## **OPINION** Leadership and vision needed for city

## Resistance to change halts innovation

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

e have used this space to primarily argue for more walkable and livable development patterns in our city.

We have found there is a loud and enthusiastic audience who support this cause.

But a recurring question that often comes up is "why don't the develop-

ers give us something different to choose from?" the assumption being it is the developers,

alone, who are responsible for how our city is built.

For starters, there are many forces that shape our city.

The biologist D'Arcy Thompson in his 1917 book, On Growth and Form, noted that the form of an object (or city) is a "diagram of the forces" that have acted upon it.

In the case of neighbourhood form, these forces are cultural and economic, as well as physical.

Calgary's early location and form were influenced by landscape forces: for ex- Jim Dewald

ample, the North West Mounted Police fort was located in the late 19th century at the confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers a practical decision.

The routing of the railway determined how early city growth would take place.

The rivers and the sharp escarpments were constraints to development until technology evolved and bridges were built.

In many ways, the city had a direct relationship to its land-

scape. Traditional ways of building streets and houses influenced Calgary's evolution up to around the middle of the

20th century. It is easy to trace the limits of this pattern on a city map by following the edge of the grid, the prevailing pattern with the exception of Mount

Royal and Scarboro. After about mid-century, the strong forces of modernism and globalization brought new trends.

As the physical constraints that had made Calgary unique were transcended, and as new patterns for streets and suburbs were brought in, Calgary's neighbourhoods started to look more and more alike, and lose their Calgary-ness.

market wants. Of course, there is some truth to

this, but what choices are given? If you were blindfolded and driven to a residential street in a Calgary suburb, could you honestly tell what community, or even what quadrant of the city, you were in?

Could you decipher whether you were in Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, or Dallas? Not likely.

Unfortunately, the patterns of suburban development in Cal-

gary mimic most North American cities — there is little to nothing that is distinct.

Although there are economic and cultural reasons why these suburbs all look alike, why should Calgary continue like the crowd? A further point is that the development industry does

not operate in isolation, but responds to political and policy forces.

In order to develop land into a neighbourhood, developers must follow an extensive set of municipal bylaws and guidelines.

rules about what goes

■ allocation of open space to future school sites (which too often

requirements for excessive park-

cies, developers are also heavily influenced by social forces, particularly the opinions of neighbours and other stakeholders

ment. Unfortunately, those

who buck the trend pay severely. Currie Barracks, the masterpiece by Canada Lands (who also gave us Garrison Woods and Garrison Green), took more time to be processed through approvals by city officials than possibly any development plan in the history of Calgary.

Statesman's Varsity LRT station residential proposal (53rd Street and Crowchild Trail N.W.) is based on city council's adopted Transit Oriented Development (TOD) policy, which promotes higher density at LRT stations.



Photos, Calgary Herald Archive The shape of Calgary is determined by many forces acting upon it — some natural and some man-made.

However, they have encountered resistance from the existing community, as well as city council requests for more studies, tablings and other delays. More recently, similar efforts to actualize TOD principles near the Heritage LRT station have faced delays and second thoughts by city officials.

At city hall, some planners refer to council's all too frequent abandonment of their own policies as the "say-do gap."

Even if this say-do gap is actually a deferral rather than refusal mechanism, time is money to the development industry.

If, by attempting to introduce innovation (such as initiating more walkable patterns) developers face both delays and additional market risks, the result will be no change to the standard suburban model and so our future is indeed bleak.

There was a time when new ideas were supported and encouraged by the city, and there was a more positive reception to changes.

In 1993, the McKenzie Towne plan sailed through city hall approvals in six months, even though the plan included drastic changes to servicing standards such as narrower local streets, sidewalks with narrower boulevards, tight cor-

ner radiuses to shorten walking distances and slow traffic, as well as very different patterns of land uses. But it seems that we have become

much more conservative as a culture and much more resistant to change, even when it is clear that these

government also significantly influence the shape of our city and the patterns of development.

A choice to fund LRT extensions, most notably the southeast leg, instead of freeway expansions, would have a dramatic impact on future development patterns.

Completion of the ring road, while funded primarily to support the movement of goods, will also pro-At city hall, foundly influence development patterns.

The limited provisions for access, and the significant physical barrier that results, will sentence us to even more auto-dependent sprawl patterns of growth.

Finally, more local economic forces also act on the form of the suburbs.

One of the challenges with new community development is that the first phases to be built are purely residential.

A critical population mass is required first in order to support shops, schools, transit,

and other services and amenities. These early residents therefore are forced to drive for all of their work, shopping, education, recreation and

other needs. This creates an unmanageable lifestyle (as portrayed in Gary Burns

and Jim Brown's film, Radiant City, currently playing in

ABOUT CALGARY'S URBAN DEVELOPMENT. JIM DEWALD, PHD, IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR,

and shops. By anticipating the needs of residents, and by building mixed-use neighbourhoods from the beginning, we could drastically improve the look, feel and functioning of our new communities. 66

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The shape of our city is determined by many forces that act on it.

ture. This could easily be avoided by

introducing a force in advance, such

as a train station with employment

Some of those forces are natural, and some are man-made.

If we want to have a different urban form and function, we need leadership and vision that understands these forces and that bring them together in a way that creates places with all the qualities of livability, walkability, and sustainability that distinguish truly great places.

With this current period of prosperity and growth, we have the opportunity to create a uniquely Calgarian city.

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These have included: where (zoning),

density limitations (until recently, suburban

development was limited to eight units per acre),

stay vacant and unsightly),

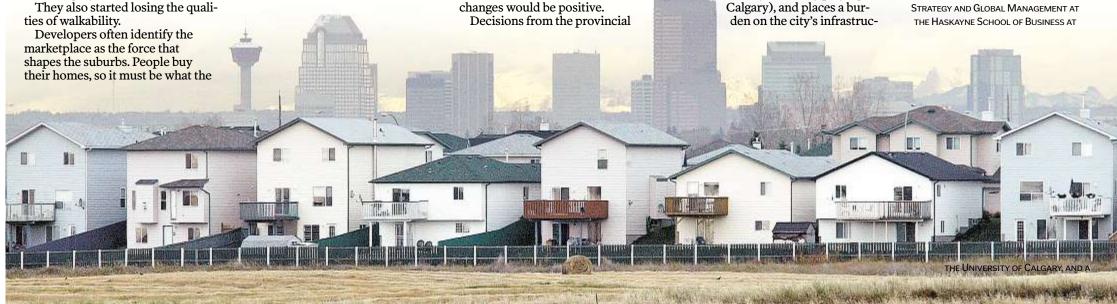
ing for shops and offices (even if the office or shop is located at an LRT station).

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## ■ the biggest bugaboo — outrageously-sized roads. Besides the city's rules and poli-

ALSO SEE Transit-oriented projects stall

near a proposed develop-



Developers often identify the marketplace as the force that shapes suburbs such as this one on the outskirts of Calgary.

