

Chalk one up for the developers

Published in the *Calgary Herald*, May 27, 2005

Naheed K. Nenshi

The developers are right; the residents are wrong. I never thought I would write those sentences, but in the case of the Stoney industrial area, it's true.

Even more shocking, Calgary city council's general willingness to roll over to the developers' point of view actually helped it make the right decision this time around.

Here's the issue in a nutshell: there's a bunch of mostly empty land north of the airport, more or less between Barlow Trail and the west bank of Nose Creek, bisected by the Deerfoot. Because of various airport restrictions, this land will not be able to support residential development. It's always been zoned for industrial development, but most landowners have been waiting many years to develop.

Meanwhile, the land immediately to the west was developed into the northern hills suburbs: Country Hills, Coventry Hills, Harvest Hills and Panorama.

These neighbourhoods are among the best-planned new suburbs in Calgary -- mixed-income, higher-density, built around a central shopping and transit hub. If you must live in a newer suburb, consider these neighbourhoods. They really are quite wonderful.

There's one problem, though. There are only two major roads in and out -- Country Hills Boulevard and Beddington Trail. Stoney Trail, when completed, will serve the northern border of the neighbourhood. Both roads are already clogged during rush hours, and there is little ability to expand them.

Residents are, quite rightly, concerned about the traffic implications of developing the Stoney industrial area.

There are really only two potential solutions here. One is for the city (and the province?) to purchase the land outright and turn it into a major regional park focused on Nose Creek.

Sound impossible? Well, it happened in 1989 to finally make Nose Hill Park permanent. And the mayor has set aside \$50 million of the Enmax dividend to purchase parks on the outskirts of the city in the other three quadrants.

Given, though, that there is zero political will to make a huge investment like that in the northeast, the only other option is the one residents and planners are the most afraid of -- a high-density employment centre. Planners predict catastrophe if the area is developed up to I2 (light industrial) standards, and their original proposal was for something new, called I2 light -- dooming the area to become an endless sea of self-storage facilities and the occasional car dealership.

Wait a second, though -- we're basically saying we can't have development at the intersection of our major north-south highway and our ring road, because of too much traffic?

If we can't handle traffic where two major highways meet, that tells me either the current model is wrong or we've had a lot of incompetent planning to this point.

My favourite moment of the public hearing on this issue came when aldermen questioned the assumptions of the traffic model -- why are people assumed to be going north more than south?

Why is the afternoon peak assumed to be at the same time for factories as downtown employees? Since nothing exists there now, can't we build the area to be transit-friendly from the start?

The answer to this last question, despite the fact the plan the bureaucrats wrote spends pages paying lip service to efficient transit service and the creation of shorter commute patterns, was shockingly simple. Transit never works in industrial areas, council was told, because the density is too low to support it.

Hang on, here. We can't build higher-density because it would cause traffic problems, but we can't work to solve the traffic problems with transit because we didn't build high-density?

Why not plot out the roads to be transit-friendly from the start, and begin transit service from the new Westwinds LRT station and the

bus hub at Country Hills almost immediately so it's seen as an option from day 1?

Instead, we have these trembling, timorous steps focused on avoiding short-term traffic problems at the expense of long-term sprawl and sustainability.

The revitalization and densification of the inner city has been driven by people who just can't deal with traffic anymore. Perhaps reconciling ourselves to the fact Deerfoot might be a bit crowded for two hours of the day will help us make other tough decisions.

Naheed Nenshi teaches in the non-profit studies degree program at Mount Royal College's Bissett School of Business.