apartment living.

The survey had a margin of error at plus or minus 3.17 per cent 19 times out of 20.

ksinoski@vancouver.sun.com