

West End takes a long view for future success

Business leader spearheads award-winning campaign to help revitalize charming 'old Vancouver'

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VANCOUVER SUN

Stephen Regan could almost pass these days for one of those smiling statues in the A-mazing Laughter public art installation at English Bay.

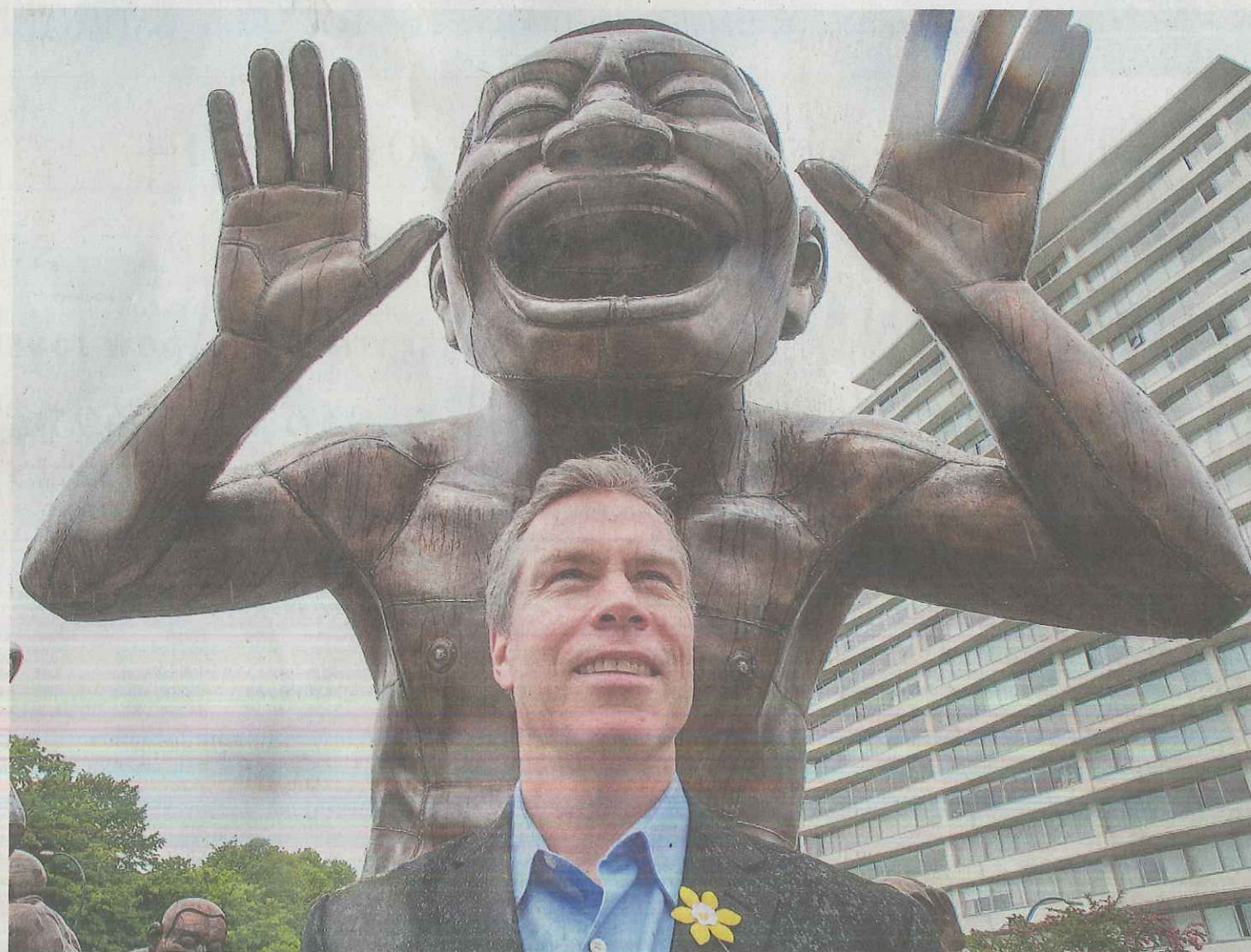
Life at home is "busy good" for the 48-year-old father of three energetic daughters — 14, 12 and "almost 11" — and the same can be said for work, especially after the clever Three Great Streets, One Amazing Neighbourhood rebranding campaign rolled out recently by the West End Business Improvement Association, captured a prestigious B.C. BIA marketing award.

And, as the executive director of WEBIA notes, the coveted Best in the West honour comes at an opportune time for the city's second-oldest neighbourhood, especially with a revitalized community plan in the works and a growing appetite to address the retail mix and perceived shortcomings along Denman, Davie and Robson streets.

The Vancouver Sun asked Regan about some of the challenges facing West End businesses, and the highlights and trends he's noticed since moving over from the tourism industry two years ago to sit in WEBIA's big chair:

Q Does it seem a bit strange that with residents and tourists flooding the West End for all its restaurants, festivals, clubs, the beach, bike rentals and events at Stanley Park, your businesses would even have to worry about staying busy?

A Believe it or not, it does slow down. There's a lot of traffic downtown, but there's also aggressive competition for the consumer dollar. The consumer has so many choices and our job is to steer them to the West End. Making it a bit more difficult is that the outlying malls have done a superb job of reinventing the shopping experience and attracting name brands. They've



Stephen Regan, the executive director of the West End Business Improvement Association, stands in front of the A-mazing Laughter statues at Davie and Denman. Regan, 48, has spearheaded the West End's award-winning marketing campaign that aims to steer consumers into the city's second-oldest neighbourhood.

ARLEN REDEKOP/PNG

almost copied the downtown formula. The free mall parking and easy access to transportation hasn't hurt them either. But our commercial streets represent the authentic retail experience: diverse, dynamic and home to many one-of-a-kind businesses. ... As for people flow, in the West End our two busiest events actually overlap — Honda Celebration of Light (July 26-Aug. 2) and Pride Week (July 28-Aug. 4) — during a typically busy tourism/cruise ship season. The plan is to get the right events and retail mix so it's busy year-round.

Q It is an interesting neighbourhood in that you have a lot of families, a lot of seniors, and a large, young gay and lesbian community that is said to favour a 24/7 party atmosphere versus worrying about quiet time. Your thoughts?

A A lot of those differences surfaced in the community planning process. There's a lot of give-and-take needed. We think the city landed on a good balance of interests. The BIA's mission is to brand, revitalize and promote the West End. We saw more density

and ownership as a key driver to bring more customers to businesses. Not everything we asked for landed in the plan. We needed to give up things, or accept things, to make for a better neighbourhood at the end of the day.

Q Is there one change you'd like to see happen sooner rather than later?

A For sure. There is a downtown bus service review underway. I'd like to see a new area for transit buses to layover. Currently, buses have a break in their routes at the foot of Davie near Denman

One of the common complaints right now is about multiple buses parked along curb lanes that could potentially host patios or parklets. The buses are valued but they basically block the view of English Bay and other businesses in the area by creating a wall. There is a loop proposed that would create a better place for a layover and liberate one of the most amazing sections of city street for public enjoyment.

Q What's one of the biggest challenges facing a new business setting up in the West End?

A Our building stock is aging. Some of these buildings, built in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, require a lot of work and money to bring them up to date. City development and permitting processes, though necessary, are sometimes lengthy to the point that needed investments are delayed. Small- and medium-sized businesses, like the ones found in the West End, are hard pressed to pay rent for three, four or six months on a lease and not be able to open. We're working closely with the city on these issues so that it won't be a huge detriment. The flip side, I suppose, is that a lot of smaller retailers like the charm of 'old Vancouver' and are willing to take some risks.

Q Anything that has surprised you about reaction to the community plan?

A People love the commercial streets. We're always reminded how much people care about this neighbourhood, but we had one person put up several big posters on a number of vacant Denman properties recently asking people to write down what they'd like to see the space used for. He, or she, then went a step further and compiled all the data and submitted it to us. It was submitted anonymously. A bakery and bookstore on Denman were clearly the most popular. Our own retail analysis suggests these types of specialty food and retail would really help drive more demand for all businesses. There is a chemistry, and a synergy, to finding the right retail mix for a commercial street. At the end of the day there has to be demand for goods and services to justify the rents. So when you have people doing surveys and basically doing what the BIA does, that's pretty neat and shows the level of community passion.

This interview has been edited for length. Read the full version online at vancouver.sun.com.
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