

## Curbing 'slurban' sprawl: End to suburban fortresses urged

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How B.C. communities can use the painful lessons of other cities to defeat an urban monster.

Having seen the monster Sprawl take shape and eat up everything in its path, the region's planning director sat down to write.

"The story I am about to unfold is that of ruination... of one of the most remarkable agricultural regions in the world, and the substitution of a completely irrelevant urban development of massive size and questionable quality that could have been placed almost anywhere else and most certainly on more appropriate land."

If you thought he meant the fairly recent, rampant suburbanization of the Fraser River Basin, think again. Karl Belser was mourning the loss of a place once called The Valley of Hearts Delight.

A half century ago, Belser was helpless to prevent his orchard blossom paradise, so "beautiful" and "wholesome," from becoming the thoroughly paved and subdivided sterility now known as Silicon Valley.

The defeated planner offered this as a prime lesson in the making of "slurban" America. He prayed others would learn from it. "Perhaps, by pausing a moment to find how this magnificent place got into the fix it's in, we might learn to act more rationally in the decades ahead. He wrote that in 1970.

Drive today through the Fraser Valley, the Okanagan, the Nanaimo corridor, and you get the sense we haven't learned much. And, conditions are ripe for more "slurban"-ization as developer friendly Premier Gordon Campbell vows to gun the engines of economic growth. This when the Lower Mainland already has been absorbing newcomers at a boomlike pace – compared with Calgary and its suburbs, the Vancouver region added more than twice as many people last year, according to Jim Sutherland in *Vancouver* magazine.

All of which make the timing quite propitious for the emerging anti-sprawl movement in this province, led by a new group called Smart Growth BC. The organization, in its just released BC Sprawl Report 2001, defines the beast as thus:

"Sprawl is poorly planned development characterized by the conversion of natural or agricultural land to low-density residential suburbs, commercial centres, and business parks, all separated from one another by roads and parking lots. Sprawl means long distances between homes and work or shopping, heavy reliance on roads and automobiles, and the destruction of the very features that induces many to live in rural developments – the natural landscape."

The report goes on to tally the evils spawned by sprawl: More pollution, higher energy consumption, obliteration of farm land and natural habitat, higher infrastructure costs, economic inefficiency, a "loss of community and sense of place."

It needn't be this way was the message that SmartGrowthBC conference held in Vancouver this week, where many bright people laid out their strategies for conquering sprawl. They shared visions of "livable communities" scaled to people rather than automobiles. Communities with home, shopping, schools and work all within walking or

biking distance. Communities kind to nature and the human nervous system, with the feel of villages ringed by green space.

We must abandon the “fortress cul-de-sac” ideal. That’s how Patrick Condon, UBC professor of landscape architecture, describes the task.

As I sat in the audience of several hundred nodding heads, a profound sense of déjà vu washed over me. During the 1960s, I grew up in one of those “fortress cul-de-sacs” in Silicon Valley, yearning to escape a terrain I found desolate yet smothering.

As a young journalist in California, I marshalled against sprawl the same arguments SmartGrowthBC makes. I profiled architects and planners pioneering the ideas that SmartGrowth now embraces, the so-called “new-urbanism.”

Years later, here I was listening same environmental rational critiques, the same eminently practical solutions largely untried in these parts. The temptation was to conclude that that sprawl is an economic weed, immune to reason and so unstoppable.

The conclusion I prefer to draw is this. B.C. is fortunate enough to be so young and early into its heyday. The human landscape is built decision by decision. We have time to learn from others’ mistakes and accumulated wisdom. The lessons to be learned, from Karl Belser and all who have come after him, include the following...

In 1986, a San Francisco based planner named Peter Calthorpe invited me to out to lunch and traced on his napkin a new way of designing the suburbs. Strung along rail lines were clustered communities with mixed housing on small lots, cross stitched by walking and biking paths that rarely crossed a street as they led to parks, stores, schools, stations.

Calthorpe called his invention the “pedestrian pocket,” and told me it was the solution to sprawl’s ills – but he couldn’t get anyone to take it seriously. I ran a big spread in the magazine I was editing, and he began to get takers.

Today, Calthorpe is America’s leading sprawl-buster. His firm has developed master plans for many regions including Seattle and Portland, and is laying out a city of 13, 000 housing units on the grounds of Denver’s abandoned airport, the largest such development in the U.S.

Calthorpe’s approach contains the basic elements he sketched for me on that napkin. Instead of everything covering the land with single-family homes on big lots, he prescribes denser neighbourhoods of two-to-five storey mixed-income housing, allowing nearby farms or wilderness to be left undeveloped. Instead of separating out “bedroom communities” and “industrial zones” with the occasional mall in between he zones for a mixture of all those human activities close to each other.

Streets are narrower with alleys, homes have neighbourly porches, and the spine running through all of it is a robust transit system. By delivering all the advantages of a denser community without the aspects of big city cores, he wins over residents.

UBC’s Patrick Condon, who is helping the City of Surrey develop some parcels along these lines, says the Lower Mainland’s Liveable Region Strategic Plan makes a gesture towards Calthorpe’s ideals, but falls far short. Yes, it strings denser nodes of development – Metrotown, Lougheed Mall, Whalley – along the SkyTrain line. But then the plan pays too little attention to the details of how those communities are put together.

“What’s important about the pedestrian pocket,” says Condon, “is that is all about how you defeat sprawl street by street, block by block” through enlightened zoning specs

for roads and housing stock. If Metrotown seems a boring mess it's because most of Calthorpe's principles were ignored at ground level.

Condon's own specialty adds another layer of fine grained detail – the salmon factor. Wherever possible, he and his UBC colleagues design out storm drains and swaths of pavement, substituting ponds and fields that percolate away clean water at a regular rate, rather than sending polluted water sluicing through fish spawning grounds.

“Cascadia, between here and Eugene, is a unique bioregion characterized by special kind of rainfall, streams, and salmon who inhabit those streams,” says Condon. “That all has implications for neighbourhood design.”

When the evil side effects of sprawl, from choked freeways to choking air pollution to eye-smarting strip malls, began to poison Northern California, citizens roused themselves to oppose it.

But because there was no regional authority with any teeth to redraw land use patterns throughout the Bay Area, the anti-sprawl movement morphed into a Not In My Backyard revolt, the NIMBYs shouting: Take your growth somewhere else!

The developers obliged, which merely pushed the sprawl farther beyond the edges of established suburbia.

By then it was too late. The big-lot-and-drive everywhere infrastructure of the burbs had been laid down, and stopping growth did nothing to change it.

You see the results in Silicone Valley today, where home prices are astronomical in part because housing density is so low. Result: housing supply is hopelessly out of sync with demand.

Suppose the Vancouver region's high-tech dreams do come true in the next several decades. Will we find ourselves in the same boat, thanks to the toothless nature of the GVRD and Translink?

In the regions where war may be waged over agricultural lands, regional authority is equally crucial. An admirer of Napa Valley's strict rules for preserving vineyards and architectural quality, writer Trevor Boddy fears the worst for our own wine region, the Okanagan.

“The revocability of the Agricultural Land Reserve demonstrated in the fractured squirmish several years ago near Kamloops will wither in comparison to the battles soon to come in the Okanagan, especially with the change of provincial government,” the architecture critic has written in the *Georgia Straight*.

Similarly, the long fight over a golf course / housing development in the Naramata shows how few planning tools residents of the Okanagan now have to control wall to wall development.”

In his blistering attack on sprawl titled *The Geography of Nowhere*, author James Howard Knustler lays into the engineers who draw up suburbia's specs.

“Does the modern profession called urban planning have anything to do with making good places anymore? Planners no longer employ the vocabulary of civic art...All the true design questions such as HOW WIDE SHOULD ELM STREET BE? And WHAT SORT OF BUILDINGS SHOULD BE ON IT? were long ago ‘solved’ by civic engineers and their brethren and written into municipal codes.

“It has been established, for example, that the suburban streets...ought to be as wide as two-lane country highways, regardless of whether this promotes driving at

excessive speeds where children play, or destroys the spatial relationship between the houses on the street.”

This behaviour by planning engineers is perfectly understandable from their own perspective, given that their mission in life is to standardize whenever possible, and above all, eliminate risks. Streets are wide so fire trucks can pass each other, and they are stripped of eccentric curves and intruding trees lest some speedster aim his car incorrectly.

It's a lesson Patrick Condon has learned first hand while trying to manage his anti-sprawl zoning specifications through the Surrey bureaucracy.

“No city engineer ever got a promotion for taking a risk. Their job is to make this system run as problem-free as possible.” Thus, Surrey's engineers want to install traditional storm drains to back up Condon's nature based approach, should it not work. And that adds the cost to the project, which makes the developers balk.

“To a city engineer, the environment is someone else's job, or concern. Citizens are concerned, the federal government is concerned, the United Nations is concerned, but none of them has the power over the incremental decisions that are pushing our planet into the crapper,” says Condon. The solution, for prototypes like Condon's Surrey project, is for higher levels of government to step in and assume some of the risk, and the costs it creates.

Think of it as public investment. Once the experiment is shown to work, developers will be more likely to replicate it.

That was the case for Peter Calthorpe. Reached in his California office between jet trips, he concurs that fear of risk has been his biggest obstacle in getting his ideas accepted.

To do something new, a developer not only has to finagle city hall to change zoning, he or she has to talk financiers into backing something that hasn't been built, or sold, before.

“Inertia. That's what keeps sprawl going,” says Calthorpe. “Banks and developers like to repeat the past.” He senses a change in those dynamics, though, as demographics in North America shift rapidly from the Ozzie and Harriet home buyers of the past.

Surveys show strong market demand for the kinds of housing and neighbourhoods he creates, and developers like his mixed housing approach because they can sell out quickly to a broad spectrum of buyers, freeing up capital for the next project. In short, gradually, it is becoming financially riskier to build sprawl than not.

As anti-automobile environmentalists have been pointing out for years now, the car is a highly subsidized mode of transportation. If drivers had to pay the true cost of roads and other infrastructure, as well as the costs of car-related pollution and injuries, other ways of getting around might begin to look better.

Less known are the many other ways sprawl is subsidized through government policies, which gives the lie to the idea that this way of building communities is merely the market's response to people's choices on a level playing field.

One example: Surrey charges developers a Development Impact Fee of \$18,000 per dwelling unit, no matter how large the lot.

It's the same price whether the developer wants to build a single-family mansion with a six-car garage on a 12,000 square-foot lot, or a smaller dwelling on a lot one-quarter of the size, fitting neatly into Condon's pedestrian pocket neighbourhood.

Never mind that the big lot, multiplied many times over, becomes the cellular essence of sprawl, creating a community of relatively few people living on large lots driving great distances to get a quart of milk.

The developer does a simple calculation, and finds that the fixed cost of \$18,000 is a much smaller percentage of the over-all cost of the lot, leaving more of the eventual sale price for profit. Why lose money moving denser parcels? Welcome to the economics that feed the monster.

It is now the business of SmartGrowthBC, along with Patrick Condon and every other opponent of sprawl, to study such lessons, add to them and make the case for something better. The West Coast Environmental Law offices have prepared a binder full of legal tools the average citizen can use to oppose sprawl.

Over at UBC's Sustainable Development Research Institute, John Robinson is putting the final touches on his computer model of the Georgia Basin, which allows users to punch in various policy options and see how the traffic, pollution and land use patterns play out over the next many decades.

Once installed at Science World, audiences will be able to vote their future with buttons by their seats.

Through such education and advocacy, sprawl busters find themselves in a far better position to win victories than did poor Karl Belser as he watched his, and my, Valley of the Hearts Delight disappear 50 years ago.

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