

Density 'magic bullet' needs decoding

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Think about this — less than five per cent of the surface of the Earth is developed at an urban density. Canada, with a vast landmass, is a particularly urbanized country, with somewhere around 90 per cent of its population living in cities. It's pretty clear that there is a lot of space out

there. Why, then, is density an issue? For much of the world, the main urban problem is overcrowding. However, most North American cities, Calgary included, seem to be suffering from the opposite problem — not enough concentration of people to economically provide the required services and amenities, such as schools and LRT, and to produce vibrancy. Density, almost by itself, is viewed as a magic

bullet that will cure all our social ills, including sprawl, homogeneity of suburbia, decline in walkability, shortage of good public spaces, and even homelessness. But is it that easy? The concept of density is often politicized, idealized and also estheticized, and it might be useful to try to decode it. What exactly is "density?" Density, as a measure, represents the relationship between a given land area and the number of people who inhabit

that area, expressed as persons per acre (PPA). This is a combination of persons per unit (PPU) and units per acre (UPA). Planners and urban designers have no influence over persons per unit, but units per acre is one of the most valuable tools in the urban design toolchest. Society's perception of density has changed dramatically. In the industrial urban conditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, density was rightly perceived as a highly negative quality — the crowded and unhealthy inner-city areas are well documented by everyone from 19th century novelist Charles Dickens to Toronto-based urban critic and author Jane Jacobs. The push in most of the 20th century was to reduce urban density and provide residents with space, clean air and a house of their own. Most city plans specified maximum densities.

Calgary has expanded outward at a remarkable pace due to the demand for single family houses in low-density suburbs. It is now almost a given that most new housing will take this form. This development pattern has taken on a life of its own, and Calgary is now well-known nationally for its low-density suburbs, almost more than for the Stampede or for its incredible setting. Higher densities are more difficult for Western culture to wrap the mind around and accept, especially in the wide-open spaces of Alberta. Although all five boroughs of New York can be contained in the land footprint of Calgary — and the density, and vibrancy, of Manhattan is what draws residents and tourists to it — the same densities would be shocking to all but a handful of Calgarians.

The current film *Radiant City*, by local producers Gary Burns and Jim Brown, takes a hard look at the suburbs and poses some uncomfortable questions.

What is the quality of life that low-density suburbs provide? Are we depriving ourselves of true civility and urbanity in our search for our private piece of the patch?

Should we expect more from our civic administrators and politicians for how to build our city? Many residents and neighbourhoods are dubious about the value of higher densities around them, and many actively oppose increases.

Density, just by itself, is not necessarily positive. In fact, the addition of high-density developments often seems to be arbitrary, and invokes some justifiable NIMBY (not in my backyard) reactions.

But here is the key — density by itself is not enough.

Even so, density, plus the right mix of uses, plus development of a good urban structure plan that emphasizes higher concentrations of development (intensity), can produce a much better quality of life than what is provided right now.

What are the positive aspects of increased density?

Good density can lead to a variety of shopping and recreation activities, and a wider range of experiences and opportunities.

A bookstore generally requires a population of 15,000, which is seven to eight times the population that lives within walking distance of our suburban shopping centres.

We have even lost the simple convenience of the corner store, where neighbours can meet as they pick up a litre of milk, a newspaper, a loaf of bread, or some cheese and olives from a local business person.

All of the handful of good-quality pedestrian streets in Calgary — including 4th Street SW, 10th Street and Kensington, 11th Street SW, 17th Avenue SW, and 9th Avenue in Inglewood — are, coincidentally, surrounded and supported by residential neighbourhoods that are of higher density (but not necessarily high-rise) than what we are building in the suburbs.

These streets do not happen by accident — they are supported by, and dependent on, people living nearby.

If you live in the suburbs, think about the services and amenities that are available in your neighbourhood, and then list how many within walking distance.

Probably not many. Now think of what might be nice to have within walking distance — stores, post office, bank, coffee shop, bookstore, gym, library, video store, and the list goes on.

Most of these could thrive in your neighbourhood if only there were more people within a convenient catchment area.

But they are impossible to provide within walking distance when the density of our suburban neighbourhoods is only six to eight units per acre.

The key is density, but it also depends on the urban structure of a permeable grid block pattern as well as walkable streets with sidewalks and street trees.

In Calgary, we have fallen woefully short of this. Despite all the repeated evidence for higher densities and the development of a more compact city, it is going to take a huge amount of effort to change.

The city has recently amended its suburban standards and is even toying with elimination of the cap on suburban densities.

This is a progressive move that we wholeheartedly support. Further, the Mahogany Community Plan in southeast Calgary was recently approved for up to 12 units per acre, making a huge leap forward in sustainability.

Still, just specifying higher densities is not sufficient.

The adoption of urban design as the methodology for city building could provide the tools and techniques for taking density as a dreaded quantity to a desirable quality of urban form and urban life.

It is going to take the efforts of all of us to see the creation of a more compact city and higher-density neighbourhoods.

Who knows, we may actually like it.



Jim Dewald



Bev Sandalack



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