



CASE STUDY

Project Greenlight

Digital Library

De-risking Innovation
in Public Procurement

City	Vancouver
Population	662,000 (2021)
Country	Canada
Region	North America



The pool of responses to the standard procurement process is typically constrained to larger market-size players. Small and medium-sized enterprises have impactful solutions that are outside the box, but can be missed through the traditional process.

John McPherson, Executive Director,
Project Greenlight

Project Greenlight, an initiative of the Vancouver Economic Commission in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, is a technology demonstration platform that connects enterprises and innovators with the goal of fast-tracking pilot projects and accelerating innovation focused on smart and sustainable solutions. Project Greenlight, a fee-based membership initiative, enables innovators with an opportunity to propose their new technologies to major enterprises seeking solutions to urban challenges, such as stormwater management and equitable transit solutions. The public-private collaboration provides cities and asset owners, such as transit and utility companies, with access to emerging but tested and scalable solutions that would otherwise be overlooked due to traditional procurement processes that favour large companies.





Overview

The City of Vancouver launched its 10-year [Greenest City Action Plan \(GCAP\)](#) in 2010. One key provision was to grow the city's green economy. To address this challenge, the Vancouver Economic Commission (VEC) introduced in 2014 [the Green and Digital Demonstration Program](#) (GDDP). The programme sought to foster the local green economy by encouraging companies to leverage city assets and infrastructure to showcase innovations in clean tech and digital development, resulting in marketing or fundraising opportunities or more successful commercialization. Although the programme aimed to encourage innovators to share their solutions with the city, it was often challenging to find a match within city operations due to innovator readiness or feasibility. Thus, the VEC, with the cooperation of its programme delivery partner [Foresight](#) and funding partner [Pacific Economic Development Canada](#) (PacifiCan), reimaged the GDDP and launched Project Greenlight in 2021.

Project Greenlight is a technology demonstration platform that connects enterprises and innovators with the goal of fast-tracking pilot projects and accelerating innovation focused on smart and sustainable solutions. It is in essence a de-risking strategy for governments and asset owners to engage the innovation community.

As a fee-based membership initiative, Project Greenlight links public and private asset owners (such as FortisBC, TransLink, the City of Coquitlam and the City of Vancouver) with local innovators and small and medium-sized technology startups. The public-private collaboration provides cities and asset owners, such as transit and utility companies, with access to emerging but tested and scalable solutions that would otherwise be overlooked due to traditional procurement processes that favour large companies.

For example, [Novion](#) CEO Refayet Siam credits the initiative as the key enabler in connecting his startup with the City of Vancouver. Novion was selected for a pilot programme through a Project Greenlight call for its innovative solution that uses connected technologies, data analytics and environmental science to offer a green stormwater infrastructure platform. Novion's solution helps cities manage green infrastructure needs ranging from planning and design to operations and maintenance. [After executing the pilot](#), Novion successfully transitioned to a yearly contract with the City of Vancouver, connected with other cities across British Columbia, and gained a new client in the province as a direct result of working with Project Greenlight.

Key decisions and tactics

1 Streamlined application and bidding process

Relative to traditional municipal competitive bidding processes, Project Greenlight minimizes the paperwork burden on innovators, such as through the [TransLink: Innovation Demonstration Program](#) Open Challenge. Its targeted application process outlines members' expectations for innovators through detailed documentation. These expectations are communicated to innovators through resources such as the [Project Greenlight Applicant Handbook](#).

2 Identifying and cultivating project champions

Project Greenlight serves as a champion for vetted applicants, promoting their innovations and aligning their brand alongside the strategic priorities of members. Identifying "project champions" or staff from members who become strong advocates for the Project Greenlight solution, is a key component of success. These project champions serve as a conduit between innovators and the members as they implement and refine their pilot programme and target their technology to the member's unique needs.

3 Targeted calls to solve unprecedented challenges

The Targeted Call model has created successful matches that address climate-related challenges members need to address. This pathway allows Project Greenlight to work closely with innovators to demonstrate and iterate their technologies' capacity to address specific challenges. In addition to Targeted Calls, the Open Call model provides an open door for innovators to propose and highlight their solutions on an ongoing basis.

4 Membership model: Mutually beneficial partnerships

Building out solutions beyond one city to other public and private partners in the region broadens opportunities for success. Project Greenlight membership has grown across metro Vancouver; expanding the membership of the online procurement platform allows for economies of scale, increasing the visibility of innovative solutions and maximizing marketing dollars spent.





Best practices

Solicitation of innovative ideas through targeted or open public challenges

Development of a data-sharing agreement

Membership model that fosters information sharing on new technologies and increases innovations' visibility



Impact

Strengthen Vancouver's innovation ecosystem through the partnership between innovators and the large asset owners to address infrastructure-related issues

Position the Vancouver region as the hub for innovation and creativity

Create a diverse pool of innovators and solution-based technology providers



Replicability

Transparent documentation of expectations.

Both open and targeted challenges clearly communicate the criteria for a successful bid

Streamlined applications for innovative companies.

Reducing complex, burdensome application components made space for startups to participate



What did the public sector offer?

Flexible procurement channel to support connection with innovation community

Fast-track pilot discussions with potential clients

Opportunity for local innovators to undertake mentorship and coaching opportunities, in addition to well-structured partnership tools and resources

Provide technology acceleration opportunities to local startups and innovators



What did the private sector offer?

Innovative technologies that address challenges pertaining to climate and digital transformation

New ideas with the potential for scale across the British Columbia region

Contributors

Jawaher Almheiri

Co-Author, School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

Isabella Brandes

Co-Author, School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

John McPherson

Senior Manager of Economic Transformation, Project Greenlight & Vancouver Economic Commission

Leslie Ng

Sustainability Specialist, City of Vancouver

Refayet Siam

Chief Executive Officer, Novion

For more information

→ Official website: [Project Greenlight](#)

→ Twitter: [@ProGreenlight](#)

→ LinkedIn: [ProjectGreenlightVan](#)