BACK TO THE FUTURE FOR EAST CLAYTON: storm sewers out, pedestrians in.
The Leader, Sunday August 1, 1999

David Marsh (staff reporter) - Planners are looking to the past to find the future of urban living.
And several say the proposed blueprint for Surrey's East Clayton neighbourhood, which would see the pastoral area to mushroom from 1,000 to 14,000 residents, is B.C.'s biggest and best example yet.
Wide driveways are out, and back lanes are in. Front porches would be newspaper-tossing distance from the sidewalk. And those sidewalks would be filled with pedestrians, since workplaces and corner stores would be a five-minute walk from most residences.
Nature itself would be reintroduced as the collector of rainwater. Specially configured areas of greenspace would soak up the rain, replacing ever-present storm sewers in streetside gutters. Call it a pipe dream, without the pipes. But its proponents insist it can, and will work.
"None of this is new or exotic or untried," says Patrick Condon, a University of B.C. planning consultant. "What's new is combining all these good ideas in one place."
East Clayton is one of a series of so-called neighbourhood concept plans Surrey city hall is implementing in the municipality. It became the leading attempt at progressive planning for two reasons. One is timing - after two decades of discussion, pedestrian-oriented, "livable" neighbourhood ideas are starting to trickle out of urban planning forums and into reality.
And the other is the rain collection issue. Conventional storm sewers would have flooded the lowlands south of East Clayton, and city hall needed to do things differently if it wanted to develop the area, most of which is bounded by 64th and 72nd Avenues, and 188th and 196th Streets.
"It took us a long time to realize how badly we were dealing with rainwater," says Condon, who was recruited by Surrey to help shepherd the East Clayton plan. "Like a big flush" is how Condon describes the effect of directing rainwater to a network of underground pipes, to eventually dump it all in the urban streams, ruining fish habitat.
"We need to find a way to build cities that don't kill fish," he says. From there it seemed natural to put other progressive, "sustainable" development ideas to work, says Surrey planner Wendy Whelen. Usually those revolve around catering to the pedestrian, rather then the car.
Mayor Doug McCallum says council is "quite excited" about the plan. A business park is planned for the southwest corner of East Clayton, with the intention of supplying jobs to as many residents of the new neighbourhood as possible, allowing them to walk to work. Commercial outlets such as corner stores would be located throughout the community. And schools would be situated near the centre.
"People should be able to do more of what they want without hopping into their car." says John Turner of Progressive Construction, one of the major developments in the area. "It's what we've talked about for the past 20 years, but haven't done it."
Experts say aspects of the East Clayton approach have been used elsewhere in B.C., but never as many of them in one place, or over a large area (500 acres). Several hurdles remain, however. First is the plan itself, which still needs fine-tuning. Clayton resident Mike Mclennan says he's generally supportive of the project, but withholds full support

until some details are worked out, such as the proposed realignment of 192nd St. and possible extra lanes on 196th St.

"Sustainability is one of those motherhood issues that everyone says they support," said Mclennan, one of several residents on the East Clayton planning committee. "But behind the scenes you have a very large development that's happening." If it gets the committee's OK, the final plan will go to the city hall for approval, probably this September.

From there, it could take 15 years or longer for the idyllic, back-to-the-future vision to take shape, subject to economic forces such as the jobs and housing markets.

"We have great confidence that this can be realized," says UBC's Condon.