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Vote for De-suburbanization: New policies are key to reining in sprawl

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Vote for De-suburbanization

New policies are key to reining in sprawl.

Deborah Curran



T ALL STARTED when the American dream of single-family home ownership leaked into Canada. Yet who would have predicted that the desire to provide inexpensive housing and stimulate the economy after the Second World War would result in the expensive-to-maintain, agricultural-land-gobbling, ecosystem-fragmenting community form we find today outside most major centres in North America?

Almost 70 years of building automobile-oriented communities on the urban edge has created a crowd of economic, environmental and social ills for rural areas. In most provinces, we have systematically paved over sometimes irreplaceable environmental and cultural gems, such as First Nation heritage sites and traditional harvesting areas. Discussions about land development or the housing market often focus on where new development will occur, without reference to the impact the suburban form has on the countryside.

James Howard Kunstler, the author of a host of texts critiquing suburbia's impacts, including *The Geography of Nowhere*, believes that de-suburbanization is beginning. Using the example of the US housing market implosion and the prominence of foreclosures in outer-ring suburbs, he predicts in *The Daily Reckoning* e-newsletter, "...it's the crack up of the system that America has invested most of its wealth in since 1950."

It is the high public subsidy paid for roads and other municipal infrastructure at the urban edge that upsets Kunstler. Designed primarily for cars, expensive to build and costly to maintain, this suburban infrastructure requires more municipal resources than it recoups in property taxes. In many communities this results in an overall infrastructure deficit because few municipalities can afford to repair and replace ageing roads and bridges.

Studies commissioned by the Toronto-based Neptis Foundation indicate that the cost of growth in the Greater Toronto Area over the next 30 years, given a business-as-usual scenario, requires a public investment of \$44-billion in roads alone. Add operating costs of \$850-million per year and a 63-per-cent increase in user (driver) costs and we begin to understand why expanding hard infrastructure at the urban edge is unsustainable.

What does this have to do with the countryside? The public investment is a hidden subsidy for new suburban housing that spills onto greenfields since the high infrastructure costs that accompany it are not reflected in the price of land or housing at the urban edge. This makes them appear less expensive than more compact housing in already-urbanized areas.

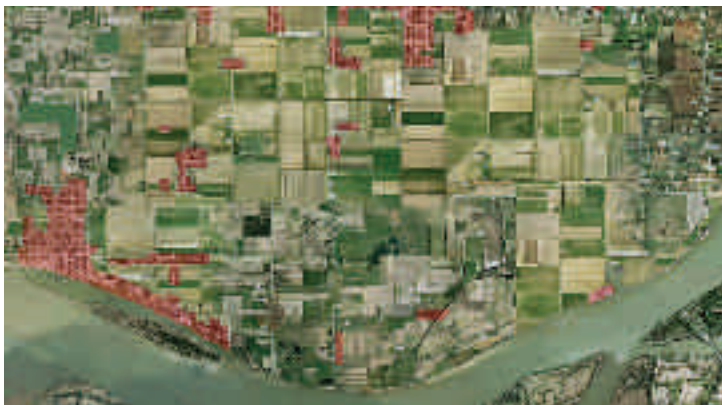
Suburbanization can also lead to a "tragedy of the anti-commons" – the downside when individuals control their own square of property, and there is no accounting for the cumulative impact of this form of development on the environment, social cohesion and regional safety. So habitat lost to sprawl continues largely unabated across Canada – from the antelope-brush grasslands of the Okanagan to the beaches of Nova Scotia. Similarly, the majority of Canada's best arable land is in valley bottoms and along lakeshores, which are highly prized for urban development. As a result, about 50 per cent of Canada's urban uses are located on agricultural land.

There are a few notable exceptions to this outward sprawl. Whistler, BC, for example, recently completed a multi-year community sustainability planning process. Mayor Ken Melamed explains, "We need to stop talking about the triple bottom line and three-legged stool analogies because the social and economic are nested within the environment." Ontario's Places to Grow growth management policy, when combined with its newly implemented Golden Horseshoe greenbelt (see "Places to Grow," page 25), is another attempt to get a handle on sprawl, as is the Regional Growth Strategy for the Capital Regional District of Greater Victoria. The latter requires that all municipalities establish urban containment boundaries to allow near-urban lands to boost the region's economic, environmental and social health.

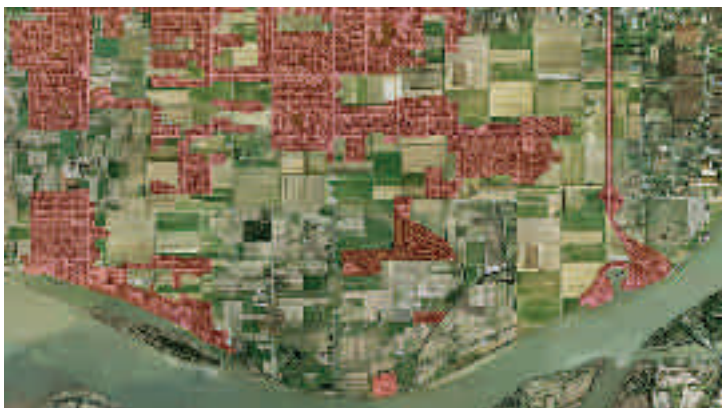
Despite these advances, the development charges or levies paid by developers to local governments in some provinces encourage sprawl because they are calculated on a per-unit or per-square-foot basis regardless of where the development is located. Infill or condominium housing in already serviced areas must pay the same charge as detached housing at the periphery, even though the suburban housing costs more for the municipality to service. The burgeoning City of

The Urbanization of Southwest Richmond, BC

In 1974, the province created the Agricultural Land Reserve to protect farmland.



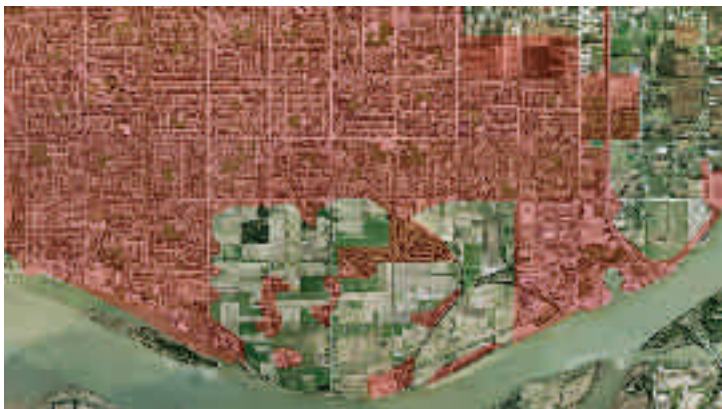
1954



1963



1976



2008

Kelowna, BC, on the other hand, has taken the additional cost of greenfield development into account and charges significantly more for servicing suburban housing than for redeveloped areas in the core.

Zoning also facilitates sprawl. It is a rare local government that has an urban growth boundary – and sticks to it – in the face of pressure to develop. It is easier to build on greenfield sites than to work through a more complex, higher density redevelopment in a serviced area. Okotoks, Alberta (see “Saying No to Growth,” page 24), which has limited its growth to the carrying capacity of the nearby Sheep River and Saanich, BC (adjacent to Victoria), with its 40-year-old urban growth boundary, are welcome exceptions.

And now that experts have figured out how to put a price on the services provided by our ecosystems, there is the occasional sign of change. Nancy Olewiler, an economics professor at Simon Fraser University, values the waste-cleansing services of natural wetlands in the Lower Fraser Valley at a remarkable \$230-million per year. Moreover, a BC court ordered the suburban municipality of Surrey to pay farmers upwards of \$50-million for agricultural losses caused when runoff due to urbanization flooded agricultural lands.

The work of people such as Joe van Belleghem is helping to deflate our infatuation with suburbanization. Van Belleghem, the developer responsible for Docks Green, an award-winning neighbourhood in Victoria, says, “It is abundantly clear that sustainable land development is not a cost to business. It brings value to developers, life, and community, and is absolutely necessary to tackle the significant environmental issues we are facing.” In BC, where mountains, oceans or agricultural land hem in many communities, the provincial government is proposing to do more with less land by creating urban (densification) and rural (large-lot) policies.

If arguments for compact development do not change our sprawling ways, Kunstler asserts that the price of oil will. An increase of one dollar per litre would make a one-hour commute from the suburbs uneconomical for many families. Kunstler opines, “...we’d better start making other arrangements immediately for how we occupy the landscape, how we grow our food, how we move people and things from place to place, and how we reconstruct an economy consistent with these new arrangements.” Sage advice from south of the border. 🇺🇸

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