

Daphne Bramham: The Millennials are here, but are we ready?

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 15, 2014



Transit is one of the most important infrastructure investments we can make to meet the future needs of the Millennial generation.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, Vancouver Sun

‘Millennials’ are the kids crammed into overcrowded B-Line buses headed to and from UBC. They are the many under-employed servers and clerks, unpaid interns and contract workers.

They are frequently dissed as being entitled, lazy and arrogant. But they are also the largest demographic group to come along since the Baby Boom.

What they do, want and aspire to already influences everything from fashion to urban design.

But for urban planners, the most important question isn’t what do they want now, it’s what will they want in the future.

Because meeting their future wants and needs means building that infrastructure now — whether it’s more transit and more tightly packed cities, or more suburbs and freeways.

At this point, no one’s sure which they will choose.

Right now, they are flooding into urban centres like Vancouver.

“It has built ‘up’ instead of ‘out’. It has good transit, walkability. It has an interesting arts scene, music,

cafes and shopping,” says Markus Moos, who teaches urban planning at the University of Waterloo. “Millennials seek vibrancy.”

TransLink statistics indicate that Millennials are three times more likely to live close to transit, and much more likely to live downtown than other age group.

Unlike previous generations, Millennials no longer see getting a driver’s license or owning a car as rites of passage.

Only half of Metro’s 16-to-19-year-olds can drive, while among 25- to 29-year-olds, car ownership has dropped 10 per cent in the last decade.

But as they get a bit older and start to have families, will they want to raise their children downtown?

If more of them do, something will have to be done soon because Yaletown’s only elementary school already can’t cope with the unprecedented increase in the number of children.

Then, there is the question of housing. Some Millennials may be content to raise children in one- or two-bedroom apartments and condos. There are some larger units, but Moos says many of those are already beyond the reach of a generation strapped with larger debts and poorer job prospects than their parents.

To make it work, he says, there will likely need to be some form of government intervention. What kind is an open question.

It could, for example, be encouragement to developers to build different forms of housing with more shared communal space to keep costs down, even higher density or some sort of incentive to developers to forego expensive finishes like granite counters and stainless-steel appliances.

Of course, the Gen-Yers may decide they want to return to their suburban roots where land prices mean cheaper housing.

But Moos believes that returning Millennials will want a different, more vibrant suburban experience that is close to what they have become accustomed to in the cities, and less reliance on cars because many are not only used to transit, they prefer it.

Accommodating such tastes means that suburbs need to change. Short of sprawling ever further onto prime agriculture land, adding more cars, more exhaust and more carbon into the air, planners and politicians need to be preparing for higher-density developments and more transit rather than more roads.

American studies suggest that young adults are more practical about their transportation choices and more concerned about the environmental impacts of their choices.

They will walk or ride bikes if that is easiest. For longer trips, they prefer buses and rapid transit because it gives them time to catch up on social media or work. For trips to big-box stores, Millennials are the most likely to use car co-ops and car shares.

So what does it all mean for planners?

Transit. Transit. Transit. That is one of the clearest messages that Moos says we should be getting.

Regardless of whether the Millennials choose downtown or the suburbs, they are likely to continue to demand access to transit.

Two-thirds of the region's jobs and nearly half its residents are located within walking distance of rapid transit. And while the population increased by 15 per cent between 2002 and 2012, transit ridership increased by 85 per cent to 1.2 million riders a day, 233.9 million trips a year on buses, trains and SeaBus.

 This statement needs verification. - cjk

But the system needs improving to meet rising demand, and TransLink needs money beyond its current budget of \$1.2 billion a year to do that.

And that is only going to be possible if citizens approve new funding sources for the regional transportation authority in next spring's referendum.

Beyond that, Moos says, Millennials' choices of where they live will definitely impact housing prices.

And while some people speculate that this will mean higher prices for suburban single-family homes, Moos suggests the bigger demand might be for urban condos.

There, the competition won't only come from other Millennials, but from their deeper-pocketed parents, who are discovering the joys of downtown living now that the kids have left home.

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Markus Moos will be speaking at SFU Harbour Centre on Tuesday, Sept. 16 at 7 p.m. There is no charge. But online registration at <http://bit.ly/1xV5q2L> for The New Generation: Are Millennials Changing the Game? is required.

dbramham@vancouversun.com

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