



Surrey plans to relocate city hall

Frances Bula

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Mayor Dianne Watts is going to move Surrey city hall to the developing central business district to send the message that Surrey wants to create a real downtown.

"By relocating city hall, we will be demonstrating our faith in the future of our downtown core to investors," Watts told an enthusiastic crowd today in her annual state-of-the-city speech to the Surrey Board of Trade.

The move symbolizes the city's determination to create an urban-style downtown that she called "the future of the region."

Watts' public declaration was cheered by planners and developers, who say it's just what Surrey needs to transform itself from a suburb to the home of the region's second downtown.

They also say it will help attract the office development that has so far been eluding what's called the Surrey Central area.

The area, which planners have been aiming to transform into a dense urban core and "transit village," has been successful in attracting condo builders and buyers, but less so with commercial space.

It includes the Central City shopping complex at King George Highway and 102nd Avenue, as well as three SkyTrain stations.

Metro Vancouver regional planner Chris De Marco said the symbolism of putting city hall in Surrey Central will be a "huge boost."

"[Surrey councillors] had been asking developers, 'What would instill confidence in this area?' and they were told, 'The city of Surrey should be making its own investment there,'" said De Marco, whose work is aimed at nurturing the buildup of the town centres that are at the heart of Metro Vancouver's regional plan.

The current city hall sits far south of the main business district on Highway 10, a long way by car and a marathon by transit.

Architect Bing Thom, who has working with Surrey city council on future plans, said he was thrilled to hear the mayor, who has occasionally mused about the idea in conversations, had made a public declaration about her intentions for city hall in

the speech.

"That makes my day. I've been trying to urge them to do that for seven years," said Thom, who designed the distinctive tower at Surrey Central that now houses a branch of Simon Fraser University.

He said planners and council members had been wondering why they haven't been able to get office development in that area.

"We said, 'You can't expect the private sector to lead. The public sector has to lead.'"

University of B.C. professor Thomas Hutton, who has studied Vancouver's regional development for years, said it's a real sign that Surrey is leaving its Wild West past behind and making a commitment to becoming urban.

Watts said she thinks the move can happen within three years, though she won't have a timeline or even a cost until staff finalize a report on it in the next few weeks.

But she said with all the development already happening in the area, it's vital the city have a presence there.

Thom said having city hall in the central district would make it far easier for people to connect with city services, because it's so convenient to transit. The success of the SFU campus has shown him that.

"We thought that of the students there, 50 per cent would use transit. It turns out 80 per cent are using transit."

The push to move city hall downtown is the latest step in Watts' efforts since she was elected to give Surrey a different image and to grapple with its status as a real city, not just a bedroom suburb.

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