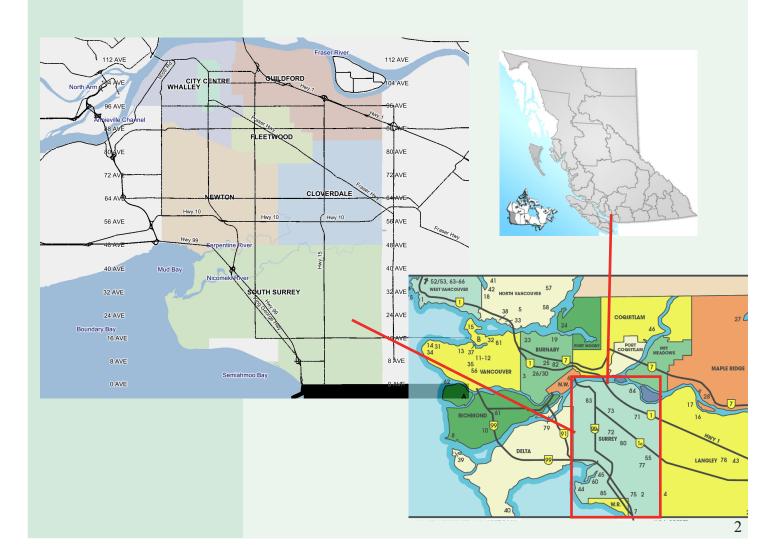


# SURREY, BC an overview of development trends

prepared by BLAKE R. LAVEN for the suburbs project

# SURREY: An Overview of Development Trends

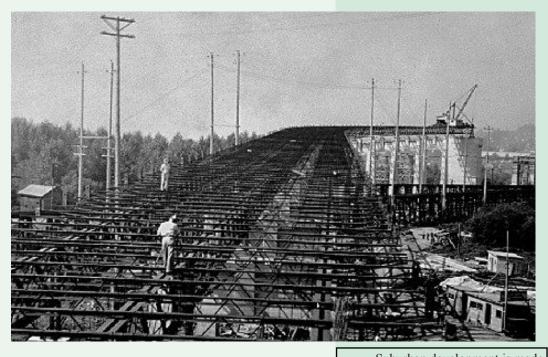
Surrey is a large suburban municipality located in British Columbia's Fraser Valley. With a population close to 400, 000 in the most recent census and a growth rate of over 4% per year, Surrey is one of the fastest growing communities in Canada. Surrey's relatively cheap land in comparison to neighbouring cities and its connection by SkyTrain and highways to Vancouver have made it an attractive place for people to settle. It serves as a bedroom community for the Lower Mainland's employment areas, like Vancouver, Burnaby and Richmond. Families wishing to own a house and raise children in a suburban setting have looked toward Surrey as a safe and affordable option. Surrey is also a popular destination for new immigrants to Canada.



# **Development History**

At the turn of the twentieth century, Surrey was little more than a handful of scattered farms and wood mills. As the city of Vancouver to the west began to grow with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, Surrey became a main supplier of lumber and produce. Cloverdale, the urban center of Surrey, soon became a hub of activity and a juncture point for rail heading south of the border into the US. During the 1920s, Surrey was parceled into 2 ½, 5, and 10 acre parcels organized around a grid (Brown 1998). During the 1930s many prairie farmers, frustrated with drought conditions and poor crops, came west and settled in Surrey.

Surrey remained a largely rural agricultural district until the construction of the Pattullo Bridge in 1937 and the completion of the King George Highway in 1940. At this point a trend began that would continue until present times: high land prices and shortages in Vancouver spurred residential development in Surrey. After the war, returning soldiers settled in Surrey to raise their families while working in other municipalities. In fact, by 1950, 75% of all workers residing in Surrey worked north of the Fraser River (Brown 1998).



Transportation improvements in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in increased population growth and development in Surrey. The completion of the George Massey, and Highway 99 opened up more areas of Surrey for residential development. The opening of the Port Mann Bridge saw the development of the Guildford/Fleetwood areas and the Guildford Town Shopping Center, an important regional commercial center. The Sky Train, the GVRD's light rail line, arrived in Surrey in 1993. Also in 1993, Surrey officially became a city within the Greater Vancouver Regional District (City of Surrey 2008).

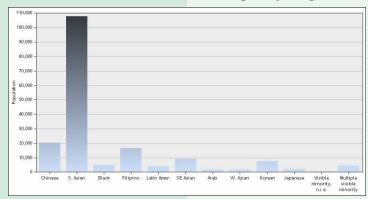
Suburban development is made possible by the construction of large infrastucture projects that allow for easy commuting to employment centers. This photo shows the building of the Patullo bridge connecting Surrey with New Westminister and Vancouver.

#### Census Snapshot

The population growth of Surrey in the second half of the 20th century had been remarkable, and draws comparison to many American suburban municipalities referred to by Robert Lang as boomburgs. Lang (2007, 6) defines boomburgs, "as having more than 100,000 residents, as not the core city in their region, and as having maintained double digit rates of population growth" for a at least three consecutive census periods. Surrey's population growth has been in the double digits since at least the 1986 census.

Surrey's varied ethnic makeup is similar to other boomburgs, and defies the classic view put forth by most cultural critics of suburbs as heterogeneous places. Surrey features a large South Asian community, as well as significant Chinese, Korean, Filipino, South East Asian and Black populations. While close to two thirds, or 250,000 of the population of Surrey are Canadian born, roughly one third, close to 150,000, are immigrants. Most households are families in Surrey, with over to 70% of the population over the age of 15 claiming to be living in a family situation either legally married or commonlaw. In Surrey, the average family size is 3.1 persons per household, slightly larger than the Vancouver or BC averages, both at 2.9.

The work pattern of Surrey's population reaffirms some of the stereotypes of suburban living and highlights some of the challenges planners in Surrey have to contend with in developing a more sustainable community. Of the total working population of Surrey, 198,000 workers, close to 100,000 work in a different municipality within the Lower Mainland. Over 150,000 workers travel to work by personal vehicle, with only 20,000 taking transit and 5,000 walking or cycling.



Surrey features a diverse population, challenging the commonly held notion of the suburbs as hetrogenous places. Despite several very poor neighbourhoods, income in Surrey is on par with the British Columbia average. Personal income in Surrey, for those workers employed full time, is just over \$40,000 a year, and the median family income is over \$60,000 – both comparable to the Canadian and British Columbia averages.

Not surprisingly, given the suburban nature of Surrey, close to half of the built units within Surrey are single detached housing units. Only 20% of the dwelling units in Surrey are classic apartments. The remainder of the units consist of various semidetached and row housing configurations. Townhouses, however, represent the fastest growing sector of the market.

#### **Development Environment**

Surrey's development industry is characterized by large land developers who assemble land and put in services and infrastructure. The city itself does not build infrastructure. According to one councillor Surrey does not build roads either. He claims, "We never have. We hate building roads and only do soon the extreme exception. We let the developer build the road and he gets to give it to us as a donation."

Generally, once services are put in, the individual lots are sold to builders and other developers who build the houses. There are a number of large and small builders in Surrey. Some builders have relationships with the developers and they work in tandem. If the developer creates a few hundred lots, perhaps they will sell a certain number to a certain builder and sell the rest to small builders. The builders are constrained in what they can do by the covenants placed on the deeds to thelots by the developers and the stipulations of the Official Community Plan and subsequent Neighbourhood Concept Plans that direct development.



#### **Planning Structure**

Planning in Surrey follows the municipality's Official Community Plan (OCP). The OCP "provides guidance for the physical structure of the City, land use management, industrial, commercial and residential growth, transportation systems, community development, the provision of City services and amenities, agricultural land use, environmental protection and enhancing social well being." Council adopted the plan in 1996 and amended it in 2001. Further reviews are scheduled every five years, for twenty years, at which time the plan will be rewritten.

The OCP sets some overarching planning objectives for development, such as building compact communities to protect agricultural land; encouraging business and employment, to diversify the land use in Surrey; creating

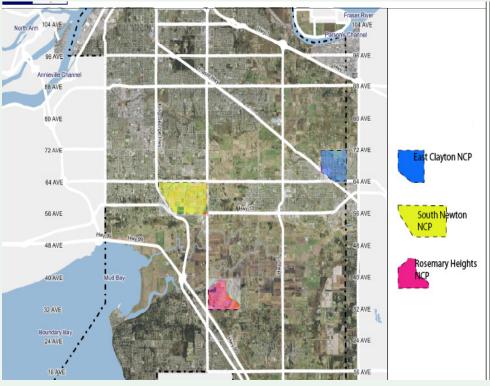
Competing signs in Surrey show various projects for sale by individual builders, part of the East Clayton project developed by one large land developer. complete communities, with residential, employment, and recreational components; enhancing the 'image and character' of Surrey; increasing transportation choices; protecting agricultural and natural areas; providing parks and recreational areas; and incorporating crime prevention through environmental design.

The goals of the OCP are translated into development through the neighbourhood concept planning process. Neighbourhood Concept Plans (NCP) are secondary land-use plans that provide direction on how a particular area of land will be developed. NCP's include maps, a clear development concept, and must include a section reflecting on the policies set out in the OCP and how the development plan will achieve those goals. The NCP process guides all new development in Surrey.

To initiate an NCP, 51% of the owners of 70% of the land in the affected land area need to agree to the process. Most landowners vote in favour of the process, because land value generally increases as the speculation on the property increases. Sometimes developers acquire large amounts of land to begin an NCP. The typical NCP area is just over 100 hectares. Usually these secondary plans are designed by private consultants hired by the city. The consultants work closely with city's Long Range Planning staff to make sure that the secondary plans meet the intentions of the OCP, and are accepted by council.

The NCP process has an extensive public consultation component. Advisory committees with local residents, businesses and developers are set up and public meetings and open houses arranged. When they agree to a NCP process, council decides on the level and type of public participation expected.

Surrey's community and new development planning is done on the neighbourhood scale.
This image show three new Neighbourhood Concept Plan (NCP) boundaries.



The City of Surrey Planning Department has two main departments which deal with planning and development: Long Range Planning and Policy and Area Planning. Long Range Planning and Policy focuses on the formulation of long range planning objectives, including maintaining the OCP and initiating and seeing through the NCP process. Area Planning works with the development industry to make sure decisions made by council are followed through by reviewing development applications and making recommendations to council.

#### **Results of Field Research**

During the summer of 2007, we conducted interviews with members of the Surrey planning community, developers, and city councillors. We also performed visual surveys on old and new developments in Surrey. The following observations result from these efforts.

### a) Is Surrey a suburb?

When we characterized Surrey as a suburb, we had varying responses, from out-right denial to full agreement. One respondent was slightly offended with the characterization of Surrey as a suburb stating, "First off, Surrey is not a suburb. We do not consider it a suburb. We are trying to build Surrey as a complete city" Usually though, interviewees talked about Surrey as a city in transition from decentralized growth to a more compact style featuring defined urban centers.

Respondents from the City of Surrey planning staff talked about Surrey becoming urban, with one stating, "We are growing very rapidly as a suburban community. I say suburban because I don't think when you look around you see Surrey as an urban community like Vancouver. We are not there yet, although we want to be there." Planning staff expressed a strong commitment to embrace a smart growth, work, live, play development strategy. That strategy, according to the planning staff is translating into a different development pattern than what currently exists.



Perhaps the trend toward urbanization has less to do with municipal policy and more to do with the fact that land has become limited, and housing construction cost are going up. At least this is what is suggested by some of the developers. One builder noted, "The cost of land and the cost of construction are getting so high that multiple family forms of development are becoming more

The green area on this map shows Surrey's Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), representing one third of all land in Surrey that was designated, in the 1970s for agriculture. The ALR adds to the shortage of developable land in Surrey but provides an important diversification in land use.

acceptable to the market. It is just getting people into housing at a reasonable cost. Developers that I had, even two years ago, who were not interested in doing multi-family, are now saying, 'We have to look at that.'"

The development community, for the most part, expressed an interest in maintaining the suburban nature of Surrey, and even as they densify, they see the marketability of Surrey as suburban and primarily residential. One developer admitted that, "Surrey has always been suburbia. It has always been about single family housing... It is evolving though. I think the single family is still the bread and butter for the city, but the market is starting to change now."

# b) New trends in Surrey

When asked about the most important new trends in development in Surrey, several different answers were offered. Most respondents though, talked of the shift to a higher density built form with smaller lots and a shift to townhouses and apartments, generally unheard of in Surrey. Respondents, however, explained the changes in different ways. The planning staff generally attributed the shift to changes in city policy, while the development industry respondents talked about the changes in the housing market and the rising price of land and building materials. Generally, the shift to a higher density in Surrey was well received by planning staff, council and developers.

Old and new suburban streetscapes in Surrey, representing a shift to a higher density built form.





One developer had serious reservations about moving away from the typical suburban single detached model that has defined Surrey for so long. He argued that, "As much as people talk about the desirability of living downtown, there is a silent majority of people who actually prefer suburb living. The point is, even if it was the same price, and it is not, a good majority of people would still choose to live in a lower density suburb, whether it is new or used." This sentiment is reflected in the form that the higher density product is taking in Surrey. While lots are being built smaller, and more multi-family housing is being constructed, the suburban model is still being advanced. Rather than apartments or condominiums, as found in urban areas, townhouses with private yards and privacy fencing are being developed instead. Whether this is an interim shift to an even denser model, or just a reflection of the economic

times is unclear. What is evident however, is the desire of people to want to maintain a piece of land and a backyard, albeit a small one, which is so important to homeownership in the suburbs.

One trend related to the move toward multi-family development that we noticed in Surrey was the rise of private enclave development. Most of the condominium apartments and townhouse developments developed in Surrey were being constructed around private streets with strata ownership. These developments were taking an exclusionary form, featuring internal street patterns divergent of their larger neighbourhood, and for the most part with only a single entrance. While all but a few of the developments did not feature controlled entrances, most had some form of exclusionary design to them, including restrictive signage, landscaping and in a few cases ornamental gates. Many of these developments resembled gated communities in all but the gate.





Typical townhouse development in Surrey featuring exclusionary entry features, private interior streets, and poor permeability. Cottage architectural touches, front porches and gingerbread trim reflect the influence of new urbanism.

Initially we found this pattern troubling, because of the social and physical effect of gated communities on neighbourhoods, but when asked about this trend, most respondents were skeptical of the negative impacts these types of development would have on the larger community. Neither City staff nor private planning consultants saw these developments resembling gated communities. When asked about this, one respondent argued the distinction: "The gate is the barrier. The gate can stop people from entering in. Even though these developments are done on a private roads, without a gate somebody could walk through the development. If you have a gate on there, you stop people from walking into that community." For him, there was a large difference between the single entrance enclave developments and a classic gated communities.

When compared, the similarities between the gated communities and the private enclave developments, the gate itself begins to be less important. Take for example the large entry features on most of these developments. The signs give an identity to those living within the development that is distinct to the identity of the larger neighbourhood. Often this type of branding is found with gated communities as well. Exclusionary signage is another feature similar

to both housing configurations. While, the respondent mentioned that without the gate anyone can just stroll through these developments, there is usually signage letting people know that they are on private property which discourages travelers passing through. Added amenities are another similarity. As developers compete for exclusivity and privacy, they add more and more self-sustaining elements to the enclaves, such as pools, gyms and clubhouses, which reduce the interaction between residents and the larger community.

Aside from the social implications these private enclaves are having on the communities they inhabit, new research shows the effect they may be having on the physical pattern of the larger neighbourhood. Laven (2008) shows that these private developments are decreasing the overall connectivity of the neighbourhoods they are in by increasing the block size and disrupting the larger street pattern.

On the one hand, planners are expressing a commitment to developing at a higher density to meet social and environmental objectives, but on the other hand, what is being developed are private enclaves that may be undermining those same planning objectives. Most of the respondents did not acknowledge this contradiction.

Another trend the planning staff talked about was mixing uses in Surrey, currently a primarily residential community. The idea of 'urbanizing' Surrey was strong in much of the planning language and part of that urbanization project, it would seem, is to bring in uses other than strictly residential. One planner stressed that the City wanted, "to create more of an urban community, with street friendly shops lining the street as opposed to backing away from the street," and, "creating what the City calls a more 'complete community,' more 'self sustainable community.'

The planning staff also talked about some of the frustrations of Big Box pressure in relation to their plans to urbanize Surrey. For the planning staff, the big box model is inherently suburban and antithetical to the small-scale retail they are trying to attract. One planner commented, "From a planner's point of view, big box goes against the notion of good planning; Big box means suburban."

Large-scale retail, however, has a long history in Surrey. The Guilford area in North Surrey, features the Guilford Mall, which was the largest mall in the Lower Mainland, until the late 1980s. The mall is currently embroiled in a battle to keep its Walmart; a battle which has been divisive for the city. On the one hand, some of the planning staff and some of the councillors are happy to see the area where the Guilford Mall is come up for redevelopment, and move away from the big box single use model. They want to see a mix of uses integrated with the retail. On the other, some councillors and the development industry wish to expand the role of Guilford as a regional shopping center, and bring in commercial tax dollars. One proposal to do an urban design

"The townhouse developments on private streets in Surrey, increase the grain size of the neighbourhoods they inhabit, reduce the amount of route choice for travellers, and allow residents to retreat into private enclaves." study on the Guilford area was turned down. An urban design study, however, was allowed on a new big box development in Semiahmoo, and the result, according to one councillor, "was a commitment from those who own the 17 acre site, to redevelop the site with some mixed use sustainable principles —more transit, less cars, and a focus on growing the residential base locally." The approaches to retail in Surrey are mixed.

The other trend mentioned by a few respondents was a changing demographic profile in Surrey, in conjunction with the changing built form. One consultant talked about marketing to empty nesters, as opposed to the typical 'family' market Surrey developers tend to market to.

## c) New urbanism and smart growth

New urbanism and smart growth are not officially embraced in Surrey by name; however, most respondents were familiar with the concepts. Surrey's planning community seemed skeptical toward embracing planning ideologies such as Smart Growth or New Urbanism. There seemed to be general sentiment that Surrey was different than a lot of other places in North America and that developers will develop what works in Surrey and not be swayed by all-encompassing theories. When asked if Surrey's planning policies are consistent with new urbanism most said it was, with one respondent stating, the language has "seeped into the new Official Community Plan."

There was also general acceptance that Surrey's OCP is open to ideas of smart growth and new urbanism, but it was also open to any 'good planning principles.' That said, many of the tenets of new urbanism and smart growth have been embraced in Surrey and are seen in new development there – at least from an architectural perspective. Design elements such as front porches, gingerbread features, and neo-colonial touches set the tone for new development.







Water cisterns and swail ditches are evidence of the innovative drainage system engineered for East Clayton, part of what garnered it the notariety of being a sustainable subdivision.

Many respondents mentioned Surrey's new urbanism in relation to the East Clayton project. East Clayton is a greenfield development on the Surrey-Langley border and was the result of a collaboration between a local land developer and a designer at the UBC School of Landscape Architecture. The city was originally hesitant to allow an NCP in the area because of drainage issues, but the developer and designer were willing to introduce some innovative solutions at a an albeit significantly increased cost. At the same time, the designer was interested in introducing a series of principles of sustainability, which he though could guide new development to better ends than the current model. In all, there were seven principles for the development, most reflecting new urbanist tenants, such as back lanes, a grid street system, and a mix of housing types.

The Surrey planning staff, when asked, showed some skepticism toward new urbanism in its institutionalized form, but agreed on the planning principles supporting it. One respondent stated, in response to a question of whether Surrey's municipal plan supports new urbanism: "When you say new urbanist development, I am not exactly sure what you have in mind, is it an Andres Duany Seaside type of new urbanist development? Or, is it a smart growth community? Is it just doing things the right way?" When talking about the principles of new urbanism, most planners agreed that Surrey supported a new urbanist style organization, but spoke little about transects, form based coding, TOD or TND, important aspects to new urbanism.

Some developers did mention the influence of new urbanism on the architecture of new developments in Surrey. According to one builder, "The design of new urbanism houses have been huge. Surrey has a design review process, which is supposed to make new developments reflect and complement the existing area. What do you do in new subdivisions though, where there is nothing to reflect and compare to? It is in these areas where the new urbanist design has really taken off. This form is comfortable given the suburban nature of Surrey."

One respondent, a private consultant, said that the development industry tries to learn and apply new techniques and styles like 'new urbanism' and 'smart growth' but recognizes the "challenge of getting the public on board." Most developers though, talked about the planning process allowing any kind of development idea, new urbanist or otherwise. One developer described the planning process in Surrey: "Surrey's plan is fairly open to allow you to come with any idea you think is appropriate. The NCP is really the vehicle for development. We worked on the North Grandview Heights plan, but this isn't a new urbanist community. We were taken in a different direction given the existing population."

"Typically, I think people would rather not have back lanes. What happens with the lane is, it kills your back yard. Usually there is a detached parking garage facing inward where your back yard would have been. People would rather trade the front yard for a private back yard, because the back yard has more private space." (private developer)

#### d) Back lanes

Where back lanes have traditionally existed in Surrey, they have been designed to move traffic more efficiently on collectors and arterials. Houses that front the busy streets have rear access, via a laneway so that traffic is not slowed as residents turn into their garages. On the local streets, however, the usual front loaded suburban model is still the norm. More recently back lanes are becoming more common. In the East Clayton NCP back lanes are a main feature of the design. The idea was to remove garages from the front of the houses to create a friendlier street atmosphere. The results, however, have been mixed.

One developer who worked on East Clayton commented on the increased amount of impermeable surface back lanes add to a typical development. He did not understand why, a development that was trying to come up with innovate drainage solutions would propose a model that increases the

permeable surface so much. Others commented on the reduction of parking spaces and the added expense for home purchasers that back lanes create. A builder addressed back lanes from a marketing perspective. He stressed that, "typically, I think people would rather not have the lanes. What happens with the lane is, it kills your back yard. Usually there is a detached parking garage facing inward where your back yard would have been. People would rather trade the front yard for a private back yard, because the back yard has more private space. What happens in a lot of these houses is, there is very minimal back yards."

City planning staff was generally supportive of back lanes. One commented that lanes are integral to what they are trying to do. He mentioned, "The lane system is necessary because we want to create a friendly streetscape. Instead of having the garage at the front door, with cars coming off the street, you would have the garage on the back side. This way you bring the house forward, have a narrower street, and you create a much more pleasant street-scape. It is a much more friendly walking, pedestrian environment along the street."

#### e) Gated communities

Although Surrey has gated communities, new and old, there is a perception that the city does not allow them. There is in fact no real legislation against gating, just a preference against it within the city. One councillor commented that, "broadly and generally, the City of Surrey does not like gated communities." He goes on to note that, "gated communities tend to be isolationist and they tend not to be community orientated. They are insular.









Gated communities in Surrey in new and older subdivisions.

While most planners discourage thier construction, the development community sees a strong market for a gated product.

They are not eyes on the street. They do not help with crime prevention. They become a little world to themselves." This strong reaction however, was not reflective of all respondents from city staff and council. While most talked of gated communities disparagingly, when asked about the benefits of gated communities, most could see some benefit for seniors. One respondent commented, "The only benefit I see is if the demographic is getting older and people want to travel more, leaving their house for a month, it is better to line in a gated community where there is some protection."

The development community, on the other hand, sees gated communities as an effective marketing tool, especially to seniors. There is the perception, amongst the development community that gated communities are more attractive for customers. One responded commented that, "people love them. Absolutely. Especially if they have security built into them. If you go to some of the posh areas of South Surrey, the gated communities are really nice. There are \$800,000 townhomes behind huge gates. They have a watchman there and everything. It is high security [laughs]. It is like rich people in Beverly Hills, do you think they say, "Hey come on in." No. That is what comes with having money." The city itself, especially the councillors who commented on the gated communities were against gated communities in most instances, but could see the benefit of them for seniors.

As a result of the city making it virtually impossible for the construction of gated communities, the development industry has responded by building many private communities, without the gates. One respondent recognized that there was little difference between these communities and traditional gated communities, "We have gated communities without gates. There are a lot of these, and they still function the way a gated community does, whether it is gated or not."

#### Conclusion

Criticism of the suburban model of growth that has characterized development since the 1950s has dominated planning literature for the past two decades. First, a critical discourse against sprawl and separation of uses zoning emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s. Then, solutions for development emerged, claiming to save the suburbs through better design and reverting to past planning models. Surrey with its fast growth provides an interesting snapshot of how this critical discourse has come up against historical trends. For most of the twentieth century, Surrey satisfied a demand for family based affordable low-density housing model within the Lower Mainland. As this trend toward a higher density suburban model plays out in Surrey, the interaction between planning, development, and council illustrates of the challenges happening across Canada.

No doubt the greatest trend in Surrey is a move to a higher density built form.

There are several reasons. On the one hand, city policy is proposing a more sustainable model with greater community cohesions and a better use of land through clustering and directing growth toward designated urban centers within Surrey. This push from the city is reflective of shifting priorities in planning practice and literature. At the same time, however, land speculation and development pressure throughout the Lower Mainland is driving land value up. In conjunction with increasing building costs, these higher land values are forcing developers and builders to build at a higher density to satisfy the housing market in Surrey.

While these two converging factors, a shifting planning approach towards a sustainability model and land speculation driving up land price, are seemingly complementary, it would seems as if the economics of land development play a stronger role with the current trend toward higher densities than city policy. The increasing stipulations the city is putting on development to build mixed-use, to go through a design review process, to conduct extensive environmental assessments etc, is acceptable because of the currently 'hot' market. The sustainability elements that the city is trying to build into most new plans are seen by the developers as 'the cost of doing business' rather than a value added amenity leading to a better community. Talking to the development community it is apparent that there is an unapologetic capitalist element to land development in Surrey. The largest developer we talked to admitted candidly that the cost of developing in sustainable ways is much more expensive than the traditional way. He argues, "Sustainability, if you want it, you are going to pay more for it. There is no way it is going to be built cheaper than the status quo." There is a feeling, within the development community, that to move to a more sustainable system, the City needs to increase its support both financially and logistically. The development of East Clayton only happened because of logistical support from the city.

While planning staff and city representatives point the finger at the development industry for much of the decentralized growth in Surrey, the waters are much muddier than they first appear. The trends in Surrey are systemic of the problems faced by most suburban municipalities in North America that offer residential land at relatively short commuting distances to major employment centers. What is illustrative of the Surrey example is the interaction between the intended plans for the city, dense urban town centers connected by transit, and the process that development is interpreting the plans. Ideas of smart growth and new urbanism were influential in the development of the OCP and subsequent NCPS, but the built form, featuring a preponderance of enclave townhouse development may question some of the stated achievements of the city and may suggest to planners a more collaborative approach is needed.

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