



Expensive, Inconvenient Suburbs Need to Change

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It's not exactly breaking news: suburban sprawl costs a fortune. The most common pattern of "urban" development is an expensive and wasteful environmental blight that is inadvertently promoted by a host of clumsy government subsidies. We are actually taxing ourselves so we can live more uncomfortably.

The proof of this perversity has been available for decades, a fact brought to my attention by a friend who had heard that I was on this week's [Canadian Urban Institute](#) panel entitled: Innovative Approaches to Managing Suburban Sprawl in Canada. The event leverages an excellent [new report by Sustainable Prosperity's David Thompson](#), exposing the hidden costs of sprawl and suggesting a host of solutions. Having seen some of Thompson's work, my friend reached into his (remarkable!) library and produced a surprisingly similar report -- [The Cost of Sprawl](#) -- which had been prepared for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ... in 1974.

The details were all there: with the advent of the personal automobile, North Americans had started spreading our cities aggressively over the land. Developers started buying properties on the urban fringe and breaking them into loosely packed, lightly serviced lots that could be sold cheaply. As each neighbourhood filled, developers and homeseekers ventured further afield.

Governments followed along. Municipalities took responsibility for the services: the roads, sewer, water and power lines, the garbage collection and maintenance -- even though there would never be enough taxpayers per square kilometre to make those services affordable. Senior governments built free-to-use

bridges and highways (at huge expense). Sometimes, they even tried to provide transit, although low-density and high car ownership meant that bus routes would be affordable.

Today, close to 70 per cent of all Canadians live in those suburbs. Most bought homes early in their adult life. Most raised families. And many are now living alone or with an aging spouse in houses designed for four to six people. The kids have grown and left, so nearby schools are unsupportable, too. Even the strip malls are failing as old neighbourhoods hollow out -- as young buyers head to ever-more distant points in search of the latest "cheap" development.

This was all a bad idea in 1974 -- and we knew it. It's worse today, especially now that we understand the additional burden on the environment. We are changing our climate in a dangerous way to support a lifestyle that condemns most of us to spending unacceptable parts of our day driving, expensively, from one place to another.

And the challenge is getting worse. Over the next 30 years, Metro Vancouver is expected to welcome a million additional residents. If we sprinkle those new residents in suburban homes on the fringe, we will consume all that remains of our agricultural land and condemn the whole population to commuter hell. At the same time, the current population is aging. By 2031, one in four Canadians will be over the age of 65 -- living in lonely subdivisions, dreading the day the Superintendent of Motor Vehicles calls to remove their driver's licenses.

What all those people need, the new and the aging, are practical, affordable homes in compact, walkable, livable neighbourhoods -- someplace like UniverCity. Solving sprawl doesn't mean that everyone has to move into a highrise in downtown Vancouver. It doesn't mean abandoning the suburbs. It means building nodes like ours, making the best use of the land at hand. It means protecting greenspace and ensuring that homes, jobs and services are all within easy walking distance or, at least, that the density will support great transit.

This will take some time. We will need to tweak the monetary incentives that encourage people to make the wrong decisions. And that will mean implementing policies that will be unpopular in the short term: road pricing, for example. But UniverCity demonstrates that a walkable urban community in the suburbs can support a fabulous quality of life even as it lowers costs and lightens our environmental footprint. We've known about the problem long enough. It's time to implement the solutions.