

OPINION

Older inner-city areas losing people

Population trend affects city plans

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SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

While Calgary is one of the fastest growing cities in North America, a review of the recent census findings uncovers many interesting, if not shocking, facts.

For instance, one-half of Calgary communities actually lost population over the past year, including popular inner-city construction zones such as Bankview, Eau Claire, Elbow Park and Hillhurst.

How can this be — and what does it mean for Calgary's future?

From April 2004 to April 2005, Calgary grew by 2.42 per cent, or 22,583 people. However, much of our population growth was housed in newer suburbs.

There are fundamentally three factors that contribute to population decreases in older communities:

■ Firstly, children grow up and move out of their homes and communities, reducing the number of people per household.

Because most residential neighbourhoods are composed of housing for families, when kids leave home, those houses become too big for empty-nesters and are difficult to transform — and they move to smaller or more convenient homes.

■ Next, as old communities mature, some of the housing is redeveloped into non-residential uses, such as offices and shops. Land use changes also come about through the current processes of decentralizing services, which have led to a decline in the number of schools, libraries, swimming pools and other amenities in the inner-city.

■ Finally, partly in response to the declining number of schools, libraries and so on, inner-city housing projects are often targeted at young adults, thereby replacing families with single-person households.

To be sure, Calgary's population will continue to grow, if only from the natural increase of approximately 9,000 people per year (such as births over deaths).

If current housing trends continue, new suburbs will house this growth, resulting in additional pressure on transportation systems as people travel away from their suburbs to do their work, recreation, entertainment and shopping.

Hence, we face the prospect of more freeways, buses and trains, and more time, money and effort being spent getting ourselves out of our impressive homes in new suburban communities.

To further complicate this messy state of affairs, there is a decline in the demand for schools, libraries, swimming pools and other amenities in inner city areas as the population demands increase at the city edges, and a contrasting cry for redundant facilities in the new suburbs.

It would seem that we have all the assets in all the wrong places. Is this an unavoidable fait accompli?

We hardly think so.

There are many factors about the urban landscape that make nomads of us, as we are forced to move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood as our circumstances and ages change, and as we need to drive from place to place to meet basic needs of working, shopping, recreation.



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The Calgary Tower rises over new condominiums within the inner-city Ertion community.

This is one of the products of the previous paradigm that has heavily influenced the form and function of the city, where zoning attempted to segregate different land uses, different activities, and different ages and incomes.

For decades, the City of Calgary has promoted (backed by numerous policy reports and council resolutions) the idea of bringing non-home activities closer to where people live in order to provide the benefits and conveniences of living in the city, while combating the travel time, nuisance and costs associated with the "Los Angelization" of Calgary.

This is indeed a wise policy because there are only two ways to deal with the problem: either build more transportation links (expensive and time-consuming) or reduce the need for so much travel by bringing our activity spots closer together.

Unfortunately, after decades of trying to bring work and home closer together, we reluctantly observe that implementation is much harder than simply passing a policy.

Clearly a more significant shift in thinking and approach is needed, even to support implementation of existing policy.

How does one shift a paradigm? We will share some of our ideas on this question in future columns.

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COOL IDEAS

f o r y o u r h o m e

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