



Enhancing Student Life

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Bill 20: A promising first step for UBC students.

I was surprised to read the opinion piece by Metro Vancouver Chair Lois Jackson calling Metro's unilaterally developed bylaws for UBC "progress toward increasing accountability," especially given that those bylaws would have moved control of UBC's institutional land to a body on which the Alma Mater Society (AMS), the official student society of UBC Vancouver, has no formal representation. When those proposed bylaws were announced last fall, AMS Council responded quite forcefully.

On December 2, 2009, AMS Council, representing more than 46,000 students, unanimously approved a resolution taking a stance in response to Metro's proposed bylaws for UBC. The resolution recognized that "local control over institutional lands and buildings is necessary for the preservation of academic freedom, the enhancement of the student experience, and the development of UBC as a globally significant university that is able to provide a high quality of education." The Graduate Student Society passed the same resolution shortly thereafter. Both of these resolutions followed a message from UBC President Stephen Toope to the UBC community expressing the University's concerns with Metro's proposal.

Metro's proposed bylaws were developed without any consultation with the University community—a practice that is contrary to what students are used to. At the time, we had a campus plan for institutional land already in place. It had been developed in consultation with students. Students had a basic understanding about the relationship between Metro and UBC: Metro would regulate family-housing development while UBC, in consultation with the University community, would regulate institutional and academic development; however, with the proposed bylaws, Metro was going to unilaterally take control of both. This would mean that in the likely event that the University wanted to build a research facility that did not fit within Metro's zoning bylaws, the University would have to apply to Metro for a zoning change. In effect, this gave the Metro Board the sole discretion to decide what kind of research our students could do on this campus. It could also result in an unhealthy politicization of the University's research decisions by municipal politicians. This went right against the fundamental principle of academic freedom at UBC, and was found to be unacceptable by the AMS Council.

In addition to preserving academic freedom, AMS Council values student engagement in the governance and land-use framework of UBC. Bill 20 is a promising first step in this direction.

Bill 20 transfers Metro's authority over UBC's land use development to the Minister of Rural and Community Development, in consultation with the Ministry of Advanced Education. The Minister will receive the Land Use Plan, as well as amendments to it from the UBC Board of Governors, to which UBC Vancouver students elect two of the 21 members. These two students also sit on AMS Council, and are entitled to sit on the Board's Properties and Planning Committee. This is the Committee that makes recommendations to the Board on the content of the Land Use Plan after reviewing the campus consultation results.

The consultation process is delivered by the Campus and Community Planning Department, which has a strong relationship with the AMS. As a standard practice, they regularly consult AMS Council, its Executives, and its University and External Relations Committee.

Additionally, during consultations, students have the opportunity to attend workshops and submit feedback online for any land-use plan changes. Furthermore, the AMS has a seat on several planning committees across campus as well as on the University Neighbourhood Association.

Considering all of these opportunities to provide input, students and the AMS are well positioned to be heard on procedural and substantive aspects of land-use issues from their inception to the moment they are sent to the Minister for approval. Contrary to that, at the 37-member, 125-vote Metro Vancouver Board, UBC students' only formal influence is through the single elected representative for the entire area called Electoral Area A, who has only one vote on Metro's Board. Additionally, Metro Vancouver has previously stated that its long-standing policy is to no longer govern electoral areas. So, how can Ms. Jackson claim that Metro Vancouver's proposed bylaws would have brought more accountability to students when UBC already provides a much higher level of student engagement on land use issues?

Additionally, Ms. Jackson's comparison of us to other universities is misleading as our campus is unique, and our challenges with governance will require solutions emerging from our own community and not ones imposed by Metro Vancouver. We enjoy the benefit of a diverse community of faculty, staff, alumni, students, as well as several unique neighbourhoods in and around the campus. We have our own unique opportunities and challenges when it comes to interfaces between student and family residents.

Our interests may not always coincide, but we share many common values such as academic freedom, inclusion and sustainable living. These common values will help us come to a governance framework that will allow our community to prosper, and support UBC's stance as a global centre of excellence in teaching and research.

While Bill 20 is a promising first step, we recognize that it is a temporary framework, and by no means the ultimate solution. We expect that the Provincial Government will announce a process to address the governance issue at UBC soon. We understand that, unlike Metro's past proposals, it will be a complex process and will require thorough consultation with all stakeholders in the community. And that is all the more reason to get started sooner rather than later.

Establishing a permanent governance structure will take time, but the AMS will certainly be a key player in the process as soon as it starts. We are optimistic that the end result will yield new opportunities for student engagement and leadership on campus and in the community. In the meantime, Bill 20 will serve us well enough as an interim framework to promote a robust and real student voice in UBC's land-use and governance processes.



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