

Ways to Build a Better Calgary

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I had a wonderful time in Olympic Plaza last weekend -- movies on a giant screen, an Asian night market, drop-in bocce. There was also something called "laughter yoga" but that scared me a little bit -- probably a sign that I needed it.

All of this action was tied to the release last week of the new plan for the Olympic Plaza Cultural District, but it's no accident it also happened during the annual conference of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

Politicians and administrators from across Canada converged here, and there was a real desire to show them not only the best of what we are, but the best of what we can and should be.

But it's about a lot more than bocce and backgammon. We have to make our big cities work better as engines of social and economic development, while recognizing they are the "magnets" that draw the best of the world to Canada.

It's a good time now to forget about territorial fights with provincial and federal governments, and to start thinking about the kinds of cities we need, and how we're going to get there.

Sometimes, I call this the "global urban consensus" -- people who live in cities across the developed world, whether they're left wing or right wing, no matter what language they speak, value the same kinds of things in their communities.

My colleagues at the Better Calgary Campaign and I have taken a stab at some of what this might mean for Calgary:

Ending urban sprawl: The growth patterns we see in Calgary are not natural evolution; it's because of the choices we have made that 80 per cent of Calgary neighbourhoods lost population in 2005, a year of incredible growth. We have chosen to subsidize new homes on the outskirts of the city, while making it difficult to redevelop inner-city and existing suburban neighbourhoods.

We need to ask ourselves why bureaucrats measure the height difference between a "deck" and a "patio" for home renovators while we pay almost full freight for the infrastructure needed in new areas.

Renewing our focus on public transit: Everyone who has studied the issue comes to the same conclusion: New roads create traffic, they don't remove congestion. Transit, on the other hand, is the answer to so many of the issues that big cities face: congestion, pollution, social isolation. We have to work hard to make it the best possible choice, not the choice for those who have no other choice.

Fighting urban poverty and homelessness: While big cities have inequities in income almost by definition, homelessness is not inevitable. How is it that Calgary, with its sometimes brutal winters, has far more homeless people per capita than Vancouver?

Building vibrant, mixed communities: Arts and culture really matter -- even if people never go to the ballet, they want to live in a city with a ballet. Even more important is the backgammon-and- bocce stuff I discussed at the beginning.

Cities need an urban vibe, attractive and attracting public spaces, and neighbourhoods that are welcoming, safe and mixed.

Here in Calgary, we love to build monocultural, mono-income, mono- age neighbourhoods -- just check out the Herald's Saturday real estate section maps. If you're a well-off family with school-age kids, look west. If you're starting out, look far north and south.

Then, there's ethnic segregation, but that's a column for another day. This is a problem not only for soft reasons -- kids are immeasurably richer when they grow up with people different than themselves -- but there are practical concerns as well. If all the kids in a neighbourhood are roughly the same age, there'll be a huge demand for new schools, and then, 15 to 20 years later, the school loses population suddenly and faces closure. Sound familiar?

There's more, of course, but the important issue here is the need for leadership at the political level as well as at the public level. We need to elect politicians who can make the tough decisions, and throw out the ones who cannot.

And how about supporting those leaders once they are elected? It's easy enough to say you support increased density, but that also means supporting the new apartment building being built over the dilapidated strip mall at the end of the street, and not worrying about traffic.

It's about welcoming mixed-income developments on the same street as our kids' school, and quelling our nervousness about who might live there. Are we, as citizens, up for the challenge? Are our leaders?

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