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PH.D. THESIS

*STRATEGIC PLANNING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: METRO VANCOUVER
EXPERIENCE*

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Since the development of New Public Management, we have seen the introduction of many innovative management tools focused on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations in addressing complex policy challenges. Strategic management emerges as a central approach among these tools, equipping public managers with valuable insights to navigate the intricate landscape of modern public administration. This landscape often entails grappling with numerous conflicting political issues and practical dilemmas from external and internal stakeholders.

Strategic planning is at strategic management's core, underscoring the importance of public managers taking on multiple roles. These roles encompass conducting comprehensive assessments of both internal operations and the external environment within their organizations. Such a holistic approach is crucial for achieving organizational goals and fulfilling missions, all while effectively meeting the demands of external and internal stakeholders.

Theoretically and empirically, this thesis aims to offer a snapshot of the comprehensive planning process in the local government of British Columbia and, specifically, the regional district of Metro Vancouver. The thesis starts with analyzing the existing layers of government and regulation in Canada, British Columbia, and regional districts, including the legal framework regulations, the role of politics, and strategic planning at the local level.

The thesis is split up into eight chapters :

The **first chapter** speaks to the motivation and hypotheses; the summary of the nine hypotheses can be found below :

Hypothesis #1 In principle, municipal growth and development of communities should not be done randomly or by preference. There should be a cohesive and guided strategic development plan with multiple consultations with internal and external stakeholders offering their advice and ideas.

The purpose of this research is also to picture the working relationship between levels of government and see how strategic plans overlap. Specifically, I will look at Metro Vancouver's regional district and local government. **Hypothesis #2:** There is an overlap between Metro Vancouver Strategies and Local Government Strategies.

Hypothesis #3 The next part of the proposed thesis is to evaluate how these strategies and plans are implemented and used. We can attempt to understand if there is a correlation between the size of local governments and the use or number of implemented strategies. The hypothesis is that the bigger the municipality, the more council resolutions and meetings.

I will evaluate the approved Council strategic objectives and approved resolutions in each local government to see which of the categories of the council strategic objectives are the most used. **Hypothesis #4**— Housing will have the highest use of resolutions by Councils in Metro Vancouver.

Hypothesis #5 Organizational performance will be measured by the relationship between the number of Council-approved resolutions and the number of meetings; the hypothesis is that the ratio will be higher for larger local governments vs smaller local governments. As such, I will be able to note efficiency and performance.

Hypothesis #6—Through qualitative content analysis and a survey of all local governments in Metro Vancouver, find out what the challenges in strategic planning in local government and the low-scoring aspects of planning in Metro Vancouver will be: Feasibility studies, monitoring, performance data, and evaluation steps in the strategic planning process are very low in Metro Vancouver and are the problems in strategic planning.

In theory, all strategic plans should have a clear list of strategic goals, values, a mission, and a vision. However, the way strategic plans are formulated is uncertain. My **Hypothesis #7**: The creation of the strategic plan (OCP) is run through all levels internally, with stakeholder engagements in the development stages.

Through creating strategic plans with council strategic objectives, Staff and Council now have direction on how to proceed with future applications. **Hypothesis #8** is that reporting performance to the Council and the Public regularly is essential and done regularly.

Hypothesis #9 states that there is a relationship between local government's strategic objectives and managers' roles, which creates a sense of responsibility.

Chapter 2 offers a context analysis of the existing legislation, international influences, and the framework of the different levels of government that play a role in the creation of the environment in which local governments function. I analyzed all three levels of government: the Federal, Provincial and local governments. I dug deeper into the specifics of the Metro Vancouver regional district and went down to the specifics of each member. The discussion of the legislative requirements in which strategic documents are formulated focuses on common goals at the local government level for the region and the province. This then segways into the

discussion on how all local governments in the province of British Columbia are legislatively required to provide a strategic plan in which the local government can function and plan to achieve the local goals and incorporate the regional goals within the document. This was done through :

- **Regional growth strategy (RGS)** is a regional vision that commits the incorporated local governments, local governmental groups, and regional districts to meet specific common social, economic, and environmental objectives. It is a top-down approach introduced by the region and presented to all member groups of the local government for acceptance and adoption. (Ministry of Community Services, 2016)
- **Regional Context Statement (RCS)** is embedded within a city's official community plan (OCP), establishing the acceptance and relationship between the regional and municipal growth strategies. (Ministry of Community Services, 2016)
- **The implementation agreement (IA) is the agreement between the regional district and other levels of government that specifies** how certain aspects of the growth strategy will be implemented, such as upgrading roads, sewers, hospitals, and parks. (Ministry of Community Services, 2016)

Chapter 3 is the theoretical framework of the thesis:

The main pillars which were depicted and defined within the chapters are:

1. Strategy:
2. Strategic Management
3. Strategic Planning
4. Effectiveness in Local Government
5. Performance
6. Municipal Planning
7. Strategy Content

Chapter 4 addresses the methodological framework based on the theories in the subsequent chapters to test the proposed hypotheses. This study uses qualitative data collection, quantitative analysis, and participatory approaches. The purpose of the thesis was to gather enough information to detail a comprehensive view of the planning process within Metro Vancouver. To gather enough significant data, I proposed using a mix of methodologies.

The first was a qualitative review of each municipality's existing strategic planning documents and council meetings, which included the strategic objectives adopted by the council through a resolution. I categorized all of the newly adopted council directives (content analysis). To further this, I enumerated the use of each strategic objective within the Council meeting and published reports for the year 2023. To continue in the same stream of methodology, I then did a case study review on the only charter City within Metro Vancouver, which is Vancouver; this is important as the Vancouver charter pre-dates the provincial legislation, which means that Vancouver is under pre-existing rules, powers and regulations and we will see how this affects strategic planning.

A quantitative method was applied, and a survey was sent to all local governments within the metropolitan area of Vancouver; as such, this would be the data needed to compare the extracted data equally. Lastly, there will be a participatory approach to review my research results. To do so, I will have a focus group and a semi-structured interview to review the results. I will explain each of the three methods in the coming paragraphs. The survey questionnaire I crafted for this study comprises 59 questions. These questions were formulated based on the literature review and aim to capture the essential data accurately. The survey is divided into three parts, shown in the table below; a complete copy can be found in the annex.

One semi-structured interview was conducted during the research with a professional policymaker who works at the provincial level (Metro Vancouver). The interview had

predetermined questions with a specific starting point for the questioning and then branched on the follow-up questions that came to mind and how the discussion naturally turned out. The original questions were sent beforehand so he could understand where the line of questioning would go.

The focus was the last step in the study, where I led a group of eight people through an open discussion. The objective was to validate and discuss the survey results that the local governments completed. The discussion had some key areas that I wanted to garner conversation toward; however, it did have a spontaneous aspect where I left the group to carry forward ideas and steer the discussion. The focus group lasted one hour, and I had some questions, but the main goal was to review the survey results; see the handout in the appendices of this thesis. The idea was to allow for a free-flowing discussion, which can be stimulating in itself from different thoughts and experiences from the group.

Chapter 5 of the Thesis presented the results and discussions on the survey and document analysis. As such, I presented the survey results for all 59 questions. Within the section of the document analysis, I first reviewed the Metro Vancouver Regional Strategic Plan, which had eight regional management plans. I was able to highlight each important aspect within each plan.

I continued my analysis of the specific demographics of each local government. This was done to better understand the different constraints and sizes of the local governments that make up the regional district. I separated them by type of subdivision (City, Village, Island Municipality, District Municipality), then went on with the population as of 2022, the land size of the local government and the density (population vs land size) and lastly, the number of regional parks which existing in the local government. With the data, I could better understand the outliers, which show the strengths, weaknesses, and oddities, before analyzing the Council's Strategic Goals and Priorities.

I reviewed the Council strategic objectives of each local government within the Metro Vancouver regional district. Most communities had the Council's strategic goals and strategies as separate living documents on their website. Some objectives were not physically published on the website, and I had to retrieve the document published through a Council report in the months after the election. Nonetheless, I was able to recover all of the Council strategies. Most local governments had five council strategic objectives, whereas others had only four.

I categorized each objective into the following groups :

1. Environmental and Climate-Oriented Goals,
2. Housing and Livability,
3. Economic Goals
4. Transportation
5. Infrastructure and Services
6. Safety and Resilient Communities
7. Community Well-Being.

I then reviewed how many times each of the categories came up within the proposed Council strategic objectives for the current elected councils within Metro Vancouver. This gave me a list of the most popular resolutions within the Councils. That being said, I then wanted to test the validity of which resolutions were the most used within the 2023 Council year.

To determine the use for each local government, I analyzed all of the Council reports that came forth and were published in agendas; these are reports that went to a regular council meeting, special council meeting, or committee of the whole. I did not include anything that was in-camera as those minutes and reports are not made public and could only be accessed through a freedom of information request, and even then, those minutes and reports are

blacklined. I only took the final approved resolution from each project, as some projects require multiple approvals for bylaw adoption; an example is a project at the City of Port Moody that took eight council resolutions in a year to be adopted finally. As such, I counted the eight resolutions as one; many times, applicants would return to make changes to projects and policies adopted in previous months. Therefore, I would only count this as the exact resolution.

In most cases, the reports that go to the Council have a brief paragraph which notes how this project or plan aligns with the Council's strategic objectives. This line of research is to see how important or how many projects come before the committee that meet the council's strategic objectives, which have been laid out for one year. I have chosen to review the year 2023 and have gone in no particular order in reviewing the public reports available through the local government website. This aligns with Andrews and Boyne (2010), who debated that performance is tied to policy adoption. Therefore, by looking specifically at the council resolutions and adoption, we can see the performance of each local government.

The document analysis results were then tested in Chapter 6, which started with Cronbach's Alpha. To test the reliability of the answers in the survey, based on Cronbach's Alpha, we could conclude that the result of 0.94 is reliable and can be depended on, as it is at the higher end of the spectrum.

Moreover, I have also calculated the mean and the standard deviation. The results also show that the responses were excellent and very positive. I then took both results from the Document Analysis, which looked at the specific Council Strategic Objectives chosen by the Council and the Use of Each Council Strategic Objective per Category. This verified which Council strategic objective was the most valuable to the community in terms of use, specifically which projects were the most approved.

To better understand the results that have been presented, I chose to host a focus group, which are panels of individuals brought together to discuss different topics and provide valuable feedback about the information and themes provided. I also chose to do a semi-structured interview, which lasted half an hour. The interview was conducted with a general manager within the regional district (Metro Vancouver) to discuss the proposed research results and how this can be better implemented or if there is any feedback I could apply to the results. The focus group reviewed the survey results, and the Interview reviewed and discussed the document analysis and the Council's strategic objectives.

I chose to lastly present data through a case study of the City and Vancouver, specifically the Vancouver Plan, a long-term strategic document published to drive the city's strategic planning. I chose the City of Vancouver as it has the largest population within the metropolitan region, a total of 706,012 people. It is 7th in land mass at 115 km² and is first in density, measuring 6139 people per km². The other essential attribute of the City of Vancouver is that it is a Charter City. Canada has only 5 Charter Cities (Saint John, Montreal, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Lloydminster). In Vancouver, the original charter of incorporation dates back to 1886 (Vancouver Incorporation Act). The Vancouver Incorporation Act was amended and replaced throughout the 20th Century. However, the original document predates the provincial Community Charter and the Local Government Act. The Vancouver Charter that we know today was passed in 1953 and does give the Council certain powers which other Councils in the area do not have under the Provincial legislation, such as:

1. Taxation,
2. Banning of certain fuels (natural gas),
3. Construction requirements through city building code,
4. Affordable and special needs housing,
5. Heritage conservation,
6. Vacancy tax, and,
7. Powers for water, sewers and drains.

This thesis should help comprehend strategic planning within local governments in Metro Vancouver and create a framework for other research. Previous chapters defined strategy as how organizations react to their environments (markets, target audience), constantly improving their services and performance to grow and thrive. (Boyne & Walker, 2004). Throughout the analysis, we can see that all local governments aim to provide services for their residents. However, another significant aspect was preserving the existing environment as well. There was a heavy focus on the natural environment at all levels of government. We see the importance of producing and preserving as well.

Based on the research, survey, and document analysis outcomes, we can conclude that strategic planning in local governments in Metro Vancouver is a tool. Some local governments are at different levels in the implementation; some are also doing the bare minimum due to the available resources and size of the local government. Nonetheless, we see a baseline due to the legal requirements to have at least one strategic long-range plan available within each local government.

We could include strategic plans, documents, and decisions when defining strategy. Boyne and Walker define strategy as a simple improvement to public services (Boyne & Walker, 2004), which every local government strives to do. Osborne and Gebler note that the efficiency and effectiveness of the services offered within the public sector then roll over into strategy creation (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Do we then define strategy as making the budget and allocating resources to specific areas? If so, then all local governments apply a strategy at this level. Mulgan defines strategy as using resources to achieve objectives and goals (Mulgan, 2009). Overall, when looking at the communities' strategic plans, we can say they exist. Whether local governments define strategy or not, they use strategy to make decisions. There are Council objectives in all local governments; there is a strategic plan and a road map. However, based on the findings, the concern is that there are difficulties in transferring the

importance of the strategies and goals throughout the organization. This is where it is essential to have strong strategic management to ensure the rollout and implementation of the strategy. This was a clear issue in the research as many local governments implement a strategy, but the management could translate into performance management.

At the beginning of the Thesis, I expressed the Hypothesis in **Chapter 7** I reviewed the Hypothesis and provided the recommendations:

***Hypothesis #1** In principle, local government growth and development of communities should not be done randomly or by preference. There should be a cohesive and guided strategic development plan with multiple consultations with internal and external stakeholders offering their advice and ideas.* This was confirmed in chapter 2.2, which reviewed the provincial context when we reviewed the legislative requirements under which local governments function. Moreover, in Chapter 5.2, *Document Analysis*, we see how the regional strategies overlay onto the local government strategies and how the functionality of the regional board and the powers it has on the existing crown corporations.

***Hypothesis #2** is that there is an overlap between Metro Vancouver Strategies and Local Government Strategies.* Interestingly enough, again, on paper, the current governance model is that there is overlap with the board of directors being the mayors and elected officials; but, we see that within the survey question #49 states, does your local government preserve and create intergovernmental relationships? This came out to 48% positive; just under half of the respondents answered yes to this; this could also be attributed to intergovernmental relationships between other local governments or, more than that, the federal level relations.

***Hypothesis #3** The hypothesis is that the bigger the local governments, the more council resolutions and the more meetings.* This hypothesis was incorrect; if we define the biggest local government by population, we would mark them as Vancouver, Surrey and

Burnaby. Only Surrey is within the top three for most meetings; however, in reviewing the process charts, many things are done by delegating Council powers to staff and other committees. Council comes to approve the project or bylaw resolutions. This is why there are fewer meetings; however, another issue is not the number of meetings but the length of meetings, which sometimes span out more than 4 hours, especially for Vancouver. A report from CBC News (a provincial and national news station) stated that many Council meetings within BC in specific cities last more than four hours. Of the list provided, 11 local governments were within Metro Vancouver. (McElroy, 2022)

Hypothesis #4 Housing will have the highest use of resolutions by Councils in Metro Vancouver. This was straightforward due to the circumstances within the Metropolitan area, as the lack of housing has been a great concern over the years. This could be considered tunnel vision, as Vabo suggests in his research. Within the document analysis, I noted that most resolutions were in Housing and Livability.

The relationship between the number of Council-approved resolutions and the number of meetings will measure organizational performance. **Hypothesis #5** is that the ratio will be higher for larger local governments than for smaller ones. We support this hypothesis using Andrew and Boyne's performance and organizational capacity theory. The top two local governments with the highest number of resolutions per council meeting are the two largest in population: Vancouver, with 19 resolutions per meeting, and Surrey, with 11 resolutions per meeting.

Hypothesis #6—Through qualitative content analysis and a survey of all local governments in Metro Vancouver, find out what the challenges in strategic planning in local government and the low-scoring aspects of planning in Metro Vancouver will be: *Feasibility studies, monitoring, performance data, and evaluation steps in the strategic planning process are very low in Metro Vancouver and are the problems in strategic planning.*

In theory, all strategic plans should have a clear list of strategic goals, values, a mission and a vision. The way strategic plans are formulated, however, is still being determined. My **Hypothesis #7:** Creating the strategic plan (OCP) is run through all levels internally and stakeholder engagements in the development stages. Questions 7 – 11 in the survey speak to who is centrally involved in developing the strategic plans; it is with confidence that we can acknowledge that citizens, department heads, senior managers, the City Manager, and the Mayor were all centrally involved. I would say that the Council is “sometimes” involved centrally, as it only scored 8/14. When taking the example of the case study for the City of Vancouver, which had a total of 52,480 engagement touchpoints and 25,000 survey responses, we can deduce that even at the citizen level, there were engagements at the stakeholder level.

Hypothesis #8 is that regularly reporting performance to the Council and the Public is essential and routinely done. In the survey responses, we see that 92% of respondents noted that they report performance to the Council regularly, which on the Likert scale came to “always.” When it came to the question, does your local government regularly report performance to the public? We see a 28% or 1.4 score on the Likert scale, which translates to “never.”

Hypothesis #9 is that there is a link between strategic objectives and managers to create a sense of responsibility. Poister (2005) noted a positive relationship with how local governments have grown to achieve their goals and objectives by creating a link between strategic objectives so managers to develop a sense of responsibility; the hypothesis was tied to the evaluations of the department heads based on the accomplishments of the Council’s strategic objectives or the strategic plan. The survey shows that 79% of managers are evaluated on the success of implementing or accomplishing the strategic plan.

If we were to break down a strategy's lifecycle, based on the survey results, we would have a vision and mission which is implemented through the 20 to 30-year plans; furthermore, we see regional plans overlapping with the local government level. This creates a steady vision the local government could build if no one is in place. We then would gather the information specific to the local government, the accurate articulations and day-to-day needs. Based on that information, the Council's strategic objectives are formulated and published to all staff and the public. The implementation of the strategy is at the discretion of the Council and the recommendations of staff, which focus more on specific strategic goals, as we see in the document analysis results. The lack or missing item is the evaluation and reporting to the public and stakeholders other than just Council. Within the text, I make recommendations on:

#1 Reporting: Reporting can be done by publishing quarterly reports on what has been approved in what way and what ongoing projects are happening.

#2 Participation in Strategic Document Creation: Create systems in which random surveying and interactions can be done through popup touch points in heavy-traffic areas such as a grocery store or school. Simplify the discussions and ask direct and easy-to-answer questions.

#3 Evaluations and adjustments are always necessary. Strategies and council directives must not remain set in stone; they can be moulded and amended to fit the changing world.

#4 Limit time in Council meetings – Create more delegated powers and ward systems, limit the number of speakers, create committees.

#5 Create partnerships between local governments – The existing Overlap between Council Strategic Objectives can create shared goals and objectives.

#6 Take an inventory – As seen in the Case Study of the City of Vancouver

In **Chapter 8**, I review the limitations and potential future research.

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