

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The development of regional town centres has been a priority for planners and politicians, in Greater Vancouver since the mid-1970s. Regional town centres are intended as places where a wide variety of uses and activities are concentrated, including employment, retail, civic and cultural services, and high-density housing. They are part of a regional strategy which values, among other priorities, the protection of agricultural and ecologically significant landscapes, and the promotion of a more efficient urban transportation system. In recent years, *Surrey City Centre* has been re-designated into something higher than a regional town centre, yet below Vancouver's central business district. Rebranded as Surrey Metro Centre, it is intended that this district be developed as a second-tier "downtown" for Greater Vancouver, serving the rapidly growing South of Fraser sub-region.

The purpose of this report is to examine the historical development of Surrey City Centre and to look for quantitative evidence that either supports or problematizes the notion that it is becoming the region's second "downtown". The analysis assumes that urban development is a process driven primarily by economic demand. Concepts from neoclassical economics, urban geography and suburban planning are used to formulate the framework through which to compare the characteristics of a suburban mixed-use centre to those of a traditional CBD. In particular, the research seeks to apply principles derived from the monocentric model to study a suburban, polycentric context.

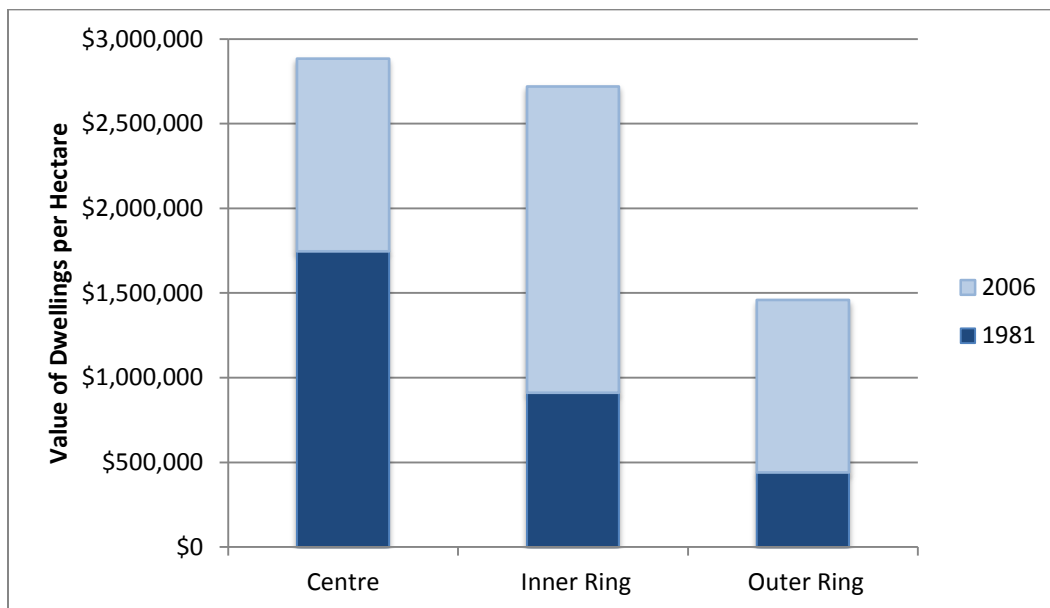
Research Question: *How do the housing and household characteristics of Surrey's regional town centre compare to those one would expect to find associated with a traditional CBD?*

Methods

Data was collected from three types of sources. Quantitative analysis of tract-level census data was used to examine changes in household and dwelling characteristics from 1981 to 2006. To support the quantitative analysis, academic literature was used to provide a theoretical framework, and government documents and case-related literature was reviewed to provide a historical analysis of the case study.

Results

The analysis found moderate support for the idea that certain principles of the monocentric model can be applied to a suburban, polycentric context, and that Surrey Centre is an appropriate example of this application. Residential densities were generally found to be higher nearer the centre, though the gap between the City Centre and surrounding tracts appears to have narrowed over the course of the study period. Similarly property value density was highest near the centre, but the difference with surrounding tracts narrowed over time, as shown in the figure below.



These density and land value figures suggest that land values are nominally higher near the City Centre, but not dramatically higher as to spur the large volume of high-density development necessary to achieve the desired transformation.

The analysis found some evidence that households are taking on more urban-like characteristics near the centre, particularly smaller household size, fewer children and slightly higher proportion of adults of professional age. Additionally, housing size, cost and income data aligned well with the principles of the monocentric model; households were wealthier and lived in larger, more expensive homes nearer the periphery, and vice versa for the centre.

Finally, the analysis found evidence that transit mode share is gradually higher with proximity to the centre, where the rapid transit stations are located, but that there had not been a significant shift in mode share over the last 10 years of the study period. The rapid transit network currently terminates in the City Centre, the north-west corner of the city; most of the city is not connected to its centre by rapid transit. Therefore, it is likely that the current extent of the transit system has reached the limit of its ability to influence the dynamics of development in Surrey City Centre.

In summary, there is some evidence to suggest that Surrey City Centre is developing into an important suburban mixed-use centre, showing a few characteristics typically associated with a CBD; however, to consider the district to be a second-tier CBD appears to be premature based on both the quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Recommendations

In light of planning priorities that promote compact housing, the protection of agricultural and environmentally significant lands and the development of high density suburban centres, while

promoting alternative modes of transportation, as well as in light of the findings of this research, the following recommendations are offered.

- 1. Continue to support the protection of agricultural and environmentally significant lands on the periphery.**
- 2. Consider measures to discourage or restrict the development of office uses in low-density employment lands on the periphery and to encourage offices uses to locate in Surrey City Centre.**
- 3. Continue to promote the proposed expansion of the rapid transit network further east and south into Surrey and surrounding communities.**
- 4. Plan for the long-term evolution of existing neighbourhoods adjacent to the City Centre.**
- 5. Continue to promote well-designed development that contributes to the attractiveness and desirability of the City Centre.**