

Putting the Urban in Suburban: The Modern Art and Business of Placemaking

27 February 2003 ~ Markham, Ontario



Proceedings from a one-day conference sponsored by:

Canadian Urban Institute ~ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation ~ Town
of Markham ~ Bell Canada ~ The Remington Group ~ Urban Intelligence

In cooperation with:

Urban Design Working Group, Ontario Professional Planners Institute

THEMES

1. There is a market for an alternative to the suburbs

Statistics suggest that about 60% of households want a single-family house with a big backyard. That leaves 40% of the market wanting something different.

2. Urban environments take time

The places we consider urban have taken decades to develop. Similarly, creating new urban spaces will also take time.

3. Urban life means urban gathering places, but the good ones are not cheap

Attractive public spaces are rare or non-existent in many suburban cities. Many speakers suggested a growing demand for well-designed spaces that engender civic pride. However, these features cost money, and developers still do not know if they can cover the costs of creating artificial lakes and civic squares by charging higher rents or sale prices, since potential tenants or buyers can always find cheaper alternatives.

4. Urban spaces demand high-order transit

Suburban municipalities face a difficult dilemma — without higher densities, it is difficult to support transit; without transit, it is difficult to support higher densities.

5. An important difference between urban and suburban life is where you park your car

Suburban life is characterized by acres of free surface parking. Private developers require incentives to build underground or structured parking, and municipalities need transportation demand management strategies to get people to accept paid parking.

6. Sustainable development entails short-term costs to achieve important long-term benefits

Securing those benefits will require sharing the short-term costs, probably through public-private partnerships and development incentives.

7. Getting retail in place is important and difficult

One developer is subsidizing carefully selected retailers in his new development to attract buyers. Elsewhere, retailers in New Urbanist communities like Cornell have closed because they do not have enough customers. This is another chicken-and-egg dilemma — having retail in place early attracts buyers and tenants; however, there are few customers to support retail.

8. Urban spaces do not just happen. They require partnerships

Costs and risks must be shared. Public-private partnerships are essential for developing infrastructure, as well as partnerships among utilities and service providers. Some approaches, such as district heating and cooling, demand coordination between developers and municipalities. Finally, the provincial and federal governments must be involved.

9. Public consultation doesn't end when a plan is adopted

Residents must be involved throughout the development process. In addition, public education is required to ensure that residents understand the benefits associated with new forms of development.

10. Urban environments need to be managed after they are built

It is not enough to build urban spaces. The finished product must be maintained and supported. In some cases, what has to be managed is the success itself. Urban spaces are characterized by bustle and activity, whereas the suburbs are typically associated with peace and quiet. The most successful urban spaces attract people from other municipalities, creating noise, traffic jams, and parking problems for the locals who then complain. Good management must balance competing expectations and demands.

MORNING SESSION

8:45 — Opening Remarks

Don Cousens, Mayor, Town of Markham

Donald Cousens welcomed the participants to the Town of Markham and thanked Lucent Technologies for making its facilities available.

He noted that Markham has deliberately chosen to keep the word “Town” in its name, to denote the attitude and spirit of the residents, which give the place a sense of energy and purpose. He mentioned the many awards that the Town has received recently, including the Prince of Wales prize from Heritage Canada, a prize for race relations, the Canadian championship from Communities in Bloom, and an award from the Royal Bank for youth programs. He was particularly pleased by the fact that Markham was described as one of the ten “most enlightened suburbs” in North America by *Utne* magazine, the only Canadian community to be included.

He was also proud that the Town was free of debt and has received an award for its budget and its annual report from the Finance Officers of Canada. “When we pay for something, we pay for it using cash. We had to wait a few years to build our new \$43 million community centre, but it’s paid for. Our community likes that.” When big corporations such as IBM look at sites for establishing new facilities, they assess the whole community – housing, recreation facilities and quality of life. A “people-friendly” community like Markham attracts both business and people.

Cousens also mentioned Markham’s adoption of New Urbanist principles in Cornell. Although a number of people were involved, the plan went ahead without an appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board, and had buy-in from Council, staff, and the public. Council learned a great deal from the process, and the Town is now working on a plan for Markham Town Centre for a 400-hectare site that will rival Yonge and Eglinton, with restaurants, shops, a community college, and transit connections. He noted that it would have been easy to create a conventional suburban centre, however the Town wanted to create a place that reflected the community spirit.

Finally, Cousens mentioned an essential ingredient of placemaking – community character. The Town should reflect a sense of honesty, integrity, responsibility and reliability, and those qualities should be reflected in business dealings, personal relationships and public decisions. “We will work together in a spirit that says we can accomplish great things.”

9:00 — What Makes It Urban

George Dark, Partner, Urban Strategies Inc.

He began with the embryo of New Urbanism — an aerial shot of a small New Hampshire town, with a green town square and a white church. New Urbanists often return to such communities to try to understand what makes them the way they are and how such communities are put together.

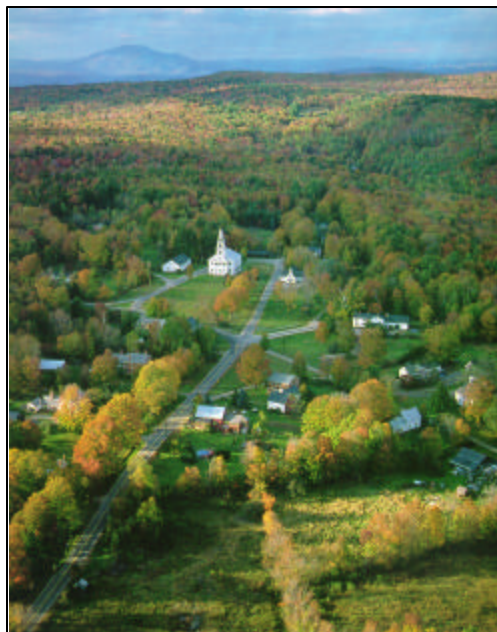
A succession of photographs traced the process of enlarging a community, the addition of shops and schools, the expansion of the grid street pattern, with each retaining a relationship to open countryside. Over time, communities filled in, yet the basic pattern of closely built houses, apartments, shops, and institutions did not change for decades.

This pattern prevailed for decades. The streets got a little wider, but as one image showed, the wide streets still fit into the pattern. We continued to build this way and got better and better at it – and then, “we changed our minds.” Dark showed a picture that was entirely filled with houses, row upon row of them, with nothing else in view.

He then showed a slide containing nine images of places that people consider “urban” – sidewalk cafes, heritage buildings, shops with apartments above them – and asked “What is it about these pictures which we like so much that we feel compelled to try to replicate them, when in fact many of these things were created a long time ago?”

Dark showed a map of the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge area, a region that prides itself on controlling growth. However, the part that is actually “urban,” built before 1948, is tiny. This part took a hundred years to create. It was built slowly, one piece at a time. A map of Ottawa showed a similar pattern — a tiny central “urban” place, surrounded by a large expanse of suburban growth.

“We have a difficult time assembling people in our urban workshops who can talk about what it means to be urban. Why? It’s because they do not live in it. They occupy a very different kind of area.”



Dark showed two areas of Oakville – part of Iroquois Ridge and Morrison Common. Both neighbourhoods contain the same number of people, but Morrison Common utilizes a much smaller space. It contains a mixture of housing forms, all mixed up, a park, a corner store (that goes broke regularly, but keeps going), and a church.



He introduced a five-step guide to creating urban environments:

1. Use as little land as possible and put as much on it as you can

We do not treat land as if it were a scarce commodity, but we should. A series of photographs showed low-rise apartments, live-work units, row housing. *Remember:* Some people do not want to buy land. This is a difficult idea for a suburban municipality to grasp, but it is perfectly okay to sell somebody a place to live with no land around it.

2. Give people lots of choice. Tomorrow’s city won’t be made from yesterday’s needs

For years, people assumed everyone wanted a large house on a large lot, but developers are beginning to realize that maybe, some people want something different. Todd

Zimmerman does marketing for New Urbanist communities. It is not a matter of two groups: one that wants houses and the other that wants highrise apartments. People are more complicated than that. We need to understand, for example, what two divorced lawyers with three children who do not live with them, who ride Harley-Davidsons and have a house in Arizona want to buy in Markham. Zimmerman has identified about 40 different market segments. In Cornell, a ratepayers' group that is helping to create an open space master plan has a very diverse membership, from Generation Xers to professionals to VPs of development companies – a slice right through one of Todd Zimmerman's marketing profiles.

3. You need flexible space so things can change over time

Cheap, flexible space is essential, space that is not high-end office or retail. In Toronto, flexible space is in many ways the backbone of the economy. A huge amount of business enterprise goes on in flexible spaces. We have a tendency to over-engineer spaces, make them too big, but this is not what people want. Flexible space is a good investment, but it can be very difficult to get approval for the kind of spaces we need.

4. Build quality public places. Walking, biking, sitting, playing and observing are a big part of urban life

Social interaction is an absolute requirement of urban life. Offer people places to go that are away from home – but not too far away. These places are important to Canada's diversity and culture. These slightly rumpled, rule-breaking places are very important to our society. If they don't exist, some cultural communities will take over shopping malls, because people want to come together, and if they have to do it in a strip mall, they will.

Most North American public space is low-quality. We regulate against creating the kinds of spaces that we pay to visit when we are tourists in Europe. However, we need to come together for certain things we can not have at home. We have a romantic notion of "Main Street", strolling up and down and shopping, even though for most of our lives, we have not lived that way. It is such a strong desire that people have actually created new public spaces from scratch.

In Providence, Rhode Island, it was a skating rink. It was actually part of a project to remove a rail line, but what was really important to people was the skating rink. Now the place is quite magical, like the Devonian Pond at Ryerson in Toronto. It is the kind of place you do not expect – urbanism is all about the unexpected. Providence also rebuilt its waterfront, and has become one of the Renaissance cities of the United States, admired all over the country.

We often make public space very complicated, but some of the most successful places are the simplest. One park in New York has a large open space with many portable chairs. The chairs do not get stolen, because there are always people in the park, sitting on the chairs. You do not steal furniture when people are watching you.

5. You need time

The best urban areas took 100 years to create. Most of the parts we don't like probably took less than 10 years. Queen's Quay Terminal in Toronto was once a warehouse, then a train repair shop, then offices, then gutted and filled with shops and residences. It's taken 100 years to make it into the destination it is today. Real urbanism takes a long time to create.

Discussion

Peter Cheatley mentioned the Town of Oakville's plan to redevelop 7,000 acres north of Dundas Street for 55,000 people. Although planners want to make urban spaces, the community "knows suburban." They like their big

houses, their wide streets, their SUVs, their six lanes of traffic. How can we convince Council that urbanism is worthwhile?

George Dark mentioned that in the Cornell project, the proponents showed pictures of places like the historic town of Oakville and Bronte, “places people really want to live,” and asked questions such as “Should we take this lovely historic street, where the buildings come right up to the lot line, and widen it?” The answer was no. It takes a huge educational process, because there is so much suburban and so little urban, and so few people have experienced urban. In Markham, these issues are constantly being discussed. It also takes willing developers, who see it as good business.

Peter Gabor noted that the resistance to higher density relates to time. It took a long time for places like Toronto and New York to get to where they are today. People object to the missed steps in between what we are proposing and what is there now. What used to take 100 years is collapsed into three or four. Gabor mentioned a client he’d tried to convince. They showed him slides of New Urbanism. He didn’t get it. They took him on a tour of the best places in Toronto. He still didn’t get it. They sent him on a tour of the United States. He came back and said, “I’m beginning to understand what you are talking about.” It’s a very long process.

Another participant asked about lowrises. How can you fill the gap between the house and the highrise apartment?

George Dark suggested that the problem was one of marketing, responding to demographics, what people want and what they are willing to pay for. Gordon Harris added that diverse local employment was also a factor. The more diverse the employment, the more diverse the demand for housing. Transportation and transit is another factor. If everyone is going somewhere else to work, the market is segmented dramatically.

George Dark offered the example of Oakville’s Uptown Core. The apartment buildings sold very well, although the Town created a barrier with its high parking requirements, which made the apartments more expensive. Live-work is going to be a big part of the future, and municipalities are still very restrictive about these units. “It’s okay if you have only one employee; if you have two, ‘the world ends.’”

Fanis Grammenos mentioned a study by Queen’s University for CMHC on demand for medium-density housing. The researchers found that they could predict people’s housing according to their income first, and secondly on lifecycle stage and lifestyle arrangements. For example, if you earn \$80,000 or more, you most likely live in a single detached house. Something like 60 to 70 percent of Canadians live and want to live in a single detached house – either a monster house or a modest house, but a single detached house. People in apartments either have a lower income or are at a different stage in the lifecycle in which they have no other commitments and can look after their own interests.

George Dark noted that at the very least, this means that up to 40 percent of the population wants something different, and that is a large market. Also, in some urban environments, many people with high incomes don’t live in houses, hence the condo boom. The 60 to 70 percent figure may have more to do with the past than the future. The key is to figure out what the boomers want next. Gordon Harris confirmed that this has been the pattern in Vancouver, with the development of the False Creek area.

Alex Taranu, a landscape architect, pointed out that prevailing business models in Canada do not allow for the beautiful public spaces shown in Dark’s presentation. Rather, new models can only go as far as the standards set

to create them, but it does not excuse the fact that we are building a “partial world, a partial urban environment.” That is okay, as long as we have another 100 years and the programs we need to perfect it in the end. But we cannot just build it, move on and build another one, move on and build another one.

9:45 — WORKSHOP #1

Building the Perfect Neighbourhood

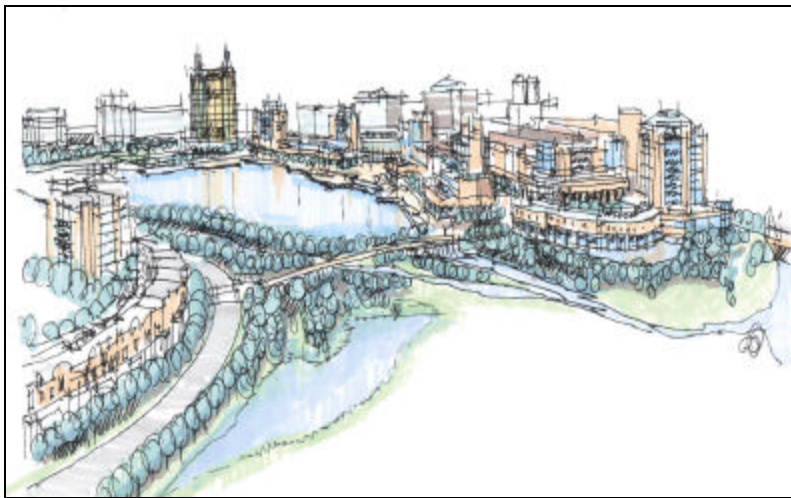
David Clark, Architect, Development Services Commission, Town of Markham

What is most challenging about working in the 905 (suburban area code) is that it means delivering urbanism in a “non-contextual framework.” How do you build context from the get-go?

It would not be possible in Markham without the commitment and passion from the mayor and Council. That is one of the most important ingredients in bringing urbanism to the suburbs. It would not happen without political leadership.

The perfect neighbourhood begins with a dream, and that has to be defined with the community involved, as well as developers and politicians. Then you need an action plan, and most important, you have to follow through. It is something of an endurance race, it is not a quick process.

Markham faced the challenge of managing the astronomical pressure of growth, while conserving land resources, especially agricultural land on the perimeter. The population is forecasted to double between 1991 and 2021. Markham’s plan calls for limited outward expansion of the urban envelope to 2021, with intensification within the urban boundaries, primarily in Markham Centre.

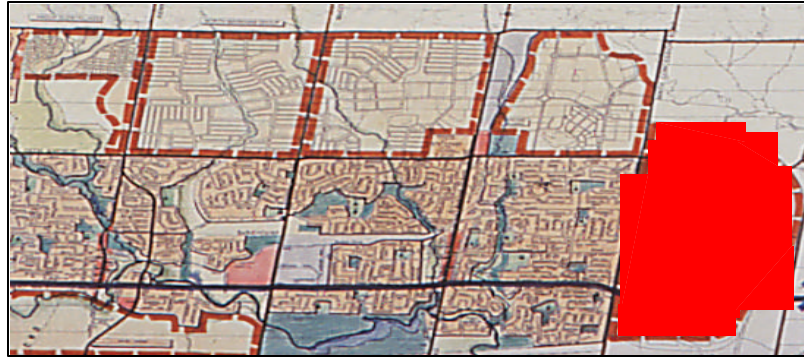


In proceeding with secondary plans and concession block plans and the realization of its vision, Markham is working to ensure that development keeps pace with infrastructure. The Town is also using new tools, such as developer group agreements and architectural design controls with a peer review process to ensure a cohesive design.

Cornell is the premier New Urbanist community in Markham. The vision emerged from a lengthy consultation process, involving residents and a who’s who of planning and design consultants. The neighbourhoods are the key building blocks. There are nine of them, each planned on a radius of a five-minute walk (about 400 metres) from the edge to the centre. The plan also uses a grid/network plan for the streets, and incorporates view corridors, clearly defined neighbourhood edges, and a central concentration of mixed uses.

Phase 1 is on the eastern edge, and has 1,100 units today. There is much debate about whether the neighbourhood centre is too big. It has more than 20,000 sq. ft. of retail, well beyond what the market would support in the early stages. That caused a lot of stress and strain on the developer. Still, it is successful as a community focus, although not as retail. There are also 46 apartments in the centre, too.

The eastern edge is defined by Bur Oak Street, a north-south transit corridor. There is a nursing home on the edge, as well as three-storey live-work units, mostly owner-occupied. Some will be used only as residential units, but they provide flexibility and opportunity for small businesses or even retail over time. The zoning permits as of right development.



The southern edge is the Markham-Stouffville Hospital. On the western edge the development is set back from Ninth Line by a nine-metre-wide landscaped zone. The scale of the buildings on Ninth Line are intended to be compatible with the existing buildings across the street, which are large single-family units. However, the developer found few potential buyers wanted to live in the types of housing proposed along the street. In the end, semi-detached units were built instead and were designed to look like single-family houses.

The neighbourhood is intended to contain a mix of activities and a range of dwelling types. There are single houses, ranging from bungalows to three-storey houses, townhouses, coach houses, semis, apartments and live-work units. Is there enough diversity? There seems to be room in the market for higher density, as well as for larger units.

Markham as a whole is developing in an unusual way. At the moment, the hole in the middle of the doughnut is the future site of Markham Centre. This is surrounded by the typical suburbs from the 1970s to 1990s, with the “dead worm” street pattern. Higher density is appearing at the perimeter of the municipality, in places like Cornell.

The open space plan includes large campuses for schools, a central park, smaller parks, and connecting walkways. The smaller parks are very important to the community, and they are well used. Some houses face the park, with the access from a walkway. This part of the plan was a significant challenge, as a result of the fire department wanting to retain a path wide enough for emergency vehicles.

Sometimes details are important. For example, gas meters are tucked under the porch, where they are accessible, but not prominent. But even this detail proved difficult to implement. Utilities were another challenge – getting everything into the trench. On-street parking is also a challenge for maintenance and fire service. The planners had to make adjustments to streets and lanes, to allow for snow ploughs, fire trucks, and maintenance vehicles. There has even been criticism that the standards for the lanes are “too high.”

Development standards become an additional issue when development is compressed into a small space. In a large space, with a seven or eight-metre setback, a miscalculation in the elevation of a house does not pose a problem, because the land can be graded. However, a high density, compact environment is not so forgiving. If a foundation

is a little too high, there may be no room to fit in the steps to the sidewalk.

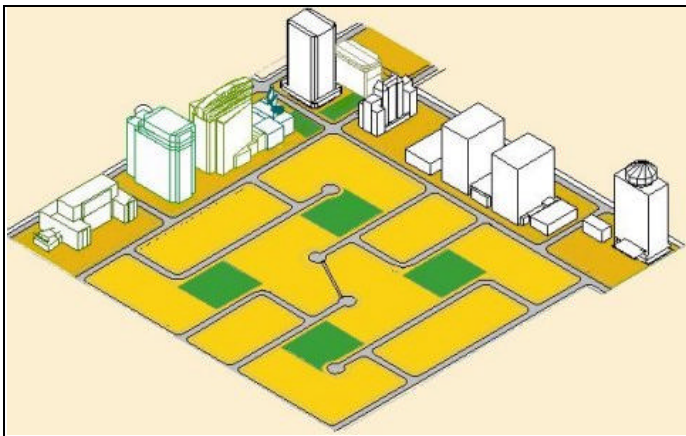
The perfect neighbourhood is a goal worth striving for. The ultimate proof of success is the experience and perceptions of the people who live there. The planners and architects have to remain true to the dream while remaining open to adjustments and improvements. Constant evaluation is necessary; complacency is not an option. Is the structure sound? Are the roads and traffic keeping pace with development? Are we protecting our resources? Are we properly phasing development? Is development supporting public transit? Are development standards generating the urban quality we want? Is there enough diversity in the community? Is the development industry delivering on the vision?

As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

The Perfect Street Pattern

Fanis Grammenos, Senior Researcher, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

CMHC has worked to develop a new street plan, the Fused Grid, to produce a replicable model that can achieve some of the goals of New Urbanism. It ties in with one of George Dark’s principles, “Use as little land as possible.” That principle also means, for developers, lower costs, higher profits. For environmentalists, it means using resources efficiently. It is also important to provide what consumers want. Surveys suggests that homebuyers want tranquillity, safety, connectivity, and visual delight.



1. Fused Grid: For Clarity and connectivity
2. Loops and cul-de-sacs: Efficiency, tranquility and safety
3. Multi-Use Zone: Walkability, proximity and profit
4. One-way twinned arterials: Safety, efficiency and synergy
5. 40-Acre Cell for Repeatable Benefits

There is a tug-of-war between municipalities and developers over the principles of sustainable development. Developers will do what municipalities want them to do only if they make economic sense. What is needed are tools for sustainable development that make economic sense.

Grid street patterns consume as much as 35 percent of land in street rights-of-way. This amount can be reduced by taking streets out of circulation. Culs-de-sac can reduce this figure to 24 percent, but in the process, connectivity is lost. The fused grid uses loops and culs-de-sac, but connected using open space (parks and pathways), creating a larger pedestrian realm, and improving the appearance of neighbourhoods.

In many places, streets have become “disconnectors” – impossible for pedestrians to cross easily or safely. Many streets in Ottawa have barriers to prevent pedestrians from crossing.

Elsewhere, efforts have been made to keep out cars and traffic, with street layouts that prevent people from driving

across a neighbourhood. Traffic is a nuisance – but it is also a blessing. It indicates trade. Without traffic, trade and transport cities die. That is why so many communities were formed around crossroads. In many congested downtowns, planners have created one-way systems to channel traffic flow.

People want tranquillity and safety, they prefer views of water or ravines, but they also want activity, next door if possible. They want a local domain and a public realm as well. The solution is to integrate uses with double main streets bounding employment lands and create a border for residential areas which are built on the fused grid pattern. The employment lands should be allowed to develop over time. This plan is consistent with the ideas of New Urbanism, and delivers the qualities of tranquillity, safety, connectivity and visual delight, while making economic sense for developers and achieving environmental benefits.

Learning From Experience

Jeff Speck, Director of Town Planning, Duany Plater-Zyberk, Miami — by videolink

At a recent meeting, representatives of Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) met with Markham planners and developers, after a period during which DPZ was less involved in Cornell. Most of DPZ's work was done between 1993 and 1996.

DPZ began by taking the components of sprawl – the shopping mall, the office park, the school, the housing cluster, the fast food joints by the highway and recombining them in a neighbourhood structure. The shopping mall becomes a main street, the office park becomes a boulevard, the school becomes part of the city fabric and the houses line a network of streets.

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk wrote a paper looking at the city as a whole, its districts, neighbourhoods and corridors. The ideas in the paper led directly to the idea for Cornell. Each neighbourhood should be compact, diverse and walkable. A healthy North American city has only these three components. Districts include business districts, college campuses or industrial facilities. Although it is dominated by a single use, it too should be compact and walkable (some things, such as container facilities or airports **excepted**). An “unjustified district” is a component of sprawl – an office park, a housing subdivision, or a shopping mall. Corridors may be either manmade or natural – roads, highways, greenways and railways. They both divide and connect parts of a community.

DPZ brought this idea to Cornell. At first, the designers worked from an aerial photograph of the site, and found that at the scale of the photograph, the size of a handprint approximated the size of a neighbourhood, with the five-minute-walk radius from edge to centre. They identified existing features from woodlots to hedgerows to old property lines to historic houses. DPZ's approach is to use what is already there in formulating a design.



The plan incorporated neighbourhoods, paired around corridors, a central business district, and a district around the existing hospital. Schools were sited to serve the neighbourhoods, and green corridors followed the existing contours. Plans for each neighbourhood were passed around the office and several DPZ designers contributed their ideas. The goal was to create neighbourhoods that would appear to have evolved over time. Today, the design process is usually so fast that it is impossible to create places with the kind of character that once took years to develop.

The design was based on a warped grid. Some details were lost in the engineering. Since the design was created, DPZ has refined its idea of the “transect” – a gradation from the most urban condition to the most rural. The plan is designed to organize that transition. What has been built at Cornell is just one piece. The corridor does not yet sustain the hoped-for level of urbanity.

The biggest complaint for Cornell is that it is still too homogeneous. The housing includes some 40-foot lots, some 20-foot lots, and one big building that looks like a piece of Paris, more of an urban building than was imagined for its location. DPZ hopes to add more diversity in the following phases of development. Although the original plans called for three- to five-storey buildings along the spine of the development, it is more likely that they will be built in the business district instead. The seven- or eight-storey buildings imagined for the business district will probably not be built. Nevertheless, the majority of the ideas and theory have survived and only some aspects of the plan have changed.

Discussion

George Dark asked about getting public acceptance for New Urbanist ideas.

Jeff Speck responded that depending on what polls are used, between 30 and 60 percent of the U.S. public want to live in sprawl – large lots and big houses. But that leaves a very large market. Although many people in the design profession like older houses, most people seem to want new houses, but not necessarily in a suburb. New houses in traditional neighbourhoods are very marketable. Moreover, the markets are well established

What is significantly different is the change is the acceptance of New Urbanism ideas by developers. In 1993, DPZ had to spend time educating developers. Now those who approach the firm understand what DPZ is trying to accomplish. The questions are now more subtle. For example, can a golf course co-exist with a New Urbanist community? A recent issue of *Planning* magazine, which focused on Denver, showed nothing but urban or New Urbanist plans. Nobody is showing sprawl any more. However, there is still a “brain-body disconnect. The planning profession (the brain) has made the leap away from sprawl back towards urbanism, but the body is still going through the Frankenstein motions of the past 40 years.” It may be another 10 years until we see a shift in the mainstream market.

An Ottawa developer, who said that he *did get it*, remarked that his problem was the municipality. For example, the city opposed the idea of pocket parks, preferring large sports fields. Also, of the slides of Cornell showed a picture of a poorly maintained park with an unused bench. Is that why Markham is debt-free – it is not putting money into the maintenance of public spaces?

Speck said that DPZ encounters problems everywhere. If the company is hired by a developer, the struggle is to

convince the municipality. In the case of Markham, DPZ was hired by the municipality and the struggle was to convince the development community. (The exception to these situations is downtown revitalization, where both sides usually come together.) Cornell is unusual, because most plans are not followed by the developers, who are making the investment and do not want to take chances.

Certain issues come up every time – street geometry, pavement widths, pocket parks (instead of one big park which makes lawnmowing easier), school size, trash collection and mail delivery. The good news now is that there are examples to show people. DPZ can say, “Look, we built it here and no one died.” However, the public realm is the result, not just of design, but also of policy and management. Policy comes before design and management comes afterwards. Design is only part of the picture.

Another participant asked about homogeneity and the lack of urbanity in Cornell.

Speck noted that Cornell was neither as urban nor as rural as the designers had hoped it would be. For example, there is less subsidized housing than DPZ would have supported, and fewer large lots than were originally envisioned, but this was the result of local decisions, and the question could be better answered by local planners.

Building At The Edge **Peter Gabor, Peter A. Gabor, Architect**

Peter Gabor pointed out that one cannot cherry-pick New Urbanist principles; they must be applied holistically. He participated in the Cornell design charrette, helped implement the zoning bylaws in the plan, and considered the plan a sustainable model. In particular, the difference between 100 acres designed in the conventional way and 100 acres developed along New Urbanist principles, is that once the space is developed conventionally, it is dead and cannot be developed any more, whereas the New Urbanist places are able to evolve over time.



One of the problems with Cornell is that the existing community to the west did not want to be involved with the new development. The original proposal to build large amounts of non-profit housing scared the community. All the plans and the literature on Cornell do not show the neighbourhood to the west. The result is a number of anomalies along the western edge.

A linear park (a buffer or “moat”) was put between the existing community and Cornell. The park doesn’t function well either as a buffer or as an attractive space. The houses between the park and the back lane were in an awkward position; it is not clear which side is the front and which is the back.

Another problem was the fact that the client did not want expensive quality architecture. The original designs were rich in detail, but had to be stripped down, particularly for the houses on the edge of the neighbourhood, where the prices were lower. Very little value was assigned to being on the linear park.

One potential solution would be to move Ninth Line to give the houses street frontage and create a stronger edge. There is room for another row of houses on the other side, backing on to the existing community to the west.

New Urbanist projects cannot be developed in isolation. Some New Urbanist developments are criticized because they have been plunked down in greenfield sites and there is no connection to existing neighbourhoods. In the original charrette, Gabor had hoped that Cornell would be successful enough to inspire the next-door community into wanting to imitate it. However, with no connector streets and a gap between the two communities, the residents of the existing older community cannot appreciate what Cornell has to offer.

Discussion

One participant asked about the difference between George Dark and Peter Gabor’s approach to connectivity which used roads and that suggested by Fanis Grammenos, which used parks.

Peter Gabor explained that connectivity is related to mixed uses. The car is not going to disappear. However, by providing live-work opportunities and walkable retail areas within the community, the car may be less important. However, the fused grid, with its loops and culs-de-sac, breaks connectivity within the block and puts most traffic on arterials, and that tends to create traffic jams, because there are no alternative routes available. The same problem often occurs with traffic calming efforts in downtown areas, but that is the outcome of too much success, not of failure.

Fanis Grammenos suggested that the important question is, what do you connect to in a 160-acre, four-neighbourhood module? Are there viable destinations? His solution would be to put the shops and businesses on the periphery, where they are accessible to several neighbourhoods and can sustain the necessary services, not in the centre, which may not be viable.

George Dark noted that his company is routinely asked to do three things. One is to undo one-way street systems, which are anti-urban, bad for business, and generally disliked. Two is to reconnect disconnected street systems, because people are tired of travelling east in order to reach a destination to the west, or to the edge using an arterial road to visit a neighbour on the next street over. Three, people want parks that face out to the street, not parks behind houses. The fused grid is the past, not the future, and its primary principles are things that people ask us to repair.

Peter Cheatley asked about the role and place of transit in Cornell. He noted that having transit already in place attracts people who will use it, rather than people who prefer to drive.

Peter Gabor noted that in the original plans, a bus route was planned to connect all the neighbourhood centres, which would also connect to the main street, the business district, and a proposed GO station. At present, transit is not in place in Cornell. The Region of York is currently working on an inter-regional rapid transit system oriented to Highway 7. Bur Oak will eventually connect with that system, but the road is not complete.

Dan Leeming pointed out that Cornell differs from the CMHC approach in that every neighbourhood is different, according to the topography and the existing features of the land, whereas the fused grid is intended to be applied universally.

Building At The Edge

Norm Connolly, Senior Research Consultant, CMHC, Vancouver — by videolink

Norm Connolly provided background on sustainable design interventions in Southeast False Creek, Vancouver, and UniverCity, Burnaby.

Southeast False Creek is a brownfield, inner-city development, covering 79 acres. It will be developed over the next 10 to 20 years. The development incorporates residential, industrial and commercial space, parks, a school, and community centre. The housing will be in the form of medium-rise and high-rise apartments. The plan emerged in part from a four-day interdisciplinary design charrette that focused on 49 acres owned by the city and was intended to test the city's draft environmental policy statement. One key to overcoming barriers to innovation and achieving sustainability is to have design interventions like charrettes at an early stage of the planning process.

A similar process was used for UniverCity at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby. This is a multi-year project for the northeast corner of the campus. It will eventually house 10,000 people in 4,500 units, along with commercial and retail space and a school. At present, the university campus is rather isolated on a mountain above Vancouver, and the goal is to bring in year-round residents. The charrette worked to incorporate goals such as energy efficiency, passive solar heating, on-site handling of stormwater runoff, and the recycling of construction waste.

The two-day interdisciplinary charrette produced excellent ideas, but some developers were unsure about how the market would respond to certain innovations. There is a Catch-22 about sustainable development in that the beneficiaries are the ultimate owners of the units, not the developer, so the developer has little incentive to incorporate "green" features.

Recognizing that there is a gap in knowledge, CMHC commissioned a study of consumer demand for innovative, sustainable, multi-unit residential housing in British Columbia. Focus groups have been held, and a wider survey is planned. The study should be completed by the summer of 2003. A CMHC report on residential intensification is also due out later in 2003.

Building At The Edge

Eric Vance, Principal, Eric Vance Associates, former Director of Planning, Port Moody & Jim McIntyre, Director of Planning, City of Port Moody — by videolink

Eric Vance and Jim McIntyre spoke about Newport Village in Port Moody. The city is the former western terminus

of the Canadian Pacific line on Burrard Inlet, an industrial seaport with sawmills, oil refineries, and shipping terminals.

Newport Village is close to the head of the inlet, across from the area designated for the town centre, where large tracts of land are available. A city hall and a recreation complex have already been built.



The site is 13.5 acres, irregularly shaped. The plan calls for 900 residential units, mostly in five highrise towers, but partly in lowrise, mixed-use buildings, along with 70,000 sq. ft. of retail and 60,000 sq. ft. of office space. Bosa Development Corporation is the sole developer. Development began in 1995, and it is expected to take up to 14 years to build it completely. Nearly all the lowrise development is complete, one highrise is complete and another is under construction.

The focal point is a village centre, with retail topped by residential units. The design is similar to Bosa developments at Whistler. The five highrise towers are on the edges of the site. Generous greenspaces is part of the plan, including semi-public space for the residents. The anchor tenant in the office building is the Simon Fraser Health Unit.

Success factors for the perfect neighbourhood

1. Good location

Port Moody is close to the affluent and growing North Shore, including Port Coquitlam. It is close to recreation areas, in a spectacular natural setting.

2. A patient developer with deep pockets

The project might not have worked if several developers had been involved.

3. The right product mix

The housing in Newport Village appeals to both ends of the market – first-time homebuyers and empty nesters. The shops are all small, there are no big stores. Nat Bosa still owns the retail units and rents them out to carefully selected tenants. He believes in using retail as a marketing tool that attracts homebuyers.

4. Good design

The towers are pushed out to the edges of the site and do not overwhelm the street with its lowrise. Great attention has been paid to design details, finishes, signage and street furniture.

Lessons learned:

1. Residential-commercial conflicts

Noise, late openings, evening hours are problems, particularly for the local pub, requiring ongoing management. Also, retailers such as the butcher and the baker are anxiously waiting for the completion of the residential units. Some specialized stores appeal mainly to visitors, but others need residents to survive.

2. Public space–private space conflicts

Some of the spaces are largely unused, because the development is incomplete.

3. Parking and traffic

This is a popular area for visitors, who tend not to use the underground parking. High traffic benefits the businesses, but the residents complain about lack of parking and safety concerns.

4. Signage

Strict controls on signage may create competition among retailers to put signs out on the street to attract business.

5. Market conditions

After eight years, less than half of the residential component is complete. The market has been slow to respond. This is why the developer needs patience and deep pockets.

Discussion

Gordon Harris asked about market acceptance and community response.

Jim McIntyre noted that Port Moody is proud of Newport Village and other communities envy it. Visitors enjoy it, although the residents complain of noise and traffic, since it is an intense urban village in the middle of a suburban setting. Eric Vance suggests that the only response to complaints is, "Too bad! Move!" People who moved in early on when it was quiet expected it to remain that way, but the planners knew it would get busier. Over time, people will move and make adjustments.

Fanis Grammenos asked if the complaints could have been prevented through design.

Jim McIntyre suggested that zoning could have been used to narrow the range of commercial activity, but council and the developer wanted a broad range of retail. In terms of design, there are techniques of setbacks and noise attenuation. It is more important to ensure that prospective residents understand what they are getting into. The developer has even helped some residents move to quieter units in the development.

Gordon Harris commented on the "tough love" approach to residents, and noted that the shift from the suburban to a more urban environment entails growing pains. Also, the West Coast context is significant. British Columbians are less accepting of high density. At the same time, the lifestyle is more oriented to the outdoors, so the desire for single-family occupancy is perhaps lower, because people spend less time at home.

One participant asked about subsidizing the retail component as a marketing expense.

Eric Vance explained that Nat Bosa is subsidizing the retail to ensure that there are no empty storefronts and to get the right mix of tenants. Jim McIntyre added that it is very important to get commercial space developed early on. Bosa was reluctant to build the office building early, so the city stepped in and did some matchmaking to find an anchor tenant, which would allow the building to go ahead. The city insisted that the office go in first, before much of the residential, whereas the developer would have preferred to do it the other way around. If the city had not insisted, the development would not have been as successful.

Closing Thoughts For Workshop #1 **Gary Atkins, President, Cornell Ratepayers Association**

Gary Atkins emphasized that he is not a planner and that his perspective is that of a resident in Cornell. He said that he did not know what was so “new” about New Urbanism, since it resembles the kind of place his grandfather lived. He offered a series of observations about creating communities like Cornell.

1. Tell everyone what you are doing

This is apparent in the need to integrate the western edge of Cornell with the existing community on Ninth Line. It is also important to explain the ideas to developers, planners, and prospective buyers. For example, there are parking restrictions that buyers need to understand.

2. Stick to the plan

Ensure that infill conforms to a pattern. When new buildings are added, they must fit with what is there already. Also, it was probably a mistake to downgrade the houses on Ninth Line.

3. Have transportation linkages in place when the residents arrive

The fact that Bur Oak is not complete is a problem. And “without transit, it’s all over for us. We’re in the high, high boonies” and if you are going to live and work in the GTA, transit is necessary. Exit interviews with people leaving Cornell would probably show that the lack of transit is a big problem.

6. Rethink the retail/commercial philosophy

Marketing and financial incentives are needed. The **mews** is “not a happy place right now” and its future is in doubt. The bank, the cleaners and the drug store did not survive. Places that require appointments – hairdressers, dentists – do better. It has not yet been possible to attract an upmarket grocery. The one thing that seems to be doing well is the coffee shop near the park, which acts as the community centre. At present, a petition is circulating about signage on the Ninth Line, and if the retailers do not get what they need, they may well depart, leaving behind a desolate failure in the middle of the community.

Despite the problems, Atkins believes that Cornell offers the best combination of built form and open space, and will continue to improve over time.



AFTERNOON SESSION

1:30 — WORKSHOP #2

Building Great Greenfield Town Centres

Mary Frances Turner, Commissioner of Strategy, Innovation and Partnerships, Town of Markham

Mary Frances Turner introduced the Town's plans for Markham Town Centre, a proposed downtown on a greenfield site. Planning started in the 1990s, when the employment and population were projected to double by 2021. The Town was concerned about disappearing green space, traffic congestion, lack of transit, pollution, and related health problems and decided on a strategy of containing growth, rather than development as usual.

Success factors for creating a good community centre:

1. You need a holistic plan

The plan should balance growth while protecting resources. The site for Markham Centre is 927 acres and is largely vacant. The plan calls for 25,000 people living in 10,000 units, more than 17,000 employees in more than 5 million sq. ft. of development. At first, developers felt the goals were too aggressive, even though the numbers had been reduced somewhat. Today, the developer is suggesting that the numbers may be too low.

2. Identify what you want to accomplish — do your homework

Markham identified housing choices, employment opportunities, walkable streets, compact urban form, high-quality architecture, environmental protection, and population densities high enough to support transit. Travel and reading helps with this process. The Council visited some new town centres in American cities and studied material published by the Urban Land Institute about main streets and centres.

3. Identify and pursue catalytic forces

Markham is home to businesses such as Lucent, IBM and Motorola, and they will each have a presence in the new Centre.

4. Foster development over various market cycles

This kind of development requires deep pockets and sustained leadership. During market downturns, it is important not to abandon the vision and goals. It is also important to understand and respect the priorities and pressures that partners face.

5. Lend regulatory support, do not just impose rules

Large mixed-use projects do not readily conform to traditional regulatory approval frameworks (applications, zoning bylaws, etc.). In the U.S., the key to building town centres has been regulatory flexibility. A large team of professionals should be assembled to deal with the many facets of the project.

6. Offer incentives to the business community

Businesses want rapid transit to their doors and diverse housing for all levels of employees. Good financial strategies and parking strategies are also incentives. It is also important to find ways to keep retailers profitable. Markham is about to launch a "synergy centre" for all government offices that support business.

7. Get the community involved

Downtown belongs to the people who will live and work there. Finding a participation model that spans the life of the project is critical. A Citizen Advisory Group, formed early in the process, should take on the job of keeping the vision alive.

8. Make a long-term commitment to the project

Implementation is the most difficult part. Municipalities have traditionally adopted a passive approach to development, but this must change.

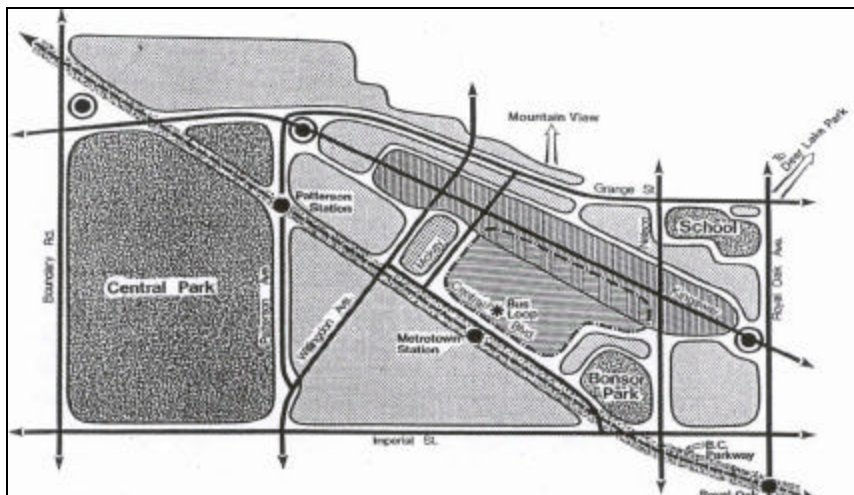
Implementation Is Both An Art And A Science

Ted Williams, Director, Metrotown Properties, Burnaby — by videolink

Burnaby, B.C., is a city of 195,000 residents, in the Greater Vancouver Area. Metrotown is in the southwest part of the city, on the Kingsway Ridge, with spectacular views. The site is about 735 acres, about 2.4 kilometres from west to east, and about 1.2 kilometres from north to south.

In the early 1970s, the area had single-family housing and lowrise apartments. Over time, the houses were demolished and small lots consolidated to make a redevelopment site. From

1975 to 1985, several highrises were built around the edges of the site. In the middle was a Ford assembly plant, the Kelly Douglas head office, and a Simpsons-Sears warehouse. Most commercial and retail development in the core occurred after 1985.



Metrotown Centre (built between 1986 and 1991) is a moderately successful regional shopping mall with 220 stores on three levels and a four level with offices, anchored by Sears, the Bay, Zellers and a T&T Supermarket. Future development possibilities include an office building off the Bay and additional office buildings along the Kingsway.

Metropolis (built 1989, renovated 1998) is the most successful part of the Metrotown complex, with retail and offices on two levels. It used to be anchored by Eatons, Brettons, and a Real Canadian Superstore. Today it has a variety of stores and a Playdium entertainment centre. There is also room on the site for more office space.

Station Square (1989) is mixed-use power centre with an outdoor orientation (an example of development gone awry) with a food store, a hotel, movie theatres and two residential towers. An additional office tower is planned.

These three combined constitute the largest shopping complex in British Columbia, with more than 10,000 parking stalls, most of them covered. A parking management program allows for office parking during the week and retail parking on weekends. The three separate management companies cooperate on marketing, security, and special events.

The last project, the Crystal Complex, opened in 1999, with a Hilton hotel and convention centre, offices, housing, and shops. The retail component is still struggling.

Today Metrotown has 20,000 employees and 23,000 residents in 13,000 units. Future plans call for a total of 40,000 employees and 24,500 residents in 15,000 residential units, and connections between Metrotown Centre and Metropolis. Combined, the two complexes will be second only to the West Edmonton Mall in size.

About 25 percent of the people who come to Metrotown arrive on the Skytrain, which is connected to the bus terminal, where 12 routes converge, or 500 buses a day. The number arriving by transit is even higher in the Christmas season. Public amenities include a 200-acre park, Burnaby's main public library, a community and recreation centre, and a police station. The mixed-use commercial core covers 65 acres and consists of four separate projects.



Ted Williams attributes the success of Metrotown to its central location on the Mainland, a consistent planning policy applied over many years, transit connections, free parking (an advantage over downtown Vancouver), population growth in the region, the population and employment density on the site, and ongoing public investment (in particular, the regional government is located in one of the office towers).

Discussion

Glenn Miller noted that when he was visiting Simon Fraser University, someone referred to “downtown,” meaning Burnaby downtown, not Vancouver, which suggests that the area is accepted as a regional centre.

Fanis Grammenos noted that Metrotown exemplified the synergy between transportation and commerce and asked about possible negative effects on smaller centres. Ted Williams noted that Metrotown is the largest of four centres in the region, and said he felt that for most people close to the other centres, Metrotown was their second choice. Gordon Harris said that he considered Metrotown a good choice for an outing with children on a rainy day.

One participant asked about working with the local community during development. Ted Williams said that most residents accept that it is a dense community and that traffic was part of that.

Implementation Is Both An Art And A Science**Mary Frances Turner, Commissioner of Strategy, Innovation and Partnerships, Town of Markham**

Mary Frances Turner spoke about implementation of a town centre in a greenfield site, which she called a “greenfield downtown.” The densities of Metrotown are similar to those that Markham hopes to achieve, but Metrotown’s built form is completely different from Markham’s main-street-style vision with a large lake in the centre. Also, unlike Metrotown, Markham doesn’t want to be a retail destination for the rest of the GTA – the Town doesn’t want to be “overly” successful and become a tourist-oriented place like Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Communication and consultation with stakeholders are very important, using a variety of approaches – meetings, conferences, workshops – both to educate and receive advice from residents and businesspeople.

Markham is taking a collaborative approach to planning, involving not only the region, but also neighbouring municipalities, to coordinate rapid transit and transportation corridors. A public-private partnership of nine companies are working to deliver rapid transit in York Region.

Financial strategies include tax incentive zones, joint development arrangements, reserves, and tax increment financing. Development at this scale means capturing the benefits of assessment growth and ploughing it back into the project.

Markham has a transit and parking strategy for the centre. Transforming suburban culture is a challenge – people expect free parking on open lots, but Markham wants paid parking in parking structures, some of them off-site, and incentives for people to use transit, such as lifetime transit passes. One of the keys is offering the transit early on in the process.

The development review process must be revamped. An advisory committee of 23 residents put together a series of performance measures and best practices to guide development applications and help track success. There is a checklist for applications, and a report card for ongoing developments.

The performance measures include the restoration and enhancement of the Rouge River, which runs through the site, and the quality of the built environment. In September 2002, the Town and Advisory Committee hosted a successful public conference, chaired by David Suzuki, to present the performance measures to residents. Mary Frances Turner predicted that the final report would be a “must-have” for other communities who want to carry out similar developments.

Creating A Collective Vision**Gary Atkins, Charles Sutherland, Ted Spence, Members, Markham Town Centre Advisory Committee**

Gary Atkins noted that just as planning doesn’t end with the adoption of a plan, neither does public involvement. He praised Markham for the way it has integrated community involvement in the planning process.

The Advisory Committee formed five subcommittees for green infrastructure, greenlands, public open space, transportation, and built form. Each subcommittee studied the available information on the subject to learn about best practices in order to come up with performance criteria/benchmarks for the regulatory process of development. The Committee was allowed to ask questions and demand certain answers. The Group continues to meet regularly to monitor progress. The development principles were adopted in October 2002. The group is currently studying three development applications.

Charles Sutherland belongs to the built form subgroup, which focused on the link between built form and transit access, and the way in which human-scaled buildings would frame the open space. The group learned about building alignment and street walls, siting buildings to create views, and the creation of a coherent urban character. The site is part of the Rouge River valley system, and the group worked to find ways to orient the built form with views of the valley. The group realized the importance of its role in the process of reviewing the first application, when its comments led to modifications in the application.

Ted Spence joined the transportation subgroup, which studied everything from bicycle trails to walkways to transportation demand management to rapid transit. The transportation strategy calls for additional north-south crossings of the 407 and the railway corridors, and eventually east-west crossings of the 404. The existence of the Centre will change the nature of Highway 7, Woodbine, Warden, and Kennedy because of new connections through the area.

Spence felt that the committee had to do more to educate Markham residents about transportation options. Letters to local papers suggest that many Markham residents fear increased traffic congestion when the Centre is developed. Also, in the plan, Highway 7 is to be transformed into an urban boulevard; but many people call it a "high-speed collector" (although it does not move very fast) and do not want it changed. At the same time, many Markham residents consider the 407 "somebody else's road" and never use it, although it is fast and convenient. Finally, many people believe that any high-density development equals gridlock, rather than more transportation options and rapid transit. Spence feels that all these perceptions and attitudes need to change, and this is the current challenge facing the committee.

Partnerships For Infrastructure To Achieve Critical Mass **Mary Frances Turner, Commissioner of Strategy, Innovation and Partnerships, Town of Markham**

Mary Frances Turner introduced the theme of partnerships for infrastructure. In particular, she focused on the transportation strategy, which is being developed in partnership with the Region of York and neighbouring municipalities. Markham hosted The Great Transportation Debate to get residents engaged in the issues.

At present, environmental assessments are being conducted on the proposed rapid transit corridors, and a public-private partnership is working on a rapid transit plan, which includes "Quick Start" (see York Region website, www.region.york.on.ca/yrtpt). Quick Start is a plan to get the elements of rapid transit on the ground as soon as possible – the date forecast is June 2004. The transit will move in segregated corridors, not mixed in with other traffic.

Markham is also pursuing transportation demand management initiatives, starting with its own employees and

promoting carpooling, biking to work, and transit. Now Markham is branching out to work with large employers like Lucent, IBM and Motorola.

Partnerships require demonstrable mutual benefits. Problems do arise – hidden agendas, conflicts of interest, failure to deliver, turnover of personnel – so careful management is required to ensure that projects do not bog down.

Partnerships For Infrastructure To Achieve Critical Mass **Diane Holgate, General Manager, Network Provisioning, Bell Canada**

Diane Holgate spoke about information technology in a community setting. She introduced a new acronym (“POTS” for “plain old telephone system”) in describing the changes over the past 10 years. In the early 1990s, communication technology consisted of telephone, television, newspapers and radio. Today, consumers demand high-speed Internet connections, satellites to deliver entertainment, e-business solutions, wireless technology for cellphones, pagers and handheld computers, and broadband networks for businesses, hospitals, and educational institutions.

The demand for new products and services is not slowing down. Customers want choice, affordability, bandwidth, speed, and security, and have no tolerance whatsoever for service interruptions, because a lost connection may mean a lost business deal.

Planning information technology infrastructure – indeed, planning for all utilities – has to happen early in the process of a project, such as the Markham Centre. It is much easier to coordinate all the utilities that serve a development if they are involved from the start. Markham has the Utilities Working Together group, which is a forum in which utilities, municipalities, and developers can discuss common issues. It also ensures equal access for all utilities and provides opportunities to coordinate the placing of cables and other elements of infrastructure in a common trench.

Bell has also developed community design guidelines for equipment placed on the streets. The guidelines are intended:

- To help municipalities understand Bell’s requirements for equipment
- To help Bell’s suppliers understand municipalities’ environmental and aesthetic requirements for equipment and street furniture

Finally, it is essential to plan, not for today’s requirements, but for tomorrow’s, so that maintenance, expansions to service, or the installation of new services cause minimal disruption.

Partnerships For Infrastructure To Achieve Critical Mass **Bruce Ander, President, Markham District Energy Inc.**

Bruce Ander proposed to answer the question, “Can a commitment to district energy create qualitative as well as environmental benefits?” The short answer is yes.

Markham District Energy is owned by the Town of Markham and known as a “competitive affiliate” of Markham

Hydro, a regulated company that distributes electricity. The Town created Markham District Energy, which produces electricity, heating and cooling services, as an economic development tool that also meets some of the Town's environmental and sustainability goals. The purpose is not necessarily to provide cheaper energy, but to offer developers a "premium product" and to ensure the security of the local energy supply.

The definition of district energy is "highly efficient, sustainable, environmentally superior production of electricity, heating and cooling close to the places that use it." Energy is produced in one facility and distributed to hotels, hospitals, schools and businesses, which are no longer required to house or maintain their own boilers and chillers. District energy, through cogeneration, offers the possibility of making more efficient use of energy sources by processes such as recapturing waste heat.

Ander showed a diagram of the energy streams in Ontario – their sources and destinations, from traditional sources such as coal and hydro, to nuclear power, to renewable sources such as wind and solar power. Only 1 percent of Ontario's energy comes from so-called "green" sources, putting us well behind Europe and even the United States.

The Markham District Energy plant is located behind Markham Hydro near the 407 and Warden. Underground pipes carry the heat or cooled air to buildings in the Town, such as the IBM and Motorola offices. These buildings have "energy transfer stations" – heat exchangers that distribute the heat or cooled air to the rest of the building. Markham Centre will be served by district energy.

In terms of district energy, there are three types of buildings:

- a brand new building, just built with boilers and chillers – it is too late to offer district energy
- a very old building, where retrofitting is possible
- future buildings, which offer the opportunity to incorporate district energy services

Markham Centre, where no infrastructure is currently in place, is an ideal opportunity to plan for district energy. There is no need to tear up existing roads to lay pipes, for example.

An important concern is built form. One approach is to blend in with existing buildings, such as a parking garage. Windsor incorporated its system with the new casino, and most people don't even know it's there. Hamilton called its plant an "energy centre" and built it as part of a school.

The benefits of district energy include:

- reduced construction costs of buildings
- space saved within and on top of buildings
- improved appearance of buildings
- reliability
- simpler operations (no boiler or chiller maintenance)
- lower noise levels in buildings
- better fire safety (no natural gas in buildings)
- simplified MOEE approvals

Nevertheless, Markham District Energy faces a challenge. It could build 15 kilometres of pipes and hope that all the buildings in Markham Centre opt to take the service, but that is risky. It needs to get commitments from developers in order to build the infrastructure in advance.

Partnerships For Infrastructure To Achieve Critical Mass **Rudy Buczolits, Vice President, Land Development, Remington Group**

Randy Buczolits suggested that “as a developer, I have to be the bad guy.” The Remington Group is poised to begin developing downtown Markham, with about 10 million sq. ft. of commercial, retail, residential and entertainment space.

The question is the economic viability of urban development in a suburban setting, especially commercial development. Markham Centre has the potential to be a model for Smart Growth. But if it does not work, it could become just another suburban development, contributing to traffic congestion and urban sprawl.

Smart Growth delivers long-term social, economic, and environmental benefits, but it costs more to build. District energy, rapid transit, and telecommunications are part of it, but premium infrastructure is needed to make higher densities work. In Markham Centre, the premium infrastructure includes the central lake, the civic mall, the civic square, the village green, the high street shopping area, the lakeside market and promenade, and several parks and playing grounds.

One key element is structured parking. Reducing the land given to surface parking is an integral part of Smart Growth. This is one of the defining differences between suburban and urban development. But everywhere else in Markham and the suburban GTA, free or low-cost surface parking is the norm, usually provided by employers for employees and customers. This competitive environment will be a factor when Remington needs to attract tenants to lease prime office space in downtown Markham. Without new financing mechanisms, the plan would just not work.

Also, the knowledge regarding what attracts commercial tenants to an urban space in the suburbs is still not widely known. Commercial tenants want the quality of life that comes with transit, lower levels of congestion, and urban amenities. But when they weigh the costs of premium infrastructure, they may not be willing to pay.

Without tenants, a developer will not build, no matter how much the municipality wants its downtown. The development costs are projected to be about 35 percent higher than traditional development, which will result in rents that the leasing market would not accept.

Fortunately, the municipality realizes the need for new financial strategies. Two mechanisms in particular may help, but they need to involve all levels of government.

- Tax increment financing is one way to promote higher densities in a suburban setting and pay for premium infrastructure. Under this scheme, the municipality collects only the taxes due on conventional development at suburban densities until the premium infrastructure is paid for.
- Special tax districts which capture taxes through special levies in a defined area. These levies are similar to development charges, and are used to pay for premium infrastructure, including parks, open spaces, and high-quality urban design.

Sustainable development costs much more than conventional suburban development. Bringing urban development to the suburbs is not as simple as copying downtown models. If the long-term benefits are to be realized, public investment is required.

Partnerships For Infrastructure To Achieve Critical Mass
Dan Leeming, Partner, The Planning Partnership & Scott Chandler, Vice-President,
Royal LePage Advisors

Dan Leeming and Scott Chandler introduced the York Region Centres and Corridors Study, a report that will soon be released.

Scott Chandler noted that “we are no longer talking about whether Smart Growth is the right idea.” The discussion has moved to methods of implementing the ideas. The study, which began early in 2002, was partly intended to build a business case for centres and corridors in the York Region, a concept that is already widely accepted. The policy is there, but, as Dan Leeming noted, there is “less enthusiastic follow-up on the construction side... The playing field between intensified development and greenfield development is not level.”

The study, which included case studies of 20 to 30 emerging centres throughout North America, found that York Region is not alone. The other centres found that they could get a few things right, but they could not get everything right. Incentives and investments were needed.

The case for centres and corridors is strong. This type of urban structure can deliver greater housing diversity, better accessibility, environmental protection, and economies of scale. The Region and the Town of Markham have already made progress in the area of transit. However, transit requires higher densities. Subways and GO stations both need and support densities of 3.5 to 5 fsi (buildings between 8 and 20 storeys, similar to North York Centre). This includes both commercial and residential uses, which means promoting the benefits of urban living to potential residents – a new idea in the 905 region.

Not everyone will live or work in a high-rise. Most people will continue to live in conventional suburban housing. The changes occur mainly at the margins – shifting modal splits, offering alternatives.

Barriers to Smart Growth remain. Greenfield development remains competitive; it is not yet economically feasible to build at higher densities in most parts of the suburbs. As well, suburban municipalities are at disadvantage: without higher densities, it is difficult to support transit; without transit, it is difficult to support higher densities.

The study included an analysis of the costs of private development. As the previous speaker pointed out, surface parking vs. structured or underground parking is a key issue. Development charges and other municipal fees also affect profits and economic feasibility. But the biggest issue is that of demand: is there a market for higher-density options in the suburbs? What will attract new residents, investors, and employers who are willing to pay feasible rents or sale prices?

The municipality can play a role in siting civic uses – city hall, libraries, court houses, community centres. Many municipalities have made mistakes in this area.

The study identified three key tools for influencing change:

- Enhance demand
- Reduce private-sector costs (for example, by helping with parking costs)
- Reduce risk (for example, with public-private partnerships)

Also, there are areas in which further work and study are needed, in the following areas:

- Parking authorities
- Development corporations
- Development charges for residential and non-residential property
- Property tax rates
- Federal and provincial tax systems

Gordon Harris concluded the day by noting that many ideas that seemed new a few years ago are now taken for granted, from Smart Growth and transit, to green roofs and district heating.

