Strategic Plan, 2026-28

Approved by the VHS Board

2 April 2026

Vancouver Historical Society

Est. 1936

Land Acknowledgement

- The VHS acknowledges that our home, the City of Vancouver, was built on territory taken from the three local First Nations, the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh).

Message from the President

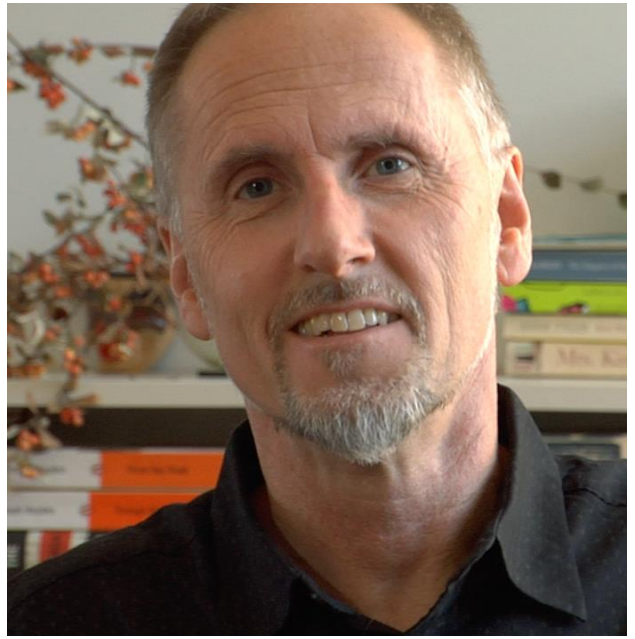
To our membership and the communities of Vancouver,

It has been my great privilege to serve as President of the VHS Board in 2025 and 2026. I have been involved with local history groups for many years and was brought onto this board by the late Bob McDonald. He believed, as I do, that a public-facing historical organization can give depth to what we experience in Vancouver while addressing misconceptions, roadblocks to better historical education, and increasing public engagement in historical conversations.

Many cultural organizations in the Metro area struggled and collapsed during Covid, and it became necessary to consider what the VHS would need to do to ensure that the organization successfully reached its centenary in 2036.

The result is our first Strategic Plan. This document outlines the process and results involved, along with the goals the Plan sets for the organization. It will guide successive boards and renew their commitment to integrity, service, and the mission of the VHS.

Sincerely,



John Belshaw
VHS Board President

The Vancouver Historical Society

The Vancouver Historical Society is a volunteer-run non-profit organization, established in 1936 to promote and present histories of Vancouver for and in the interests of a large and diverse public.

The VHS includes a dues-paying membership of nearly 300 individuals. It hosts presentations on the fourth Thursday of eight months of the year (January, February, March, April, May, September, October, November) which are open to the public and always free to attend. Presentations are broadcast live on our YouTube channel and subsequently archived there for viewing. The VHS also hosts ticketed events including an Incorporation Day luncheon annually in April, field trips (typically in the summer), and occasional special events.

Over the course of its ninety years, the VHS has sponsored publications, the acquisition of resources for the City of Vancouver Archives, the identification of structures and places of historical importance, and the development of local history curricula and projects at every level of the public education system.

Under the BC Societies Act, the VHS board has a responsibility to act in the best interests of the society and to care for membership fees and legacies. It reports annually to its membership.

The Strategic Planning Process

In 2025 the Board agreed to undertake a strategic planning process with an eye to reviewing the purposes, projects, and practices of the VHS to ensure that these were current and in alignment. The aim is to produce a guide that keeps the VHS on task, accountable, and effective.

There is always a great deal of energy and enthusiasm on the Board of the VHS. The many backgrounds, skills, opinions, and interests is an asset … and sometimes a drawback. There are very often too many great new ideas to pursue effectively and there is little appetite to dampen individual enthusiasms. The effect has been that a lot of goals are pursued but not as many captured. Fundamentals such as ‘how do we attract new members?’ or ‘what can we do to improve the experience of our presentation guests?’, attract many theories but few systematic answers.

The President (who has experience developing strategic plans at the institutional level) took the lead in this process. Dedicated meetings were held on these dates:

- 3 June 2025
- 8 September 2025
- 24 October 2025
- 22 January 2026

The Strategic Planning Process

Drafts were circulated among all Directors at each stage of the process. A consensus approach was followed throughout with an eye to producing a useful document that reflected an agreeable breadth of views. In April 2026 this document was posted on the VHS website for comment from the membership.

The VHS 2026 Strategic Plan is, in all likelihood, the *only* strategic plan that the VHS has ever developed. It is, thus, an experiment, one that contains assumptions.

First among these is that not everything will nor should be attempted at once. Initiatives will be rolled out on a quarterly basis to ensure they have good traction from the start, a dedicated lead person, some measurable outcomes (in most cases), and – where appropriate – the potential to become ongoing features of the VHS's practices.

The Strategic Planning Process

Second, we assume that subsequent Boards will in good faith respect the effort made by the current Directors and attempt to carry on with the process. Subsequent Boards will necessarily fine-tune and even overhaul the plan every two or three years.

The 2025-26 Directors also believe that the Plan will assist in the recruitment of new volunteers. It is a document that expresses not just values but ambitions. New personnel will share those while adding insights, opportunities, and innovations of their own.

In the organization's 90th year, we hope that this document will equip the VHS for success in the 21st century.

Mission

The VHS connects people to the many stories of Vancouver's past.

Values

These six values guide how the board makes decisions and acts in the execution of its duties.

We value Respect for Indigenous People, Lands, and Knowledge

We understand this place is much older than the city. What we call "Vancouver" is the ongoing historic outcome of thousands of years of human experience. It sits on the ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, whose history we acknowledge and respect.

We are committed to supporting the process of Truth and Reconciliation.

We value Curiosity and Lifelong Learning

We spark enquiry, encourage debate, and keep asking better questions about the past and its meanings today.

We seek to satisfy, entertain, and engage audiences who look to us to curate provocative and worthwhile perspectives on the histories of Vancouver.

We value Openness & Accessibility

We provide an open door with few price, physical, and digital barriers so that more people can access history, contribute knowledge, and use our resources.

Values

These six values guide how we make decisions and act in the execution of our duties, and we each share responsibility for upholding them as directors and members of the Historical Society

We value Integrity

We insist on integrity in everything we do as representatives of the VHS. Integrity in presentations, events, and partnerships that celebrate and critique, illuminate and (re)assess the past.

We value compelling presentations that are committed to ethical, rigorous, truthful research and engaging dialogue into Vancouver's history.

We value Diversity & Inclusion

We are committed to diverse and inclusive stories and membership.

We search for presenters, experts, and knowledge-sharers who amplify voices from the past & help us achieve an equitable program of lectures, walks, & other events.

We will advance histories that connect communities and audiences respectfully, while being resolute in our opposition to hate speech and actions of any kind.

We value Accountability & Transparency

We have an obligation to perform competently for our membership and the communities of Vancouver as a whole, stewarding the VHS into its second century as a respected and well-managed non-profit.

Strategic Goals & Activities

Five strategic goals have been identified arising from an analysis of VHS's strengths and challenges.

All strategic goals and activities set forth by the board must fit within the mission of the organization and be consistent with the VHS's values. The strategic activities listed here align with one or more of our stated goals.

Many of the strategic activities support overlapping goals. Repetition is intentional

Goal 1: An improved audience experience

We observed that:

- The social component of our eight annual public presentations is not as visible as it had been before Covid.
- Benefits of membership are unclear.
- The newsletter in increasingly an inefficient mode of communication.
- Membership retention is strong.
- VHS members are welcoming and open to new experiences.

Strategic Activities:

- *Increase/improve social component of presentations*
- *Host groundbreaking annual events (e.g.: trivia nights, historic menu dinners)*
- *Offer prizes/giveaways associated with publications or historic experiences*
- *Poll membership re topics/activities*
- *Explore history-oriented 'activity tours' (e.g.: cycle or zodiac tours)*
- *Secure VHS member discounts at history-oriented institutions and businesses.*

Goal 2: A larger and broader membership/ audience

We observed that:

- The membership is aging and younger members are underrepresented.
- All public arts/culture organizations reported a severe decline in audience size after Covid.
- Innovative programming attracts new faces.
- Some communities in Vancouver – neighbourhoods and demographics – have been underrepresented in programming and at the Board level.
- There are six post-secondary institutions with History programs in Metro Vancouver.
- There are a growing number of historical organizations in the city that align with unique communities.

Strategic Activities:

- *New kinds of events (e.g.: trivia nights, historic menu dinners, artifacts night)*
- *More and clearer membership benefits:*
  - *VHS member discounts*
  - *Discounts or free VHS event/fieldtrip*
  - *Research/Activity Grants available to members only*
- *Hold events in distinct communities*
- *Engage with community associations*
- *Send VHS director-historians into communities for 'VHS Presents'*
- *Build links with other local organizations and boost their social media*
- *Membership card or QR code using JoinIt*
- *Focus Newsletter on immediate events; use blasts more effectively; run blogs on website*

Goal 3: Greater interest in Vancouver history

We observed that:

- The original purpose of the VHS was to “promote” Vancouver history.
- Secondary and post-secondary programming rarely include courses on Vancouver history.
- There is a huge appetite for Vancouver history, evinced by the growth of walking tours, many historical or historical-adjacent organizations and societies, museums, and publications.

Strategic Activities

- *Prizes and Awards:*
  - *Vancouver History Book Prize*
  - *Vancouver History book club*
  - *Digital projects, art projects, community-engaged projects, performance*
  - *Invest in and promote VHS research/project grants*
  - *Heritage Fair prize*
  - *University/college essay/video/etc. prize*
- *Experts list for media relations (Directors and Members)*
- *Send VHS director-historians into communities for 'VHS Presents'*
- *Focus Newsletter on immediate events; use blasts more effectively; run blogs on website*

Goal 4: A higher profile in the city & related organizations

We observed that:

- Public/civic discourse often lacks historical perspectives.
- The VHS is the largest and most sophisticated of all the historical societies in the city.
- There is remarkable expertise among the VHS membership.
- There is a growing number of small local history groups focused on local areas or distinct demographics.
- When historical issues arise, such as the fate of older structures or spaces, the VHS is not approached.
- The VHS has no direct link to City Hall.

Strategic Activities

- *Develop a 'city-wide' strategy*
  - *Align with other history/heritage organizations*
  - *Lift up other organizations and boost their social media*
  - *Experts list for media relations (Directors and Members)*
  - *Forge connections with Council, Deputy Mayor, City Manager, etc*
  - *Explore connections with community associations*
- *Develop Public Engagement Strategy:*
  - *Heritage Fair prize*
  - *University/college essay/video/etc prize*
- *Social Media profile:*
  - *Improve the website*
  - *Boost social media profile*

Goal 5: A competent and effective leadership team

We observed that:

- The VHS has enjoyed competent and generous leadership and financial governance for many years.
- The rise of social media as a mode of communication creates new levels of work for a volunteer board.
- Reporting, fiscal, and insurance responsibilities have evolved and increased.
- Recruitment of new directors has been very informal.
- Directors do not consistently understand their obligations when they join, nor are their resources in place to support their growth

Strategic Activities

- *Succession Planning:*
  - *Establish a formal Nominations Committee*
  - *Develop a Community Code of Conduct for the Board*
  - *Policy manual with JDs for all directors/exec*
  - *Onboarding (include anti-racism training)*
- *Develop a Fiscal, Budgetary and Administrative Transparency Plan*

Next Steps

Board and Staff

The VHS Directors will:

Advance the plan with measured steps, identifying and moving forward with a manageable number of Strategic Activities every quarter.

Clearly assign responsibility for each Strategic Activity and assess results in short, medium, and longer term.

Membership

We invite you to:

Provide feedback on initiatives, projects, and events. Suggest new ones.

Stay connected. Watch for VHS newsletters and e-blasts. Stay engaged and let us know how to engage you more.

Introduce more Vancouverites to the VHS.

Organizational Structure

The VHS is led by an elected Board of Directors that includes a four-person executive and five at-large members, along with the Past President. Currently, the membership is:

President	John Belshaw	<u>Members-at-Large</u>	
Vice-President	Jan Fialkowski	Lindsay Gibson	Jennifer Chutter
Secretary	Anne Wyness	Denise Jacques	Jessica Quan
Treasurer (Interim)	Will Woods		

<u>Ex-officio Member</u> Michael Kluckner (Past President)

<u>Staff</u> Carlin Sandor (Coordinator, Communications & Outreach)

These directors all contributed to the drafting and developing of the Strategic Plan.