

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Resilience the new buzzword at Vancouver's City Hall

The City of Vancouver has joined an elite clique of like-minded municipalities in the 100 Resilient Cities movement, an initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation, intended to help cities become ... well ... more resilient.

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This week, Mayor Gregor Robertson introduced the city's new Chief Resilience Officer, Katie McPherson, a city staffer who has been working with Vancouver's emergency planning office. In that capacity, she led a risk assessment for oil spills and was involved in the city's responses to the 2015 bunker fuel spill in English Bay and a portside container fire. In fact, what she will be doing as Chief Resilience Officer sounds much like what she has been doing in the emergency planning department.

But resilience is more than recovery from earthquakes, fires and floods, we're told by 100 Resilient Cities, but encompasses other stresses cities face such as high unemployment, overtaxed public transit systems, violence, food and water shortage and, of course, the mother of all challenges, climate change. Indeed, so vague are the parameters of the job that it could include anything.

But before we get into the issue of jargon versus substance, we must address the matter of foreign influence in civic affairs.

Vancouver's chief resilience officer position will be funded by a two-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. If that doesn't strike Vancouverites as unusual, how would they feel about a city economic development officer funded by the Cato Institute? Should a foreign entity have its own paid employee working at City Hall? Of course, some critics would argue such a relationship already exists through Vision Vancouver's ties to the Tides Foundation.

Leaving aside the questionable role a U.S. foundation now plays in directing Vancouver's policy agenda, resilience may strike the pragmatic among us as the latest buzzword for bureaucrats rather than a workable concept. Vancouver is already invested in Sustainable Cities International. Presumably, if a city is sustainable, it will be resilient, or vice-versa.

At a news conference, neither Mayor Robertson, nor Ms. McPherson nor 100 Resilient Cities director Jeb Brugmann was able to satisfy reporters' curiosity as to what exactly this was all about.

“It’s about really ensuring that there are no gaps,” Robertson offered. In that case, we are talking about vulnerability rather than resilience. And, besides, addressing those gaps — that is, ensuring city departments are not operating in silos — would surely be the responsibility of Vancouver City Manager Sadhu Johnston.

To make resilience mean something, we need indicators to measure it as well as a transparent way to determine if efforts undertaken in its name are successful.