

Super location gone to waste

Published in the *Calgary Herald*, June 17, 2005

Naheed K. Nenshi

A new Superstore opened right near my house this week. Normally, this would make me very happy. I'm a big fan of the chain -- my pantry is filled with President's Choice products, and I teach about them in my marketing classes.

I also have a theory about how Superstore (and yes, Wal-Mart) improves the wealth of a community by reducing the cost of living and increasing discretionary income.

This particular Superstore, though, makes me mad.

Let me explain: the new Westwinds store is located on formerly bare land at 64th Avenue and 36th Street -- a key intersection for those who live in the northeast. More importantly, it's also the location of the next stop on the northeast C-Train line.

The city also has a policy in place called "transit-oriented development." The policy talks about increased density around transit stations, creating pedestrian links to the station, and especially about making sure land uses around the station support transit.

Sounds good, right? In fact, TOD is the only way to go as Calgary grows. We need to aspire to a topography like Toronto.

If you were to imagine looking at the length of Yonge Street from the side, it would look like a mountain range with peaks and valleys, the peaks occurring in clusters around each subway station. So, as late as last summer, the city was looking at a huge patch of bare land where a C-Train station would arise. What a great opportunity to put transit-oriented development into action.

The city had two choices, both of which would have been pretty exciting: first, as envisioned by the Go Plan, a suburban office campus, centred on the C-train station, creating a reverse commuting pattern. The second option was to create a great high-density housing complex with townhomes, condos and street-level

retail for the neighbourhood (think the Bridges), again centred on the C-Train station.

In typical fashion, faced with two good choices, the city chose neither. They decided to work with a developer to create an industrial area, the first two tenants of which are the aforementioned Superstore and -- wait for it -- a truck distribution facility.

They could not have come up with two uses less friendly to transit -- and more opposed to their own policy -- if they started with "let's do the worst possible thing."

The final state will be no better. The existing residential communities will be cut off from the station by low-density factories, the new LRT maintenance yard and tracks, vast parking lots, and a proposed interchange.

Maybe this is the northeast getting the shaft yet again. When I went to an open house on TOD last summer, I asked if this kind of development was being contemplated for Westwinds. "Oh, no," said the planner. "This isn't for there. We're aiming for Westwinds to be the mother of all Park-and-Rides."

To be fair, though, horrible transit planning is not restricted to any quadrant. The Go Plan envisioned five major suburban employment centres. The city has already fully screwed up three of them -- Shawnessy, Westwinds and Crowfoot -- now big-box wastelands that are almost impossible to serve by transit.

They've now messed up the fourth in Westwinds and there is a very good chance they will achieve a perfect record by "compromising" in the Stoney Industrial Area.

What is really happening here, I think, is a complete disconnect between vision and the day-to-day decisions that lead to that vision.

Two weeks ago, I wrote about how the Stoney Industrial Area plan envisioned great transit service, but the transportation planning department actually believes this is impossible. Westwinds is

another example -- the city is happy to pay lip service to TOD, but not actually do anything about it.

The everyday decisions, conjured in backrooms by developers and lobbyists, protested and watered-down by Not In My Backyard residents, are approved in a vacuum.

What's missing is leadership and the willingness of individual members of city council to spend some political capital for the long-term future of the city. With the next election 2 1/2 long years away, hopefully, we'll start seeing more courage now.

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