



GETTING TO GROUNDBREAKING

Dec 2014 - 01

This Key Findings Summary is based upon the first G2G report on the processes, experiences, and policies in residential building approvals, with a focus on townhouses. G2G is a housing research partnership between members of the home building industry, including the Greater Vancouver Home Builders Association (GVHBA) and the Urban Development Institute (UDI), municipalities, Metro Vancouver, and others. The research has been conducted by researchers at the Simon Fraser University Urban Studies Program. In future years, G2G will focus on different housing types and development scenarios.

Acknowledgements:

G2G thanks all the municipalities and home builders who contributed to this effort. We hope this report does justice to your contributions and rewards your willingness to face the friction of debate around this piece of the housing puzzle.



The Getting to Groundbreaking project is made possible through generous contributions from:



Residential Building Approval Processes in Metro Vancouver

Meeting the Challenge

By 2041, Metro Vancouver will need nearly half a million new homes; 3,000 new residents are arriving each month.

Due to the limited land supply, it is forecasted that only 25% of this growth can occur on previously undeveloped greenfield land. For the other 75%, we will need to be more creative with infill development at higher densities. Metro Vancouver is a desirable place to live, with an increasingly constrained land supply. Municipalities are under pressure with respect to the residential approval process. Some face record numbers of applications to process; all face increasing expectations during review, and they have limited tools to ensure that the housing that residents need can be built in good time. Home building is becoming more complicated and costly, with impacts on home builders, municipalities, residents and communities.

Getting to Groundbreaking (G2G) is a housing research project that investigates practices in the approval process, the period of housing development that happens before groundbreaking and construction. The challenge of effective and publicly acceptable housing development is one that can be met only by home builders and municipalities, working collaboratively.

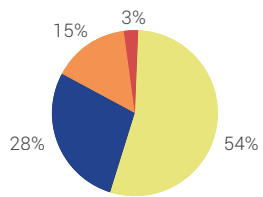
We surveyed municipal staff and home builders involved in the residential building application process in Metro Vancouver about their experiences and views on innovations and best practices. We also asked municipalities for the timing of steps, fees and charges, and additional considerations involved in processing a hypothetical 22-unit townhouse development application, called Harmony Homes.



Focus on Townhouses

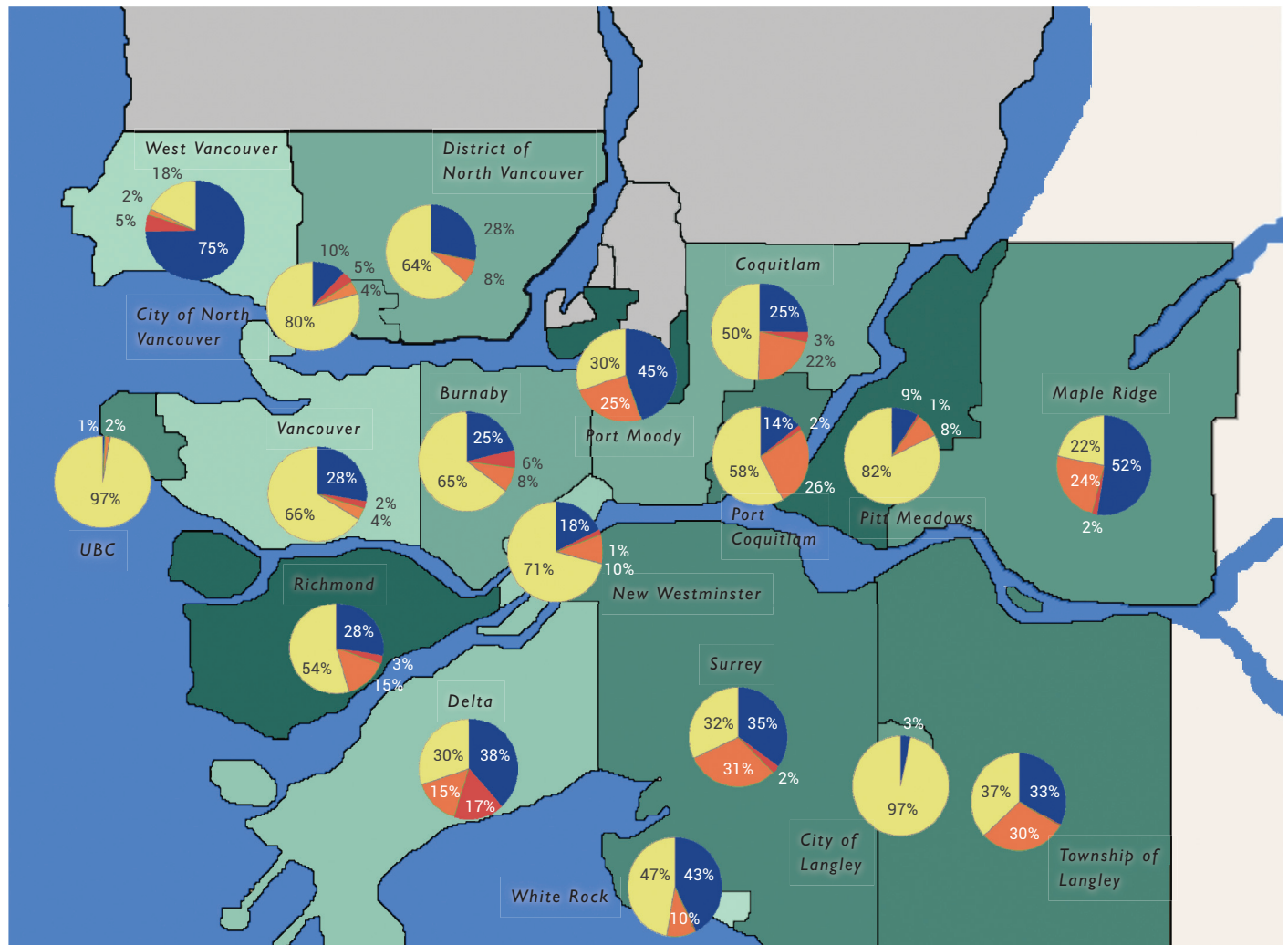
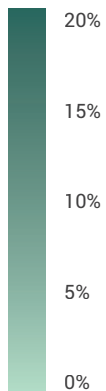
Townhouses as % of all Housing Stock and Housing Type as percent of New Housing Built

NEW HOUSING TYPE AS % OF ALL HOUSING BUILT (3 yr avg. 2011-13)



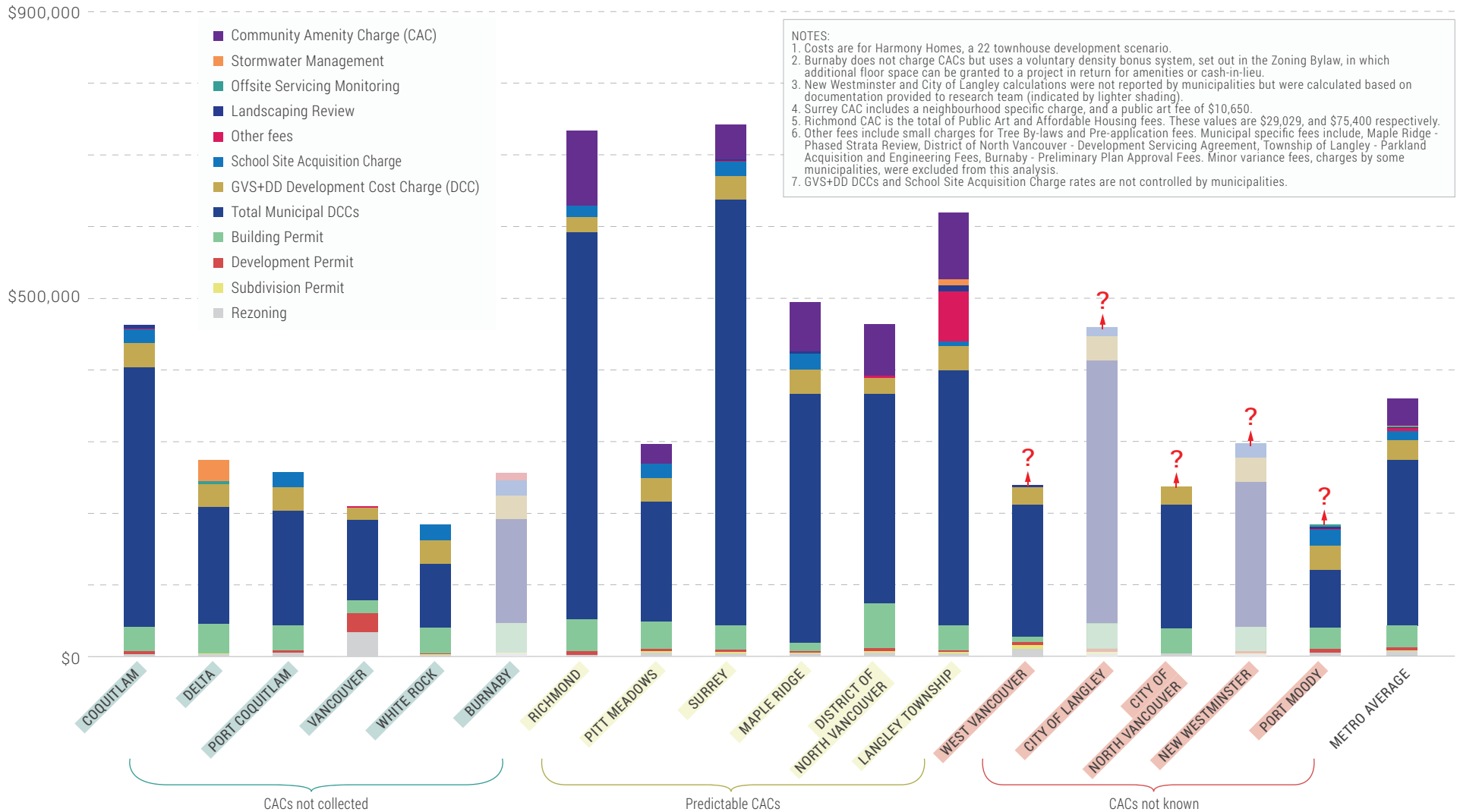
- Apartment housing completions
 - Single detached housing completions
 - Townhouse completions
 - Semi-detached housing completions
- Shown above: regional average proportions

TOWNHOUSES AS % OF ALL HOUSING STOCK



Building a Housing Partnership Approach

Itemized Costs of Fees and Charges in Metro Vancouver Municipalities for Harmony Homes



The **G2G** Housing Partnership Index, presented in the full report, factors in timing, fees and charges, along with key aspects of the regulatory process and contextual qualities considered important for an overall assessment of the residential approval process. Initial top 10 results demonstrate the difference that these considerations make compared to a simple formula of low fees and quick processing times.

Best Practices in the Residential Approval Process

Our analysis of survey and interview results reveals variability in the costs and timing of municipal approvals amongst Metro Vancouver municipalities. Some of this variation can be explained by different municipal conditions. The diversity of municipal conditions overall make it difficult to create fair and useful comparisons; however, the review enabled the identification of challenges and best practices in approval processes. By sharing best practices, home builders and municipalities can build a culture of collaboration and transparency. We can find valuable lessons across municipalities, despite diverse contexts and visions.

This year, our focus is on townhouses, a form of medium density ground-oriented housing. Many municipalities support increased development of townhouses as a way to add gentle density to traditional single family neighbourhoods.

Both municipalities and home builders agree that delays in the residential approval process create undesirable inefficiencies. At the same time, longer review processes are sometimes necessary to ensure quality outcomes. Experiences in the residential approval process have impacts on home builders and home building that are difficult to quantify but may accumulate over time. Over 30% of home builders surveyed reported that their business models are pinched by the combined impact of approval process timing and fees and charges, causing them to change housing forms, delay projects or work in other municipalities.

Municipalities surveyed were unanimous on their perceptions of pressure and bottlenecks in the approval process, as well, and these come from many directions. Strong planning and regulation lay the foundation in which the complex approval process occurs. Municipalities need to balance a wide range of valuable objectives, including developing and maintaining the housing supply. Fees and charges must be sufficient to pay for needed infrastructure and amenities, yet not so high that they pose an unfair burden on newcomers or create divides in the municipality. Processes should be as short as they reasonably can be, without sacrificing rigorous review and quality outcomes.

Summary of Best Practices

We identified 10 best practices in residential approval processes. Our survey revealed the value in particular of a good pre-application meeting, strong public engagement, as well as effective digital communication systems inside the municipality and as an interface with builders and the public.

- Accessible and Complete Information Online
- Pre-Application Meetings
- Predictable Costs and Charges
- Complete Applications
- Concurrent Processing
- File Champions and Coordinated Teams
- Better Public Engagement
- Municipal Staff Empowerment
- Effective Partnership
- Policy Clarity

For further information, the complete report, references and explanations, please download the Getting to Groundbreaking 2014 report from

<http://www.gvhba.org/events/gettingtogroundbreaking>, or send a request to **G2G@sfu.ca**



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