

Now is the time to reshape our cities

JACK DIAMOND
FROM THURSDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
NOVEMBER 27, 2008 AT 12:00 AM EST

Just as Detroit was warned about fuel-inefficient automobiles, so was Toronto alerted to unsustainable sprawl in 1996 by the Golden report.

It has been clear for some time that fuelinefficient sprawl is an obsolete, unsustainable form of development. As difficult as it is for General Motors to restructure its business, with so-called legacy issues imbedded in the way it does

business (gas guzzlers, too many dealerships, union contracts and so on), so it is difficult to restructure the shape of our cities. But it is not impossible, and like GM, we have no option. The sooner we acknowledge the problem, the better our prospects for a sustainable future.

Not only did the Big Three automobile manufacturers fail to recognize the problem of excess gas consumption, they actively resisted the call for fuel-efficient automobiles. So, too, did Mike Harris's Ontario Conservatives ignore the recommendations of the Golden report. Even the most efficient automobiles are nothing in comparison to the fuel efficiency and pollutionreducing characteristics of public transit.

It doesn't end there. Both hard services (utilities) and soft services (schools, universities, clinics, libraries and research facilities) cost far more spread out over hell's halfacre than they do in compact urban configurations. As a result, we're going broke for every \$1 earned in realestate taxes in low-density areas, the city pays \$1.40 to service the land.

Building public transit is not enough. Empty subway cars are expensive to run, too. It should be understood that lowdensity sprawl does not support public transit:

If it's too far to walk to the station, the result is predictable: Once in the car, the driver keeps going to the final destination. Alternatively, buses are involved and the journey requires more than two transportation modes, ridership falls significantly. Even with one modal change, commuting times can become onerous.

There are answers to these problems. There are ways to begin the necessary transformation.

First, higher densities should be zoned within walking distance of existing publictransit stops. To make public transit affordable, at least 25 units to the acre are necessary. Indeed, no further development should be allowed further than, say, 1,000 metres (a 15minute walk) of a transit stop. These concentrations will have further benefits: They can support other uses, such as food stores and what's known as convenience retail - dry cleaners, shoe repairs, news vendors within walking distance of home. Such arrangements break the automobile dependency that shopping malls create in spreadout suburbs.

Second, the utilization of bus flexibility. No expensive rail bed is required for bus service. Buses can serve local routes or longer-haul, express routes. They can have a number of stops in one neighbourhood, then go directly to a more

remote destination. Exclusive bus lanes on existing arterial streets, for the longer-haul components of such trips, would enhance their efficiency.

It wouldn't

be hard to figure out the demand patterns. Such a system can sustain lower levels of ridership than those required for rail-based transit. Bus transit could even function as an interim arrangement until sufficient density exists for rail. These are just two of the steps available to begin the process of rendering our cities economically and environmentally sustainable. Once these are begun, there are a host of others to accelerate the change, such as fullcost land pricing that includes the incremental cost of expressways and trunkline utilities.

The free market has been discredited by the wanton lack of regulation and public interest intervention. What governments do now with bailouts is possibly a poor, and certainly only a short-term, answer. Governments have to understand the importance of being countercyclical it's precisely at the low end of the business cycle that they should invest. This is when the best prices are available for construction and other services. As the private sector sheds employees, so the public sector should create them, by investing in future sustainability. Too often, governments do their procurement at the high end of the business cycle, overheating an already hot economy.

Now is the time to consider investing in an infrastructure that not only provides employment but also lays the foundation for future sustainability, and therefore a globally competitive and environmentally responsible economy. If we don't take the opportunity created by the current crisis, suburbs will be like an SUV in the next decade unwieldy and unwanted.

Jack Diamond is principal of Diamond and Schmitt Architects Inc. He was one of five commissioners appointed by the Ontario government to examine the governance, taxation, land use and transportation for the Greater Toronto Area, producing proposals known as the Golden report.