

OPINION

# We say we don't want sprawl, but...

## Roads are primary force behind problem

JIM DEWALD and BEV SANDALACK  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

In March, Canada West Foundation released a survey of citizens living in major cities west of, and including Toronto.

What they found was that Calgarians are more concerned about urban sprawl than the citizens of all other cities surveyed (74 per cent of Calgarians versus 66 per cent of Torontonians and 63 per cent of Vancouverites).

Interesting. One month later, Canada West Foundation shared further survey results, asking respondents what they would see as the top priorities for their city.

Again, there was a distinct difference between the views of Calgarians and Canada's larger municipalities.

Seventy-six per cent of Calgarians felt that building and maintaining a road system was a very high or high priority, making it number two on Calgary's overall list of priorities, again far outstripping the responses from Toronto and Vancouver.

Large metropolitan regions like Vancouver and Toronto are far more concerned about social and environmental issues, while the responses from Calgarians were more similar to smaller centres like Saskatoon, who worry most about how far and fast they can drive.

Calgarians seem to want to be a big city with the urbanity and qualities that go along with it, but the mindset is obviously still more like a

small centre, and one that serves and promotes sprawl. Why do we still not understand that roads are the primary driver of sprawl?

Simply put, extending road networks as the framework for urban development is a guaranteed path to sprawl. The relationship is direct and significant, and this is not a chickens and eggs paradox — roads create sprawl, period.



Jim Dewald



Bev Sandalack

Unfortunately, to many, roads look like a quick fix for our traffic problems.

In reality, research has found that extending road networks does little more than promote more travel.

The key measure here is vehicle trips travelled per capita, which increases every time a travel lane is added, an interchange is built, or a freeway is extended.

Over the medium to long term, congestion always goes up with road improvements, not the other way around. This truth has been realized in both Toronto and Vancouver.

Toronto's big experiment was the 407 Expressway. The logic seemed sound — make commuters pay a toll to travel faster, and they will take trips away from the swelling 401.

The results: after less than a decade in operation, the 407 is operating at full capacity with 360,000 daily trips (three times what we see on most of the Deerfoot), and the 401 has required two major upgrades and lane additions to cope with additional traffic.

Roads induce travel — this fact that has been proven consistently.

In Vancouver, city officials made a conscious decision years ago to stop building new roads



Calgary Herald Archive

Extending road networks as the framework for urban development creates urban sprawl.

into the downtown area.

The result has been an explosion of residential development near downtown, and dispersion of employment to suburban regions.

While perhaps not completely intuitive, this has resulted in fewer and shorter trips.

Even with their relatively under-developed public transit system, Vancouver is the only major city in Canada where average daily commute time has gone down, not up, between 1992 and 2005 (see graph).

A similar response has happened in Calgary.

The City of Calgary's 2005 transportation plan update reported that even though no new roads have been built into our downtown for decades, employment growth and downtown building have continued, supported by increased use of transit, walking, biking, or relocating (i.e. people moving to downtown housing).

This is a healthier and far more sustainable way to grow a city than just continuing to build out with low density suburbs.

Roads do not solve traffic problems, they create them. The evidence is irrefutable.

Calgary, it is time to get out of our small town thinking and realize that great cities have a different infrastructure framework than small and medium sized cities.

What is the legacy we want to leave for our

children and for future Calgarians, and how can we create the best possible example given our relative wealth and privilege?

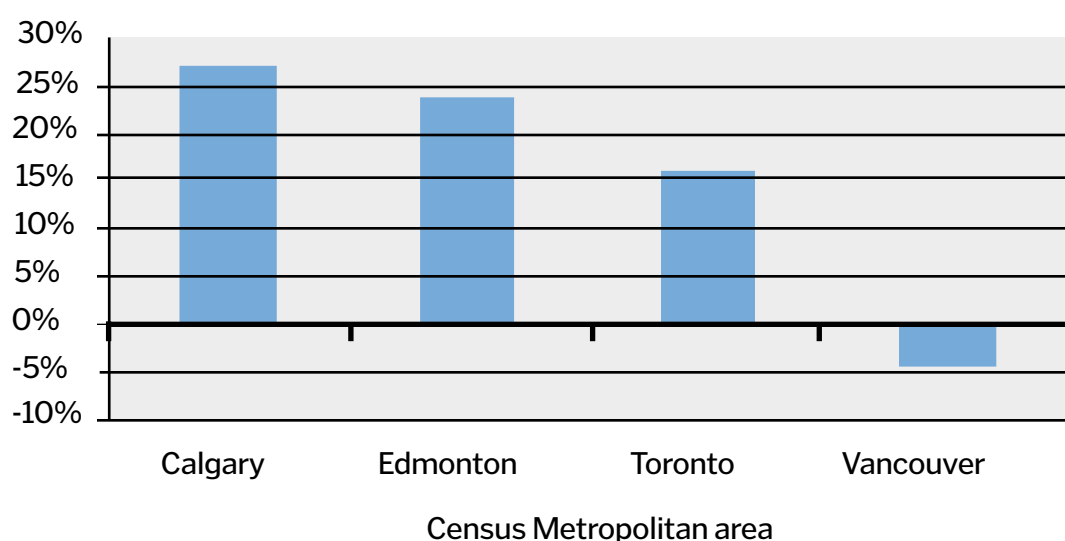
Ironically, while our political cycle of tri-annual elections causes elected officials to focus on short-term objectives, developers have a longer term, albeit frustrated, outlook.

In April, city council's priorities included tossing homeless people out to the snowy streets so that the Trans-Canada Highway improvements could be finished ahead of the next election.

Meanwhile, the Urban Land Institute (the developer lobby group in the U.S.), released a report calling for North American cities to abandon the single-use, low density sprawl patterns of growth in favour of higher density, mixed use patterns.

Maybe some of these visionaries should run for office?

Percentage change in average daily commute time (1992 to 2005)



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