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# Rebuilding Calgary

City hall has talked about curbing sprawl before. Will council do it this time?

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In the SimCity video games, you are mayor of a simulated city. As mayor, you decide what's built and where — roads, houses, factories, parks and so on — and to succeed, you need to build a city that functions well. People need to get around your city with ease. They need schools. They need hospitals. They need efficient electricity, water, fire and police services. And they want all this for a reasonable price; that is, a fair tax rate. Otherwise, your citizens riot and call for your head.

While Calgarians are unlikely to riot outside city hall anytime soon, the city's real-life mayor sees trouble

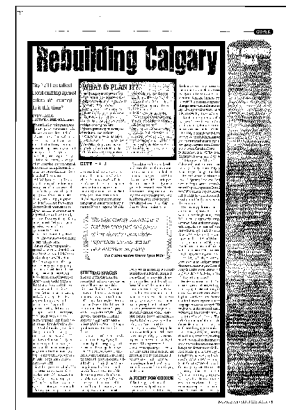
ahead if Calgary doesn't change the way it grows. "It's unsustainable in the long term to keep going as we have done," says Dave Bronconnier. Like most North American cities, Calgary has accommodated most of its growth by expanding outward, creating endless rows of single-family homes connected with a vast (and expensive) network of roads, pipelines and other services — a financial burden carried by all taxpayers. "The cost of services is killing us," says Ald. Ray Jones.

But with Calgary's population expected to more than double in the next 60 to 70 years, unbridled expansion is no longer a viable option. "The changing patterns of energy cost, the changing demographic patterns and so on will dictate that we change what we do," says Byron Miller, director of the University of Calgary's urban studies program. "The question is really whether we plan for a smooth transition."

To make that smooth transition,

the city has developed Plan It Calgary, a work-in-progress land-use and transportation blueprint that — if approved — will guide Calgary's development over the next 60 years. "We're introducing a lot more options for people," says Plan It project manager Patricia Gordon. The plan is to shift the city's growth into existing communities, densify around transit stations and double transit service hours in the city (other than the ring road, no new major roads would be built) so that people can get around without a car. "It's a complete and total new policy," says Ald. Dale Hodges, who's been on council since 1983.

Since the city released a draft of the plan in March, the document has provoked heated debate. Accusations of misinformation and propaganda are flying from both sides. Supporters argue that building up, not out, will make Calgary a better place to live and work. Opponents of the plan, led



## WHAT IS PLAN IT?

Plan It Calgary is the name of the city's long-term proposal to guide Calgary's development. If approved by council, the plan would:

- Shift growth from the burbs so that half of Calgary's growth during the next 60 to 70 years occurs in existing parts of the city.
- Stop annexing rural land.
- Focus growth around transit stations and main corridors.
- Create "complete communities" with a variety of housing choices, as well as stores, services and public spaces, including parks.
- Introduce a new transportation

hierarchy for city planning that would put walking, cycling and transit at the top (in that order) and single-occupancy vehicles at the bottom.

- Create a new primary cycling network that would make cycling "direct and expedient, while also safe and appealing."
- Vastly improve Calgary's transit system by doubling service hours and creating a new primary transit network of buses, LRT and possibly streetcars, as well as creating more transit routes across the city.

## CITY HALL

by conventional developers, say it's undesirable and unachievable. Meanwhile, city politicians who will ultimately make the decision are split on the issue. But most agree on one thing: the June council vote on Plan It Calgary will be a momentous one.

"It's probably the most important thing that we're going to be doing in the next 30 years," says Ald. John Mar.

*The high energy consumption that has been part and parcel of low-density automobile-dependent growth will not be sustainable anymore*

*U of C urban studies director Byron Miller*

## SHIFTING SPACES

Since the 1950s, Calgarians have become addicted to cars and spacious homes. Thousands make daily car trips — usually alone — from their houses in suburban Calgary to jobs in or near the city centre, often via traffic-clogged arteries, like Deerfoot Trail and Crowchild Trail. (The median commute distance for Calgary workers was 8.2 km in 2006.) "The growth of the city has been built upon very cheap energy," says the university's Miller. "And that is highly unlikely to continue into the future."

Fatih Birol, chief economist to the International Energy Agency, has estimated global energy supply will plateau in 2020 and go down from there. This presents a serious problem for many commuters, as spiking gas prices will jack up the cost of suburban living. "The high energy consumption that has been part and parcel of low-density automobile-

dependent growth will not be sustainable anymore," says Miller. "And as people see the high costs of that form of living, they're going to start shifting toward more sustainable forms of living."

Indeed, that shift is already well underway. The rate of condo ownership in Canada more than doubled from under four per cent in 1981 to 10.9 per cent in 2006, according to Statistics Canada. "Basically, the single-family home industry in North America is declining, and it's declining because of demographics," says Ken Toews, a local developer and consultant who worked on Calgary's Garrison Woods project. Many empty-nesters are moving out of their homes into multi-family units, and young Canadians are waiting longer to start families — and they're having fewer children. "They want to live closer to conveniences," says Toews. "They don't want to commute a half-hour, an hour every day. But unfortu-

nately, right now, our current industry isn't giving them that choice."

Plan It pitches more neighbourhoods like Garrison Woods, "complete communities" where people can live, work and buy groceries without using a car. "We just met the demand," Toews says of the popular southwest development. "What we're experiencing in Calgary is what has happened in other markets in North America. What's prevented the change from happening quicker... is we've had such a boom economy here for so long that the developers and builders haven't really had to be innovative, and they haven't really had to follow what the home-buying public want."

## A FIGHT FOR CHOICE

If Plan It is approved, most of the city's growth will push toward the edges for the next decade but slowly shift inward, with half of the city's

development occurring in existing communities within 60 to 70 years,

mostly around transit stations (near Westbrook Mall and Chinook, for example). The plan encourages a mix of single-family and multi-unit housing. "If you go to almost any major city in the world, a three bedroom flat is not an uncommon way of living," says Ald. Gord Lowe. In Vancouver, for example, almost one-third of homeowners had condos in 2006.

But Calgary's single-family home-builders are hopeful Calgarians won't give up their attachment to big yards and garages anytime soon. A recent survey by the Canadian Home Builders Association (CHBA) asked Calgarians if they agree or disagree with this statement: "I hope that my children will be able to live in their own single family home in Calgary." Almost 80 per cent agreed, and the CHBA fired out a news release headlined: "Calgarians' Love Affair With Cars and Single Family Homes Continues Despite Support for Densification." (The same survey found over half of Calgarians want more high-density, multi-family development in their communities.)

Cautious city politicians and bureaucrats emphasize that Plan It won't snub the single-family home — "it's almost a guarantee that the predominant form in the future is going to be single-family," assures Bronconier — but many in the industry continue to worry. Dennis Little, who represents the CHBA and Urban Development Institute Calgary, says Plan It "seems to be out of character with human nature." It's inconsistent, he says, with Calgarians' preferred lifestyles. "I like to have my green space in my backyard rather than two blocks away, and I don't like living in a balcony four stories in the air," says Little. "It's choice, and that's what we're trying to say."

People on both sides of the Plan It debate argue over choice, with opponents saying the plan robs Calgarians of the freedom to choose to live in big houses and drive cars. The city's Gordon, however, says the "restrictive language" critics use is a myth. "The single auto, in the proposed plan that we've got, still remains the predomi-

nant form of travel," she says. "But we're introducing a lot more options for people... new transit, new cycling and new walking opportunities."

In the end, the city may have little choice but to rein in the sprawling suburban costs of roads, transit and other services that eat up the city's budget and drive up taxes. (In Bridgeland, for example, taxes for a typical three-bedroom, two-storey house rose from \$700 in 1993 to about \$2,300 in 2008.) "We've hit a wall financially," says Ald. Druh Farrell.

The city estimates that under the Plan It scenario, Calgary taxpayers will save \$11.2 billion over the next 60 years, mostly because the city won't have to spend as much on roads. "Currently, the way the city is

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growing, eventually it's going to become bankrupt through increased infrastructure maintenance costs," says Ben Brunnen, policy and research manager for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce.

## OUR CITY'S FUTURE

How do we build the kind of city we want for ourselves and our children? More than 160 citizens, politicians and developers recently gathered at Knox United Church downtown to discuss that question at length. Standing beside a PowerPoint slide of gridlocked Deerfoot Trail, local author Chris Turner listed a myriad of threats to Calgary's current urban form: climate change, energy scarcity, affordability, accessibility. "This doesn't work for much longer," warned Turner, who's researched examples of sustainability in cities around the world.

After Turner's talk, people in the group stuck a flurry of fluorescent-coloured papers onto a wall. Each sticky contained an idea to make the city better. "Let's build an inner city streetcar system." "Make my city more walkable." "Make great public gathering spots." These ideas have been tossed around in Calgary for years, most recently in the city's imagineCalgary consultation, and


yet the city has struggled to lift the ideas off of paper and put them into practice. "It's time that we got on with it," says Ald. Brian Pincott.

In the Calgary area, it's not just the city that's re-examining the way it grows. The Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP), a collective that includes Calgary, Okotoks, Banff and 15 other nearby communities, recently released a similar long-range drafted plan. Like Plan It, the CRP draft calls for new development to focus in "compact urban nodes" to minimize impact on the landscape. As well, the M.D. of Rocky View north of Calgary recently put out a draft 50-year plan that — surprise! — calls for more density in "growth nodes."

With so many plans in the works, there are questions on how they'll all fit together. "I see them as maybe paralleling, but how are they going to

dovetail?" wonders Ald. Linda Fox-Mellway. "There's too much going on at once that has similar concepts." Brunnen says it's important that Calgary and the CRP implement similar policies so growth doesn't flee outside the city's borders, a situation he says would "decrease our prospective tax revenues and increase our costs as a result of these free-riders, if you will, using our infrastructure."

City bureaucrats are currently cleaning up and tightening the Plan It document ("people thought it was a bit repetitive and too long," says Gordon), adding an implementation plan and more specifics on transit. Gordon says her department will release the revised plan May 6. Then it will go before the city's planning commission on May 14 before it's presented at a city council public hearing June 16. And then what? It'll be in the politicians' hands, where they can "refine the plans if refinements are required," says Bronconier, hinting that Plan It probably won't be approved or spiked as is. "This is a plan that I don't believe is etched in stone," says the mayor.

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