

OPINION

# Cost of ongoing growth doesn't add up

**JIM DEWALD AND BEV SANDALACK**  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

The City of Calgary recently released a study that made two important predictions:

- Calgary will grow by 225,000 over the next 10 years;
- this growth will require an additional \$7 billion in infrastructure.

Back in the 20th century, a fictional character, Dr. Evil, shocked the world in the Austin Powers series of films by asking for a \$1 "beeeeeellion" ransom to save the Earth.

But in modern-day Calgary, a number like \$7 billion hardly causes people to yawn, particularly when the Herald squeezes the article next to an announcement by Shell to spend \$27 billion on an oilsands upgrader.

However, if you break down this number to the scale of your household, you might see a different picture.

A figure of 225,000 people in the suburbs converts to about 80,000 households (at 2.7 to 2.8 persons per housing unit); \$7 billion divided by 80,000 households equates to \$87,500 per new home.

The readers of this column will understand what an additional \$87,500 per home, including multi-family units, would mean.

It would be a sharp and sudden stop to the housing industry.

Why would anyone pay that extra cost to be in a Calgary suburb, rather than buy in the inner-city or out of town?

Clearly, the housing industry — or more correctly, homebuyers — cannot possibly absorb this outrageous added cost.

But, fear not; a solution is in sight!

City officials are proposing to redirect the education portion of the property tax to cover these growth costs.

However, education property taxes come out of the pockets of existing residents. Why should they pay the added cost for new residents?

There is sure to be a revolt from existing Calgary residents if this proposed solution is instituted.

"What about the provincial government?" you say. "They have billions in surplus money."

Maybe, but is it logical for money that belongs to all three million or more Albertans to go to address the needs of 225,000 new Calgarians?

Again, a taxpayer revolt is predictable.

In summary, the money cannot come from the future homeowners. It is too expensive to make sense, and it would be political suicide, and frankly



Grant Black, Calgary Herald

Rush hour traffic slows to a crawl on northbound Deerfoot Trail due to summer road construction.

not right, to saddle existing residents of either Calgary or Alberta with these costs. So what shall we do?

Here is one solution. Spend less.

The \$7 billion is irrefutable proof that the current patterns of growth are not financially sustainable.

The further we stretch, the more it costs, until we get to a breaking point.

Consider other sprawl cities, such as Phoenix, Ariz.

The Economist recently ran a feature article on Phoenix, noting that as recently as 1993, it was recognized as the world's best-managed city.

This is fitting as the 1970s to 1990s promoted the vision of a freeway-based sprawl city that placed private enclaves and the car far above concepts like sense of place and the public realm.

The freeway city concept promotes exclusivity, gated neighbourhoods, and privatization of parks and viewpoints.

Cities that were born decades and centuries earlier focused on inclusivity and a public realm that promotes a sense of community at a local scale.

Today, as the poster child freeway city, with endless suburban sprawl and rings of interchanges, on-ramps, and HOV lanes (high occupancy vehicle lanes, including things like carpooling), Phoenix has many problems.

The Economist article states that "burglary, theft, and car crime are among the highest in the country."

In addition, smog and commuter traffic are among the worst and education ratings are the lowest in the United States. The article also notes that Phoenix residents, themselves, complain about the "unsocial" nature of the city.

Others have also reported problems with the freeway city model.

For instance, a recent study by the World Health Organization states that sprawl contributes directly to obesity.

Their research indicates that it is imperative that urban development return to a more human scale that relies on mixed-use environments to

encourage more walking, and local shops that provide healthy food options (instead of the ubiquitous fast food joints).

Calgarians, it is time to wake up and realize that there are far too many financial, social, and environmental costs to our patterns of growth.

It seems easy for those who feel threatened to scoff at the social and environmental impacts.

Maybe the thought of billions converting into \$87,500 per housing unit will catch their attention.

Whether it is through witnessing the pathetic inability of sprawl to cope

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with social issues like crime, congestion, and education (the Phoenix example); the convincing research that links obesity and other health issues to sprawl; the obvious cost of sprawl (\$87,500 additional cost per housing unit); or the inability of cities to cope with crisis (like New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina); sooner or later, we will figure out that a change is needed.

Why not recognize this sooner than later and adjust our patterns of growth?

For developers, this doesn't mean an end to new growth.

It simply means doing it differently — providing employment and local shopping opportunities as an integral focus of new community design, developing neighbourhoods that work on a smaller local scale, and

infusing the public realm with a true sense of place where neighbours can be true neighbours.

Let's create meaningful new communities that lead away from, not toward, the pitfalls of the freeway city.

JIM DEWALD, PH.D., IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, STRATEGY AND GLOBAL MANAGEMENT AT THE HASKAYNE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, AND A PARTNER WITH PETERS-DEWALD LAND CO. BEV SANDALACK, PH.D., IS CO-ORDINATOR OF THE URBAN DESIGN PROGRAM IN THE FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, MEMBER OF THE CALGARY URBAN DESIGN REVIEW PANEL, AND CO-AUTHOR OF THE CALGARY PROJECT, A BOOK ABOUT CALGARY'S URBAN DEVELOPMENT.

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