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Eco- density is a thin concept

Mayor's proposal to cram more people into a small area is neither environmentally sound nor fiscally prudent

BY CHERYL SAVCHENKO

MIKE BLAKE/ REUTERS

Environmental leaders are looking towards green building codes and technologies as a more effective approach to addressing climate change than simply rezoning for higher density.

Governments that practice " policy by press release" usually encounter two related problems. First, the policies are based on thin research because the real goal is to grab a headline. Second, because of the poor research, negative, unforeseen consequences can crop up for a generation or more.

These problems can be found in Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan's Eco- Density proposal, a concept hastily cobbled together as the basis for a speech to an international urban forum.

The key premises of the policy are that packing neighbourhoods with more housing is environmentally sound and fiscally prudent. Both premises are wrong, according to experts.

A leading environmental publication, E Magazine, questions whether initiatives in urban density really mean that the environment is being " co- opted for marketing purposes." Magazine researchers Sally Deneen and Brian Howard suggest that packing more houses on the land base without ensuring that they conform to leadingedge environmental building practices will not lead to a greener world. Consider that in America (and presumably Canada with its colder climate) buildings put out about one third of the country's greenhouse gasses, more than the automobile sector. Therefore, cramming people into neighbourhoods in order to counter the environmental effects of transportation, may have exactly the opposite effect. We can't assume that all residents of these " ecodense" communities will have a short bus ride or stroll to work.

Environmental leaders are looking towards green building codes and technologies as a more effective approach to addressing climate change than simply rezoning for density. The authors see three factors driving this shift in approach. These include the rising energy prices, growing public commitment to the environment and increasing health care costs. The industry standard for green building codes is called Leadership in Environmental Engineering and Design, or LEEDS for short.

Building new housing stock that meets LEED standards won't come cheap. The magazine Business Week profiled a residence that it called " the greenest house on the planet", located in Santa Monica California. The home earned the highest possible LEED rating in the Platinum category. But the construction price comes in at $ 400 per square foot. This is significantly higher than the conventional high density, environmentally hostile housing envisioned in the mayor's press release.

Less expensive options are emerging. In the U. S., an initiative called Green Communities established a $ 600 million account with a target of building 8,500 green homes for low- income people in 23 states. The funding provides tax credits, financing and assistance to developers who meet green criteria. Today close to 7,000 units have been built, including one in Seattle where people with low income or no income can rent green units for just over $ 300 per month. For those rents, Vancouver's poor are living in roach hotels.

So if the environmental benefits of " eco- density" are questionable, what about the fiscal impact on city finances?

Three American cities, Salem, Oregon; Roanoke, Virginia; and Charlotte, North Carolina, have taken the innovative step of putting trees and green space on the cities' balance sheets in a way that measures the contribution made by nature to services in the city. The process is called calculating " natural capital" to determine how trees, shrubs, and soil produce ecosystem services with financial and health benefits to taxpayers. The cities produced data that demonstrated tax savings in flood control and drainage stemming from more park space and trees. Parking lots, driveways and buildings shed water, which results in a bigger tax bite for water control systems. Green space stores water.

As studies in these three cities and others demonstrate, the loss of green space is not simply an aesthetic deficit; it has a real impact on tax levels. The website www. Americanforests. org has a tool communities can use to calculate the tax benefits of more green space. That doesn't include better health outcomes.

So any extra tax revenues enjoyed by City Hall (or is that City Haul) as a result of eco- density would be dwarfed by increased infrastructure and health costs. That means higher taxes.

Around 20 years ago, another press release policy suggested, with lots of buzzwords, that the mentally ill would be happier if left to their own resources on our streets. There was not a tissue of scientific evidence to support this social experiment. It resulted in a generation of pain and suffering.

In the same manner, the " ecodensity" concept, hastily contrived without hard scientific or economic diligence, will create environmental and economic devastation for at least a generation.

Communities and neighbourhoods should not be undermined by top- down policies developed with no more than an eye on press time. " Eco- density" promoters should call for a rewrite, now.

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