

THE CASE AGAINST ANNEXATION

Expansion symptom of extravagance

FOR AN ALTERNATE VIEW, SEE PAGE J9 FOR JIM DEWALD'S TAKE ON CALGARY'S ANNEXATION PLANS.

Big city — big deal — big problems. How big is big enough? How does a city know when to stop growing?

Growth has always been part of Calgary's character. Its population was about 4,000 people in 1900, 325,000 in 1965, and is now approaching one million. The area contained in the city has grown from a few square kilometres, to more than 145

by 1965 — when it was known as the largest city by area in Canada — to more than 648 square kilometres today.

Some 103 square kilometres, alone, were added in the 2002 annexation. Calgary's urban edge was 1.6 kilometres from the city center in 1900, growing to 11 kilometres by 1960.

Today, the edge of the city is almost 25 kilometres from downtown.

Despite all the good intentions of such things as Calgary Plan, the Sustainable Suburbs Study that advocate higher densities, the city's density has gone from 2,711 people per square kilometre in 1914, to 2,260 in 1965 and 1,858 in 2003.

This outward growth is in many ways a logical result of the city's development practices and processes.

City council's policy is to maintain at least a 30-year supply of developable land within Calgary's boundaries. Annexation has therefore become the city's method of choice for dealing with growth.

But although it may seem logical, is it desirable?

Annexation gives Calgary larger clothes to grow into, but at the expense of a denser, more compact and healthier urban form.

The most affordable single-family houses are found in the suburbs on the expanding outer edge.

Young families especially are attracted here, necessitating construction of schools, parks, hospitals and libraries, and contributing to the loss of those same facilities in the established city, where rising property prices discourage a population mix.

This process of outward spread also pretty much guarantees that public transportation infrastructure is more expensive, an increasing reliance on private automobiles becomes further entrenched, and everyone becomes more and more cranky with the inevitable traffic problems.

Indeed, Calgary's relationship with the car has deep roots.

The western independent spirit has traditionally favoured the mobility and freedom that a private vehicle can provide, and the city's form is closely tied to a development in-



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dustry that depends on a continuing market for the single-family house.

"That's just us," many people will say, but is it what we want to be for the long haul?

The practice of annexation almost guarantees that the city will continue to expand as concentric rings of low-density single family housing and regional shopping malls.

However, cities are at their best where there is a mix of uses, housing types and people — and this essential mix is what urbanists everywhere advocate, but which is difficult to put in place when there are so few constraints to low-density growth.

With the exception of the Tsuu T'ina Nation in the southwest, there are few physical constraints to urban expansion, unlike Vancouver, for example, which is hemmed in between the mountains and the ocean.

This has likely led Calgary to a more extravagant attitude.

Rather than build up, like some of the more successful areas of Vancouver, we keep building out and out.

It is time to abandon the practice of annexation as the method of choice for dealing with growth, and fully commit to the practices of good urbanism that city policies can only tentatively hint at.

If we just said no to more annexation, we would be forced to be more creative and to act more sustainably.

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Calgary faces few physical constraints to its plans for urban expansion.

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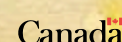
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HOME BUYER HELP

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- **Accessible Housing Society** — 282-1872; e-mail info@ahscalgary.ca; www.ahscalgary.ca
- **Alberta Health Care Insurance** — 310-0000, then 427-1423; www.health.gov.ab.ca/ahcip/index.html
- **Alberta Home Builders' Association** — 1-780-424-5890, or 1-800-661-3348; www.ahba.ca/
- **Alberta One Call** — for the location of buried lines and utilities, 1-800-242-3447; www.alberta1call.com
- **Calgary Region Home Builders' Association** — 235-1911; www.crhba.com
- **Calgary Transit** — 262-1000; hard of hearing, 268-8087; www.calgarytransit.com
- **Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp.** — 515-3000; www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/
- **City of Calgary** — main switchboard, 268-2111; www.calgary.ca
- **Federation of Calgary Communities** — 244-4111; www.calgarycommunities.com
- **National Home Warranty** — Calgary office, 278-5665, toll-free 1-888-776-7707; www.nationalhomewarranty.com
- **Professional Home Builders Institute of Alberta** — 216-8310 in Calgary, or 1-888-325-9999. www.phbia.com
- **The Alberta New Home Warranty Program** — Calgary office, 253-3636; www.anhwp.com
- **TransAlta Utilities** — 1-800-667-2345.
- **Urban Development Institute** — 531-6250 www.udicalgary.com

THE CASE FOR ANNEXATION

Fair regional governance real issue

FOR AN ALTERNATE VIEW, SEE PAGE J8 FOR BEV SANDALACK'S TAKE ON CALGARY'S ANNEXATION PLANS.

To annex, or not to annex? When you look at the options, frankly, there is no question.

Sure, my learned colleague says "no" to annexation. But what will happen?

Let's consider the relevant facts:

■ Fact 1: Growth is people having babies and moving here for jobs. There is zero evidence of growth slowing.

■ Fact 2: There is no regional planning. It is an "every municipality for its own" region. As a consequence, if homebuyers want a product (say single-family housing) that isn't available in a densified city, other municipalities — such as Airdrie, Okotoks, Cochrane and the Municipal District of Rocky View — can and will fill the void.

■ Fact 3: Calgary's recent transportation improvements are a boon to bedroom communities.

Cities should be designed to support true choice, such as transit, for its residents (choice should always be defined as what is available to the least fortunate, not the wealthy. Freeways offer no choice for the poor).

Calgary's penchant to build the freeway city has benefits for suburban dwellers — but more importantly, it is a big bonus to people who choose to live quietly in bedroom communities outside of the city, but work, shop and play inside the city.

■ Fact 4: Currently, the city has no way of collecting taxes from those who live outside the city, but work, shop, and play inside the city.

Put these facts together and the future is clear. If the City of Calgary is forced to cope with a frozen boundary, it will surely go bankrupt as outlying areas exclusively offer single family housing for the wealthy — supported by a state-of-the-art Calgary freeway system — while keeping the residential tax dollars away from city coffers.

Saying "no" to annexation is not a realistic option.

On the other hand, and this is where things get interesting, we need to ask if annexation will change the fiscal imbalance? The city is already facing the



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financial crunch of its freeway focus — and as a consequence, citizens are faced with tax increases, a heavy debt load, and new development charges.

With or without annexation, surrounding municipalities can proceed with new development.

The path the city is on is clearly dangerous without some critical stakeholder arrangements in-place.

From a fiscal standpoint, annexation is a red herring. The real issue is the need to establish a truly fair regional governance model that recognizes the autonomy of surrounding municipalities, while sharing tax dollars in support of regional and sustainable patterns of growth.

Calgary has burst beyond the reasonable bounds of uni-city, which is an

outdated idea that has run its course. Yes, Calgary should follow its own policies and move toward a sustainable urban form, but this can only be accomplished in concert with regional co-operation involving our neighbouring municipalities.

Let's get annexation done and out of the way so we can start working on the real issue. That means leadership

that instigates immediate compromise and conciliatory dialogue with Rocky View; annexation boundaries that make good sense (there are obvious problems in Springbank); a move toward finding fair practices for the regional sharing of the costs and benefits of growth; and finally, more sustainable development practices in the newly annexed areas.

Is Calgary's city council up to this challenge? I believe so, but time is wasting — let's see it happen before the fiscal, social, and environmental situation worsens further.

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“ If the City of Calgary is forced to cope with a frozen boundary, it will surely go bankrupt ”

Information online



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