

“On the south shore of False Creek, develop a neighbourhood that is the model of sustainability, incorporating: forward-thinking infrastructure; strategic energy reduction; high-performance buildings; and high transit access.”

This introductory chapter provides a glimpse into the history, policies and personalities that shaped the development of a sustainable community in Southeast False Creek (SEFC). Formerly an important industrial hub for Vancouver, SEFC occupies a key piece of waterfront real estate adjacent to the city’s downtown core. The future of SEFC became a focal point of discussion in the early 1990s, following the city’s decision to release the SEFC lands from the industrial land base. It became clear that the redevelopment of this 80-acre centrally located site presented an opportunity to make a statement about the direction of future development in Vancouver.

In 1991, Vancouver’s city council determined that the SEFC lands should be a model sustainable community: “On the south shore of False Creek, develop a neighbourhood that is the model of sustainability, incorporating: forward-thinking infrastructure; strategic energy reduction; high-performance buildings; and high transit access.” This proclamation marked a momentous achievement for the City of Vancouver, and a turning point toward a sustainable approach to urban design. In the ensuing years, city staff and countless people from local interest groups and the professional community became involved in the visioning process for the site’s redevelopment.

Chapter One of The Challenge Series describes SEFC’s past and future and discusses the importance of sustainable community development. It looks at the influences that led to the policy development and design of a new sustainable neighbourhood.

From industrial hub to vacant brownfield to sustainable community



Gordon Price on the Evolution of False Creek

On the shores of False Creek, the dreams of successive generations have been realized, often beyond their expectations, beginning with the greatest of them all: Canada’s national dream of a continental railway. When the trains reached their destination here, not only were a nation, a port and a city willed into being, but the creek itself became an expression of our relationship with nature.

First came industry, belching soot into the air, sewage into the water and filling in three-quarters of the creek. (It would later be dredged by the federal government and used to create Granville Island.) Those industries built a city, provisioned a navy for war, brought jobs and prosperity in peace, and eventually declined as jobs turned from blue-collar to white.

Then came green. After the City of Vancouver acquired lands along the south shore of False Creek, the city council of the early 1970s –

Alderman Walter Hardwick in particular – conceived of an idyllic residential community that would express the ideals of a generation that rejected the harsh modernism of freeways and urban renewal for car-free village squares and bike-filled greenways; a place to raise children, with mixed uses and mixed incomes. It all seems so obvious now, but it was so radical then.

When it came time for the transformation of False Creek’s north shore following Expo ‘86, the private and public sectors jointly built on the successes of the south shore by embracing a high-density, high-rise urbanism that eventually came to be called “Vancouverism.” The iconic skyline exemplified by the residential high-rise “point-tower-and-podium” model spread around the world.

And so, when the Southeast False Creek brownfield site came up for consideration, a new consensus proffered an alternative vision, this one closer to the ground, motivated

as much by the challenges of sustainability as the desires of livability. This sustainable community would take on the critical problems facing us as producers and consumers on this planet and serve as a place of continuous learning and problem solving.

The look of the Olympic Village may be different than what came before, but the process is much the same. This combination of vision and public policy was discussed at a hundred public meetings, filtered through a dozen staff reports, redesigned by the architects, reconceived by the marketers and rehashed by the politicians. Now gracing the shores of False Creek, the Millennium Water Southeast False Creek Olympic Village is another expression of the dreams of another generation.

Gordon Price
Director, SFU City Program

Councillor for the City of Vancouver from 1986 to 2002

PROFILE

Ian Smith

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As a Senior Planner in the City of Vancouver’s Central Area Planning Division, Ian led the planning process for SEFC beginning in 1997. He was instrumental in assembling the advisory group, commissioning consultant reports, facilitating meetings internally and with the public, creating the policy statement and the Official Development Plan and passing key reports through city council. Ian is currently the Manager of Development at the City of Vancouver’s SEFC Project Office. Ian coordinated all aspects of the development between the city and Millennium – from the master plan and rezoning to permitting and construction. He is the city representative responsible for the construction of the affordable housing units and the community centre. Following completion and delivery of the site to Vancouver’s Olympic Committee – after more than 12 years of working on SEFC – Ian plans to retire to Nova Scotia and focus on golf and kayaking.