

## SUSTAINABLE CITIES

# Cities must cope with growing global urbanization



Cities of the future must balance land use and residential development to ensure that they are sustainable and provide for the needs of their residents.

PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

**I**magine the world's current total population – seven billion people – all living in cities, making unprecedented demands on the resources required to support urban existence. Will we cope, or will society collapse under its own unsustainable weight?

David Boyd, adjunct professor, Resource and Environmental Management at Simon Fraser University, and co-chair of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Team, along with Mayor Gregor Robertson, says we will get the answer by 2050. That's when forecasters believe seven billion people will be living in cities around the world.

Dr. Boyd sees this massive move to urban centres as both a challenge and an opportunity.

"If we succeed in making cities sustainable, then we will achieve the holy grail of a sustainable future for humankind," he says.

And it's not just the mega-cities in developing countries that face the challenge of sustainability. Right here in Canada, we need to do far more, warns Dr. Boyd.

"Canadian cities are saddled with unsustainable transportation systems, outdated water and wastewater infrastructure, and inefficient buildings. These are legacies of an era when cornucopian fantasies and the automobile dominated urban design," he says.

Another huge challenge, he adds, is that Canadian cities are struggling towards sustainability with one arm tied behind their backs, because of inadequate revenue-raising powers and counterproductive federal and provincial policies.

And that's a big part of the problem as noted in a recent Federation of Canadian Municipalities report, Building Canada's Green Economy.

The report's co-author is David Thompson, director of sustainable communities at Ottawa-based think-tank Sustainable Prosperity.

"Normal municipal policy tools – planning, zoning and the like – tend to focus on the symptoms without tackling the cause: prices. The bottom

line is that buying on the urban fringe is cheaper than buying in established urban areas. As they say in the mortgage business, 'drive until you qualify,'" says Mr. Thompson.

He points out that the costs of sprawling development are artificially suppressed by a range of financial and non-financial subsidies such as the sprawl-inducing incentives embedded in the structure of municipal revenue instruments like property taxes and property development charges, in subsidies for infrastructure and services, and in unpaid environmental costs that economists term externalities.

"Prices are very powerful decision drivers," says Mr. Thompson. "The good news is we can shift the incentives at no net cost to the city, and make them reward denser development. And if we really want to beat sprawl, we need to get the prices right."

And sustainable cities not only protect the environment, they also provide proven health and lifestyle benefits to residents.

"Researchers have long known

that suburban sprawl locks in automobile dependency, guaranteeing decades of higher climate change and smog emissions," says Mr. Thompson. "Current research is revealing an association between urban sprawl and obesity, depression, diabetes and other illnesses."

Mr. Boyd says a sustainable city is a place where people can happily live, work, play, raise their children and retire.

"It's a place where all residents enjoy clean air, safe water, comfortable housing, the music of songbirds and access to green spaces within a five-minute walk," he says. "A place where the average ecological footprint is within Earth's capacity."

While it may seem utopian, Mr. Boyd says real progress is being made towards sustainable cities.

"Urban visionaries and planners understand that we live in a world of limits. Bigger is not always better, and there are smarter approaches. European cities such as Copenhagen and Stockholm offer invaluable lessons about green infrastructure and making people the priority. One of the fundamental lessons involves re-allocating public space from cars to people," says Mr. Boyd.

Here at home, he adds, Vancouver is a model for other Canadian cities because its cutting-edge sustainability plan is focused on action.

"From district energy systems and city-wide composting to separated bike lanes and community gardens, Vancouver is undergoing both visible and invisible transformations in its quest for global leadership."

Mr. Boyd says Vancouver's success proves that aggressive action to become a sustainable city triggers a virtuous circle: attracting human and financial capital that leads to green jobs, healthier people, more happiness and smaller ecological footprints.

"It demonstrates that the European approach can work in North America," he says.



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