

Higher Buildings Policy Review

Translated summary of Exhibit

[Language]
Language in English

Overview

The City of Vancouver is reviewing the Higher Buildings Policy, which provides guidance for buildings downtown that significantly exceed their zoned height. This review considers how taller buildings in key areas of Downtown Vancouver can deliver public benefits such as housing, jobs, and amenities and advance City initiatives like the Granville Street Plan, while protecting the qualities people value most about our city. Protected public views will be maintained and will not be impacted by this policy review.

The goal of the initial phase of public engagement is to gather ideas, perspectives, and aspirations for the future of tall buildings in Downtown Vancouver.

Public input will help shape future policy options and an upcoming international design ideas competition brief.

Why Is the City Reviewing the Higher Buildings Policy Now?

The current Higher Buildings Policy was created in 1997, and only minor changes have been made since then (2011 was the latest update). Vancouver has significantly grown and changed over time. The City is now reviewing the policy to ensure it reflects current needs and priorities, and provides clear, up-to-date guidance for future development proposals.

Recent City Council decisions have also created new opportunities:

- Public Views Policy updates (2024) opened new areas where height may be possible. Protected public views will be maintained and will not be reviewed as part of this work



- The Granville Street Plan (2025) directed staff to explore opportunities for taller buildings in the City Centre

This review is not about any specific application. It explores broader questions of where greater height might be appropriate, and what kinds of public benefits are important.

The Opportunities and Challenges of Taller Buildings

Potential Benefits

If carefully planned and well designed, taller buildings can generate significant value, including:

- Adding more homes and jobs near existing infrastructure downtown

- Helping pay for public benefits like parks, childcare, and cultural spaces through development contributions
- Supporting transit use and reduce reliance on cars
- Creating lively streets and public spaces
- Adding variety and interest to the skyline

Taller buildings also generate development contributions which can be invested into public benefits.

Public benefits include items essential for a highly livable city and can include parks and public open spaces, community centres, ice rinks and swimming pools, social facilities, childcare, heritage preservation, transit improvements, sea walls and greenways, police stations and firehalls, art and cultural facilities, and social or non-market housing, among other civic infrastructure and investments.

Potential Challenges

If tall buildings are allowed without careful planning and strong policy direction, they can:

- Overload infrastructure like water, transportation, and emergency services
- Further inequality by focusing on luxury housing or high-end office spaces
- Increase shadows and wind at street level
- Affect the character of neighbourhoods
- Lead to higher environmental and energy impacts

A “City in Nature”

Vancouver residents consistently say that nature, views, and scenery are among the city’s most important features. This idea, often described as a “City in Nature,” has shaped planning policies for decades.

Protected views of the mountains and water are central to how residents and visitors experience the city. These connections to nature support not only quality of life, but also Vancouver’s global identity and long-term economic success.

The Public Views Policy and Higher Building Policy

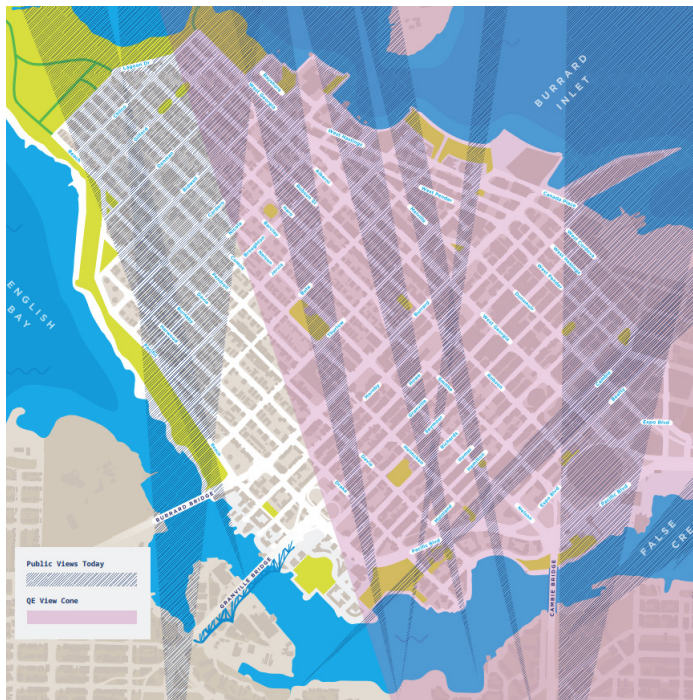
Vancouver manages tall buildings downtown through two main policies.



Public Views Policy (1989)

The Public Views Policy is a city-wide policy that protects important public views and view corridors and limits where buildings can intrude into those views.

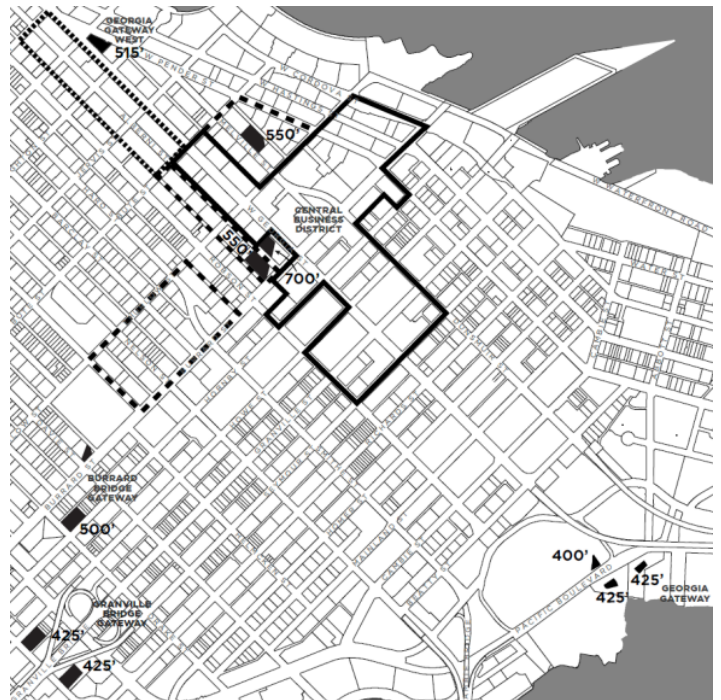
In July 2024, City Council approved changes to the Public Views policy to enable more housing, job space, and hotel rooms, while balancing livability and sustainability considerations. These changes created new opportunities for additional height downtown outside previously protected view corridors. The current review will not be revising any of the protected views.



Higher Buildings Policy (1997)

The Higher Buildings Policy was developed in response to the Public Views Policy. It applies to buildings that are significantly taller than their zoned height in downtown Vancouver.

The policy focuses on key locations like the downtown core streets and bridge gateways, with the tallest buildings in the Central Business District (see below for policy geography) to create a dome-shaped skyline. It includes guidance on design, public benefits, heritage retention, sustainability performance, climate considerations (i.e. wind and shadows), and outlines an enhanced process for review.



Since 1997, only six buildings have been completed through this policy.



2009
Living Shangri-la



2016
Paradox



2020
Vancouver House



2022
One Burrard Place



2023
The Stack



2024
Butterfly

Considering Height in the City

Building height is not determined by a single factor. Instead, it reflects a balance of three overlapping considerations: technical, financial and social. Ultimately, Council approved policy, shaped by public input, determines what level of height is acceptable in different areas.

Technical Considerations

Technical considerations address what can be safely and efficiently built. These include seismic requirements, soil conditions, wind, tower proportions, elevator systems, and the capacity of surrounding infrastructure such as water pressure, transportation networks, and emergency services.

To understand the physical limits of building height, the City hired an international architecture firm with extensive experience designing tall buildings.

What the Technical Study Found

- Modern engineering allows buildings to be built much taller than in the past
- How tall a building can be depends on the building's intended use (office, hotel, housing, etc.)



Financial Considerations

Financial considerations influence what is economically feasible. Taller buildings are more complex and costly to construct. As height increases, structures require stronger systems, deeper foundations, additional elevators, longer construction timelines, and higher levels of financing and risk.

The City also studied whether very tall buildings make financial sense in Vancouver.

What the Financial Study Found

- Taller buildings can increase land value, especially when they include housing
- Homes on higher floors often sell for more, which can help fund public benefits

As buildings get very tall:

- Construction costs rise quickly
- Projects take longer and become riskier
- Floor layouts become less efficient
- Project viability depends on very high sale prices and strong market conditions
- In some cases, moderately tall buildings may deliver as many public benefits as extremely tall ones.

Mixed-use buildings (with both jobs and housing) can be:

- More financially stable
- Better able to deliver benefits
- Less risky than single-use towers

Social Considerations

Social considerations reflect community values and public priorities. Residents care deeply about how development affects their neighbourhoods, public spaces, and sense of place.

Public support, city identity, and expectations for

community benefits all influence how much building height a community is comfortable supporting.

Current Engagement and Social Considerations

The City launched this current engagement process to better understand community perspectives and ask whether the limits set when the policy was created still make sense today, and if not, how they should evolve in a way that reflects what people care about most.

We're inviting people to share their views on:

- How tall buildings affect the skyline and the street level
- Where additional height might make sense or not?
- What public benefits should come with extra height?
- What a "made-for-Vancouver" approach look like?

Next Steps

Public input will help:

- Shape a design brief for an international ideas competition to gather ideas on how to best deliver taller buildings in Vancouver (launching June 1)
- Inform future policy options to be shared with the public in 2027
- Support Council decision-making on the future of tall buildings downtown

How to get involved:

Visit the Vancouver Lookout Exhibit between Friday, May 1 to Sunday, May 10. Admission for B.C. residents is free during these dates and times:

- Sunday, May 3, 2-6pm
- Wednesday, May 6, 6-9pm
- Saturday, May 9, 10am-6pm

Complete an online survey open until Sunday, May 31:

