



Politicians just can't resist the allure of urban sprawl

As gas prices spiral upward, calls from public to embrace green space go ignored in favour of far-flung strip malls, uniform neighbourhoods

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 22, 2011


Planning conferences across Canada usually include lofty discussion of sustainable futures based on tightly contained community plans involving imaginative infill housing, livable density, green space and smart public transit.

In other words, planning bureaucrats get it. Urban sprawl is the enemy of healthy communities.

Yet it's equally clear that elected officials still don't grasp the concept. Too many employ bogus economic arguments to support developments that transform their communities into commuter wastelands, strip malls and ticky-tack neighbourhoods of mindnumbing sameness.

Consider **Central Saanich**, a rural largely agricultural community on south Vancouver Island.

Politicians there overruled planning staff and ignored their own ratepayers to rezone agricultural land for a contentious subdivision that critics say contravenes the official community plan.

Council's decision  was challenged in court by a local ratepayers' association seeking to quash the rezoning bylaw. **A judge ruled that it's not for courts to interfere with an elected council's interpretation of its own official community plan.**

Then there's the rezoning of a former working forest adjacent to the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail, part of a world-renowned park west of Victoria that's used by 330,000 people a year. Rezoning permits a large resort development.

Critics say placing a 257-unit subdivision on the trail can only destroy the wilderness values it seeks to exploit. They further object that the extension of public services required contravenes the regional growth strategy that seeks to curb urban sprawl.

But rezoning approval wasn't even decided by the **Capital Regional District** board. A small land use committee dominated by representatives from bedroom suburbs that themselves characterize urban sprawl had final say. **Despite more than 700 letters, the great majority opposing the plan, the committee voted for development.**

Former federal environment minister David Anderson has argued something is seriously wrong when citizens have no way to influence a narrow decision that can't be reversed

and which may profoundly and permanently affect their long-term enjoyment of a high-value public asset which local supporters hope to exploit for short-term benefit.

Anderson has called for provincial intervention to ensure the democratic right of all the potentially affected regional municipalities and their citizens to have a say. The CRD itself asked Community, Sport and Cultural Development Minister Ida Chong to change the voting system to permit all directors to have a say. Chong did nothing, apparently paralyzed at the prospect of making a decision.

Meanwhile, the province passes the buck to the procedurally hamstrung CRD, claiming it has no money to buy an adequate buffer, all the while bleating disgracefully empty platitudes about protecting parkland integrity. Talk about leadership by Little Bo Peep.

Back in Central Saanich, yet another urban sprawl issue is before the courts. This time, local citizens who have been agitating against a decision by the politicians to permit a large retail mall to be built among the rural farm fields are being sued by the developer, who alleges unfair trickery by activist opponents.

Up at Bridge Lake in the Cariboo, residents are incensed by provincial plans to swap portions of a Crown recreational reserve to a developer in exchange for an island in the lake. Critics there say the proposal will result in significant financial gain for the developer with limited public benefit and will casually set aside the public interest in a provincial land reserve -not an appetizing precedent.

All these events are examples of a recurring pattern in which politicians undermine the principle of curbing urban sprawl. I suspect this is because too many governments, particularly in smaller communities, are examples of what scholars have called the phenomenon of captured agency.

This describes government regulatory bodies so deeply influenced by those they are supposed to regulate that they actually wind up favouring them at the expense of the broad public interest they are intended to defend.

Again and again, politicians reveal a mindset that causes them to think small. They seem mesmerized by the tantalizing short-term promises dangled by development and heedless of the long-term consequences.

And so urban sprawl advances incrementally at the expense of livability, even when it makes little economic sense, embedded as it is in the bigger picture of relentlessly rising gasoline prices and the public cost of extending services.

shume@islandnet.com