

# We still have work to do building bridges

BY BOB RANSFORD, SPECIAL TO THE SUN    MARCH 2, 2013

A series of random impressions can shape profound thoughts or big questions. My experiences of the past week offered some random impressions about the effort that has existed since humans first inhabited this earth - finding shelter and creating a habitat where our species can gather together.

An exchange of a flurry of tweets this week with activists protesting change that is bringing new residential density to their neighbourhoods left me with the impression that they really feel threatened and powerless. Their messages to me were sarcastic, and even caustic. I'm a target because I'm perceived to be an advocate for developers who are their perceived enemies.

What is at the root of their angst? Does it have anything to do with the way in which housing has become a commodity? They aren't nearly as powerless as they think. In fact, the irony is that housing developers believe that neighbourhood activists have all the power when it comes to deciding what happens with development. We have some work to do in building bridges and finding common interests if we want to build good human habitat.

A quick trip out to the Fraser Valley during rush hour for an early morning meeting this week made me realize **that all of the real growth in the region is still sprawling growth.** Three or four months is like a lifetime when measuring the physical impact of urban growth in places like Langley. Overpasses, huge seas of parking lots, destination shopping centres, car-oriented fast food outlets - all of the features of urban sprawl - continue to take shape.

People flock to Metro Vancouver and places to house them continue to be found. Despite all of the talk about density, the "Vancouverism", smart growth and transit-oriented development, **the fact is that the car still rules and most of the residential growth in this region really isn't smart growth.**

I received a call this past week from someone who wants to raise awareness about the need for "workforce housing". The argument is that amid all of the talk about housing affordability and the need to house the homeless, housing for ordinary middle-income people isn't getting much attention.

Who are these people? What is workforce housing? Almost all of the housing built in the region is built for "ordinary" middle-class people.

Many people are really stretched in their lives just trying to afford a roof over their heads.

What kind of housing are we building? What are our lifestyle expectations today and how do they compare to the same expectations that our parents and grandparents had? Could we lower expectations and still have good housing and livable communities?

At a meeting this week with some city officials and community activists to talk about processes for engaging the citizens in managing neighbourhood growth and change, there was talk about planning a "public benefits strategy". That's the term used to describe the mechanism that extracts value from new developments - mostly housing development - to finance community amenities and infrastructure.

Many don't really know where this value comes from. It's a lot like money that magically appears when you build a new condo project. Those who think they understand real estate economics will tell you that landowners provide this value. They seem to imply that property owners have lots of money and they can afford to pay for things all taxpayers used to pay for. Hardly anyone believes a targeted group of homebuyers and renters actually pay to finance these public extractions.

My impression is that no one really wants to analyze it or consider the impact this kind of infrastructure financing is having on housing affordability. We've found this magic source of money no one has to account for and everyone is happy leaving it that way. It's been a long week with a series of impressions, many of which knit together to tell a story. It's not a pretty story. We seem to be lost. It seems we've lost sight of what mankind has tried to do since people started gathering together. Aren't we supposed to be providing shelter and creating a habitat where our species can gather together?

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**Reality Check:**

The Development Cost Charges (DCC) and Community Amenity Charges (CAC) typically account for -at most- only a few percent of the selling price of the market-priced units. - cjk