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Private Drift? Theory and practice in planning the suburbs¹

Canadian planning policy generally tends to support new urbanism and smart growth principles (Filion 2002, 2003, Grant 2003). Many cities have adopted plans that encourage intensification, mixed uses, transit-oriented development, integrated housing, and connected street grids even in suburban contexts. The language of “sustainability” appears widely in urban development discourse. A study of suburban practice, however, shows that these ideals may have had limited impact: even proponents of the concepts acknowledge significant challenges to implementing the vision. Anathema to those promoting a vibrant public realm, private communities and gated enclaves are appearing with increasing frequency as consumers seek landscapes that offer privacy and exclusivity (Grant et al 2004).

This paper presents recent research findings that explore the gap between planning theory and philosophy (as embedded within professional discourse and municipally-adopted plans) and development practice (as embodied in the residential districts being constructed on the urban periphery). It reports on interview data collected from development participants in three Canadian cities in the summer of 2007. I consider respondents’ views on the challenges to implementing new urbanism, smart growth and sustainability ideas. Several questions inform the analysis. How are private sector (market) interests influencing the practice of suburban development? What are the challenges to planning an open, connected and attractive public realm? How do respondents explain the appeal of private amenities and infrastructure in cities that promote opposing values?

Producing suburbs

Home to more than half of the population in North America, suburbs in contemporary cities are places of continual innovation and transformation. Their construction plays a major role in our economy; their management constitutes a common preoccupation of government. While they continue to attract people beginning families they also host a wide



range of household types and ethnic groups (Filion et al 2000, Frey 2001). They are diverse and dynamic. They have become the butt of jokes and the bane of urbanists. In popular culture suburbs stand accused of generating social anomie, perpetuating endless repetition and even of making people fat (Kreyling 2001). They are a central focus of planning activity and planners' angst.

Planners helping to develop and implement urban policy find themselves caught in a love / hate relationship with the suburbs. On the one hand, through our training and via professional organizations planners learn planning principles that encourage mixed use, a vibrant urban realm, intensification, compact form, walkability, and transit-oriented development. On the other hand, planners practice in local contexts in which the suburbs are highly valued as desirable landscapes and prized real estate. The reality being constructed bears little relationship to the rhetoric of the planning discipline.

Suburbs in theory

By examining the literature of contemporary planning we find that ideas associated with new urbanism have significantly influenced planning principles in Canada, the US and England (Grant 2006, Tiesdell 2002). Professional organizations in Canada have pushed values such as vibrancy, connectivity, mix and diversity to the top of the planning agenda (Grant 2003, 2002b). The dominance of new urbanism has affected the priorities of urban and regional plans to promote mixed use, compact form, infill development, street connectivity, transit-oriented development, an enhanced public realm and pedestrian orientation. Provincial, state and national government agencies have joined the movement, especially as the language of new urbanism increasingly turned to smart growth, and sustainable development.

It seems fair to argue that the last decade and a half has seen a significant paradigm shift in planning theory, at least for urban / suburban development practice. Ideas associated with new urbanism and smart growth spread from concepts for city centre revitalization to wider application throughout the urban fabric (Grant 2006). The normative model of a vibrant, open, active, mixed-use, transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly city is widely held as appropriate for modern planning, both for central cities and suburbs. North American professional organizations have been pushing new urbanism and smart growth theory for a decade or more. Conferences, journals, reports and work books offer guidance to professionals on the values, methods and principles of the theory. A war on sprawl and search for sustainability animates political and planning discourse.

The Urban Land Institute, a lobby group for developers, made a commitment to smart growth with a suite of books (see, eg, ULI 2004), articles in its journal and conference presentations. New urbanism and smart growth have influenced engineering groups with the Institute of Traffic Engineers



developing alternative standards (Chael 2003, ITE 1999). Among the latest reasons given for the need to adopt new urbanism and smart growth strategies are assertions that by making it difficult for people to walk, the suburbs promote obesity (Frumkin et al 2004); by generating socially isolating places they spawn youth crime and violence (Duany et al 2000, Kunstler 1999). The model of the good suburb as one of vibrancy, density, connectivity and diversity is increasingly international in scope (Biddulph et al 2003, Jenks et al 1996).

By the late 1990s “smart growth” appeared to offer a new synthesis for planning. The theory suggests that with appropriate planning and design strategies growth can be good. Smart growth employs many approaches promoted in earlier movements, as it focused on finding physical and policy solutions to improve the outcomes of growth. The social responsibility implicit in the healthy communities movement and the environmental responsibility central to sustainable development were downplayed as economic vibrancy rose to a place of greater prominence in the new model. To a considerable extent the new paradigm appropriated principles of new urbanism and the rhetoric of health and sustainability as it put growth back into the equation (Grant 2004, 2007). “Smart growth” served to elevate growth in the information age; new urbanism improved the aesthetics of consumption; and sustainability added a “green sheen” to continued development. Given the role of development in our capitalist economy, it is not surprising to find the value of growth reaffirmed in a period where the externalities of growth (eg, traffic gridlock, environmental degradation, reduced affordability of housing, and a widening gap between rich and poor) contribute to public resistance to expansion.

The Ontario government promoted new urbanism and smart growth values with projects like Cornell (in Markham), through the dissemination of reports and manuals (e.g., Ontario 1997, 1995), and with the appointment of Smart Growth panels (e.g., Ontario 2004). Networks of governments, groups and organizations advocating smart growth have become central to the contemporary debate about the values that should drive development across the continent².

As we examine the discourse surrounding urban development, we find value differences among participants. Many residents and developers of the suburbs may retain conventional values associated with concerns about family and mobility (Creese 1966, Harris 2004, Perin 1977). Even as the planning profession advocates a model of urban form that promotes connectivity, diversity, and urbanity, conventional consumer values may favour privacy, exclusivity and security. Planners advocate an attractive public realm in an open city, yet private roads and gated enclaves become increasingly common in the urban fringe. How can we understand the disjuncture between theory and practice?

Suburbs in practice

Although many cities have adopted new urbanism and smart growth rhetoric in their policies and plans, development patterns in North American suburbs often remain single use and car-dependent. New values are having some influence, especially with infill developments on brownfield sites, but they have not transformed most suburban practice (Al-hindi et al 2001). Canadian cities and suburbs, especially in larger metropolitan areas like Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver, exhibit higher residential densities and greater use of public transportation than do American suburbs (Bourne 2001, Filion 2003) yet they continue to consume agricultural and resource land at an

unsustainable rate. As Skaburskis (2006) notes, they generally fall short of achieving the ambitions planners set. Some of the architectural features associated with new urbanism have caught on, but in a superficial way (Grant 2006, 2002a). Our 2006 inventory of Canadian new urbanism communities found 42 in varying degrees of completion (Grant and Bohdanow 2007). Garage-front suburbs with cul-de-sacs of large and expensive homes remain commonplace. Common interest developments or private communities are proliferating (Barton and Silverman 1994, Curran and Grant 2006, McKenzie 2005, 1994).

Among the most interesting, and some would say alarming, trends we find is that gated communities are thriving in some Canadian cities. Gated developments restrict vehicle entry and sometimes also limit access to pedestrians. Our 2003 inventory – which was by no means comprehensive – documented over 300 gated enclaves in Canada (Grant et al 2004); new projects break ground every year. Hundreds of other private (but not gated) condominium or strata projects appear in cities large and small. Although gated projects defy contemporary planning principles that promote openness and connectivity, more people live in security communities than in new urbanism projects in the US, Canada and England. Private communities are commonplace and increasing in frequency.

Related processes generate new urbanist, gated and private communities (Grant 2007). Land developers seek to create market niches that respond to the values and means of affluent consumers, to package the landscapes of buyers' dreams (Knox 1992). New urbanism projects offer intimate recreations of communities of old, where people knew their neighbours and children cycled to school. Gated enclaves promise security and homogeneity to residents (Grant 2005). Private developments offer the lure of civility, exclusivity and prestige where community is a commodity (Dear and Flusty 1998). Both types of communities appeal primarily to affluent but small households. They emphasize surveillance: new urbanism with eyes on the street; gating with guards or cameras. They create protected realms often employing private streets and amenities (Kohn 2004, Grant and Curran 2007). Consumers choose the development product that best reflects the values they hold and the ways in which they hope to present themselves to the world.

A study of practice

To gain a better understanding of why the practice of building residential neighbourhoods rarely achieves the values that planning theory holds important we conducted a series of interviews with planners, developers and municipal councillors in the summer of 2007. As part of a wider study on Canadian suburbs, we chose three cities from different parts of Canada. The research group deliberately sought suburban cities that had examples of new urbanism communities and gated enclaves and that had plans or other policy documents in place that indicated that staff had made a firm commitment to new urbanism and smart growth principles. The principal research question of the study was: how do participants in the development process explain the gap between theory and practice in the design and development of new residential neighbourhoods?

In June 2007 interviewers visited Markham (Ontario), Calgary (Alberta), and Surrey (British Columbia). We conducted pre-arranged interviews with representatives suggested by the organizations contacted. Table 1 describes the sample of 31 respondents: 25 male and 6 female. We recorded all but one interview for transcription;

the discussions typically lasted 50 to 70 minutes. A semi-structured set of questions guided the interviews through a discussion about the municipality’s experience with trying to implement new urbanism and smart growth principles, and with regulating new developments.

Table 1: Respondents in sample

	Surrey	Calgary	Markham	Total
Planners	2	6	4	12
Developers	6	5	2	13
Councillors	2	1	3	6
Total	10	12	9	31

All three communities studied experienced rapid growth in recent years. Surrey is within the commuter-shed of Vancouver and linked by rapid transit. Its East Clayton Village development has been hailed as an example of a sustainable or “smart growth” suburb (Gilliard 2003, SmartGrowthBC n.d., Surrey n.d.). Several relatively small gated enclaves of condominium (strata) homes are located in the city.

Calgary boomed in the last decade as oil sands development drove the Alberta economy into overdrive. One of the first new urbanism projects in Canada, McKenzie Towne, appeared in a south east suburb in 1995; Duany Plater-Zyberk Associates participated in the preliminary planning for that project (Grant 2006, White 1996). Calgary has several high-end gated projects built over the last decade or two.

Markham, in the suburban fringe of the Greater Toronto Area, is well known as having planning policy that mandates many elements of new urbanism and smart growth (Gordon and Vipond 2005, Gordon and Tamminga 2002, Skaburskis 2006). In the mid 1990s, Andres Duany helped to design the community of Cornell, a development that one respondent, Councillor M04, called “the poster child for new urbanism”. Markham also contains one of the largest gated developments in Canada: Swan Lake.

In the next part of the paper, I summarize respondents’ views on the challenges to implementing new urbanism, smart growth and sustainability ideas. Several questions informed the discourse analysis of transcript data. How are private sector (market) interests influencing the practice of suburban development? What are the challenges to planning an open, connected and attractive public realm? How do respondents explain the appeal of private amenities and infrastructure?

Surrey: “a bit of a free-for-all”

Surrey’s East Clayton Village project will accommodate 13,000 residents in a mix of housing types, mostly on lanes and with neo-traditional housing forms. The city developed a special neighbourhood plan area to ensure that smart growth principles would direct growth. Yet Surrey planners recognized that the plans are not as effective as they would like. As one said,

Planner S03 – ...you do a plan and then you hit reality.

Despite municipal plans that promote smart growth, a developer in Surrey described the city as “a bit of a free-for-all in development”. A somewhat cynical councillor confirmed that Surrey council promoted growth – of any kind -- and undermined the authority of planners.

Councillor S04- The business of Surrey is development. That is the bottom line. The business of Surrey is not about community, despite what some people will tell you. The bottom line is: all we are about is signing off on land development applications. ... There is so much development here. The turnover of professional staff has been appalling. There has been 50% turnover in five years. What do you have left? Architects, social planners, they just throw in the towel. And so we are now in the hands of the land development engineer. Planners know what should be going on, but they don't speak out.

Interview data from Surrey revealed the complex compromises that planners made because council did not always stand behind plan principles. A councillor told us that council ignored planning staff advice, putting planners in a position where they could not say "no" to developers. Developers complained they had to fight to get standards and concessions they needed: they noted that council didn't deliver some of the benefits that staff promised in promoting the plan.

Although the developers of East Clayton worked to implement sustainability principles, not all developers proved sympathetic to the ideas. Planners found it challenging to get some developers on board. In the following quote, a planner described developers as motivated by profit, not principle.

Q. What are the challenges to getting the developers on board to make the type of community you want to create or to follow smart growth principles?

Planner S09 - It is convincing them that this is the way to do it. Developers always see it as something about the bottom-line of how much profit margin they are making. They do not quite see the overall planning principle, the goodness of doing this for community because this is how we want to achieve Surrey as a home. We get a lot of development pressure to open up new areas. The only thing that is stopping them is a lack of services: not transit services, but utilities, sewer, water, that kind of thing.

In all three communities the developers interviewed described themselves as investors trying to make a reasonable income. They said they respond to what the consumer wants because ultimately they have to sell what they produce. Consumer preferences loom large in the rationale they use for their decisions, as the following quote indicates.

Developer S08 - Well, for instance, the city likes to push the neighbourly thing: you know, no fences between the yards, with the neighbours interacting all the time. We fight that all the time. When we are selling a townhouse, even with a small yard, people want a real yard. They want a fence that they can sit behind without 50 people staring at them. They don't



want a walkway that connects their back yard to others so the neighbourhood kid can come over whenever —you know, like *Leave it to Beaver*. That is what the city likes —low picket fences. They want you to be able to talk to your neighbour ten rows down. In reality, the buyers hate that. They complain about it all the time. The sales people are always bitching about that.

A councillor interviewed revealed concerns about whether plan policies sufficiently accounted for the nature of Surrey as a place.

Councillor S02 - It is one thing to be the niche market of environmental, but who wants to buy it? You also have to have those trendy people that want to buy it. Surrey isn't a trendy place. Surrey is a bread and butter, down home, regular folk sort of place. To end up with a product at the end of the day that was going to be marketable, and was going to be at a market price point that could work in the market place, were all huge challenges to take on.

To a certain extent, developers described city staff as ideologically driven, impatient, and ready to ignore the reality that people love their cars. As one respondent noted, though, sometimes developers gave up and accepted the requirements so they could get homes built and on the market.

Developer/ Planning consultant S01 - The lanes were a hard sell. Nobody wanted to do them. I don't think you have that hard of a fight anymore with the developers. Everybody has accepted it as what the city wants. They have gotten used to them and know that it isn't the end of the world. The price of lanes are added to the cost of the development, and passed on. Times are good right now. When times get tight, and builders are scrambling to sell product, there may be more resistance to the lanes.

Has smart growth changed Surrey? Certainly high land costs have contributed to increasing suburban densities: a goal of the plan. As a developer noted, though, other smart growth objectives may remain elusive.

Developer S07- I don't know how much smart growth we have done. Everybody has taken a lot of credit for smart growth, but we haven't done it very well. City council for Surrey and staff for Surrey think that East Clayton is something special. There are a lot of articles written on East Clayton, but the only thing we have done there is try to densify. We tried to make it more of a pedestrian, livable area. And we tried to deal with drainage in a little bit of a better way. We haven't solved all of the problems, but we have solved a few of the minor problems with that.... I don't know if that is smart growth. I don't know if that is sustainability. We have stuck our toe in the water, but that is all we have done so far. If you wrote an article 20 years from now we might be a few steps longer along the way down that path, but we haven't done very much yet.

Widespread development of strata (condominium) townhouse projects in Surrey is contributing to a privatized landscape that may have some of the architectural trappings of new urbanism without many other smart growth principles that planners in Surrey advocate. In their relatively weak position, planners in Surrey experience significant challenges in implementing their values.

Calgary: the “say-do gap”

Planners interviewed in Calgary described their efforts to promote new urbanism as generally successful. Municipal policy since 1995 strongly advocated new urbanism and sustainability. More recently, Calgary has pushed smart growth. Planners typically pointed to McKenzie Towne and Garrison Woods as great examples. Some planners acknowledged that their early round of “sustainable suburbs” policy was not effective for several reasons: council wasn’t fully committed to it; developers resisted it on the grounds that the market would not support it; and planners lacked tools to implement it.

Planner C09 - In my view, we’ve led the pack in terms of policy. We’re often criticized for what we call the “say-do gap,” where we say one thing and then development does a different thing. Our policies for the past 15, 20 years have been very oriented to smart growth. We’ve got a sustainable suburbs study that we adopted in the early ‘90s, which really pioneered suburban sustainable types of smart growth. In fact, our McKenzie Towne in the South East is perhaps 12, 15 years old and was really at the leading edge of new urbanism in suburban environments at that point. Calgary has got a lot of really good smart growth policies. It’s only now actually being translated on the ground.

While new urbanism projects went ahead in Calgary, planners attributed that to the developers’ commitment rather than to plan policies. They explained the challenges that McKenzie Towne experienced as a weak economy and “marketing problems”. They talked about trying to develop better tools to implement the ideas, and of the need to get engineering staff to accept new standards.

Q. What sort of things have been talked about as being part of the design guidelines?

Planner C10 - Public streets. How we build and address our public streets, to make them more walkable. Road standards, just the way we do cross-sections. We’re our own worst enemies for getting street trees in. Our utility standards won’t allow it to happen.



Developers of new urbanism communities in Calgary shared the concern about implementation.

Q. Do you feel that the official plan supports the type of development you are doing here?

Developer / Planner C01 - The plan does; it’s whether the reality does! The problem is that the policy plans are written in a way that they do support what we want to do. The problem with the city is that they say all the right words, but what they don’t have is the tools on the other side, the

implementation tools to make those work. *Q. Do you mean in terms of regulation?* You've got council and the policy makers that are saying all the right things, but it doesn't get translated to the administration – not all of the administration. Parts of the administration -- maybe the planners -- buy into it and are supportive, but there are certain departments within the city – it tends to be Engineering and Traffic – that don't buy into it. So, it's hard to do traffic calming. It's hard to make a street an amenity as opposed to just a vehicle moving facility.

The success of Garrison Woods gave Calgary planning principles a high profile and helped bring council on side.

Planner C05 - Since we've entered a new period of high growth, from about 2002 onward, council has become much more receptive to new urbanism, which we called sustainable suburbs, which has morphed into smart growth. The terminology now for new urbanism is smart growth, but really they're just an extension of the same movement-- from our perspective anyway. Certainly the development industry in periods of high growth is more receptive to changes in policy; we found them much more receptive. Because most changes in policy either impact the way you do things and subject you to risk, or they cost you more as a developer. In a period of high growth, which is really high profitability, the industry is much more receptive to that. We've got a convergence of planners, the development industry and elected officials all coming together to create an environment that's more conducive to introducing smart growth principles.

The convergence of interests gives planners greater latitude to implement valued principles and to push for higher densities, transit oriented development and quality design in the public realm. Planners described council as behind sustainability and smart growth but implied that developers principally set the agenda in Calgary.

Q. Is council fairly supportive of new urbanism and ideas of smart growth?

Planner C05- They are because the market place and the development industry is there right now.

The only Calgary councillor who agreed to an interview suggested that the primary challenge to implementing new urbanism and smart growth ideas was political will.

Councillor C11 - Political will... But I think we got over that. That was the main challenge in the past. The city is full of examples of good plans where council has weakened in the past and turned a good plan into a bad plan.

Developers described some recent market factors that contributed to making some ideas popular. They suggested that density and affordability have been central.

Developer C04- Calgary has probably the highest single-family residential densities in, I would argue, North America. We've been pushed a lot more into higher densities. At one time we had 6 to 7, 6 to 8 units per acre in our community plans. Now 8 is the minimum and council -- Calgary planning commission -- would like to see 10 and up. That can be

accomplished, and has been accomplished in one of the recent plans that has come through, but that means bringing additional product mixes and so forth into the market place, with more multi-family, some mixed use. That's not predicated on the policy direction, that's predicated on market desire for more affordable housing.

While density gains have been significant, respondents noted that the market resisted other elements. In describing McKenzie Towne, a developer argued it proved more expensive to build and slower to sell than a conventional suburb. Consequently, he said, developers employ a hybrid model that incorporates the most saleable features of new urbanism. Planners recognized that reality.

Planner C05 - But by and large, the development industry has embraced certain aspects of new urbanism, but not others. So we don't get the holistic adoption of that today, like in McKenzie Towne or Garrison Woods. You could say that they're like 90% new urbanist principles. What we get now are little bits and pieces of new urbanism grafted onto a more conventional design.

Although planners made clear that they preferred open, public and accessible communities, they also acknowledged that the market often builds places with private amenities and infrastructure. Planners indicated that they try to discourage gated projects and disconnected neighbourhoods. As developer respondents argued, though, buyers in Calgary like privacy and attached garages.

Developer C03 - Calgary is a winter city and people still love their attached garage, preferably out front. Six months of winter, six months of bad sledding in Calgary! That is a huge desire for most home owners, even on the multifamily side of things with townhomes and so forth. They still prefer that garage product. Can it be better designed? Yes. The challenge is, though, bringing that into the housing form and not disconnecting ... that attached garage into another location because that becomes a big inconvenience. ... All of our market monitors and our focus groups tell us that people really like that attached garage.

Developers indicated that their approach to infrastructure is closely connected to their bottom line. The developers of new urbanism projects described lengthy battles with city engineering staff over efforts to build smaller roads.

Developer / Planner C01- ... they were big fights. They took a lot of time. What happens to most developers is that time is money. You have shareholders you're reporting to and you can't wait. You can't fight battles for years on end trying to get small features, so you just cave and put in the big wide road.

The only way for developers to innovate and avoid the standards, they said, is to propose a private community. In the current context where the city does not want to assume operating costs for amenities like lakes, parks or roads, private enclaves or privatized amenities have become more attractive to developers. Ironically, some of the elements that Calgary planners would like to see in the public realm can only be achieved in private communities.

Developer C08 - The reason a developer would get involved in a condominium that is bare land is because they want to create something

that the city will not accept with regard to development criteria for road infrastructure and even the amount of green space -- because there's a maximum amount that the city will accept as municipal reserve.

In sum, although Calgary planners have made considerable progress in embedding new urbanism and smart growth principles in policies, they continue to experience challenges in implementation. The separation of policy and implementation functions, and resistance from engineering staff, have limited the effectiveness of the theory in influencing practice. While contemporary growth pressures promote density and transit-oriented development they are simultaneously driving privatization of suburban landscapes.

Markham: “poster child for new urbanism”

Since the 1990s the Town of Markham has promoted new urbanism in its plans and regulations. The planners interviewed there spoke proudly of their accomplishments and seemed confident of the authority of their principles. While they described a success story for new urbanism, they also acknowledged some early challenges. As one planner put it, the early new urbanism projects made business and marketing mistakes that planners had to fix.

Planner M01: Well the original developer in Angus Glen unfortunately had a very weak building arm, and so there were a lot of issues with the housing and the completion of the community. They got themselves into financial difficulty and as a result of all of that they developed a negative image in the community and that was also translated into the community. So that was really difficult to fight. When I first came here in the year 2000, in general the area of Cornell was thought of as a failure. But it wasn't a failure of the plan at all. It was the failure of the business acumen of the company directors... So when I came, one of my first jobs was to ensure that the community was finished. So we worked together with the developers' people to item-by-item just get everything finished. And eventually the housing product itself was brought up to spec and after that slowly the word got out that Cornell had turned into something quite nice and useful to the community.

Throughout the interviews planners frequently affirmed that Markham council proved very supportive of new urbanism. The town structured its staff into development teams that include planners, development staff, and engineering and traffic people. Planners argued that structure ensured that the municipality could present a coherent message to developers, and could deliver what staff



promised. The success of homes and live-work units in selling quickly and at high prices confirmed the validity of the concept and the attractiveness of the community in the market place. But success came with a price.

Planner M01 - One of the indicators that Cornell is very successful is that it's no longer at all an affordable place to live.

A recurring theme among planners was that they lack the tools to achieve some of the principles they promote. In trying to encourage affordability they met resistance from residents; in advocating local level retail, they ran into corporations that wanted big box formats. They described themselves as hoping to create "a complete community" but noted that the private market makes that a challenge. Maintaining the new urbanism vision required vigilance and conviction. It also required strategic compromise. Planners discussed reluctantly accepting gates or private streets in some cases where other public objectives were achieved. The following extract indicates that although developers have increasingly accepted the new urbanism principles promoted by the city, planners also revised policy to accommodate private and public interests.

Planner M08 - It was a hard sell with the development industry in the beginning because the next step, once you set the highest level growth strategy, the next level down is amend the official plan, so we put a lot of ...strategic stuff in that about the direction, and what the town was looking for, and density targets. And then the next level is the secondary plan for each of the new communities. That's where we really started to butt up against the development industry. Gradually they came around... Then after the secondary plan level you get into the draft plans of subdivision and zoning. We came out in '96, we did a zoning bylaw for what we call the urban expansion area - a very, very prescriptive bylaw. We've since gone in and we've been able to pull some of that very prescriptive stuff out of the bylaw because now the industry gets it. They're doing it.

Planners described the developers as mostly supportive, but also acknowledged that some developers resisted elements of new urbanism while pointing to the market to justify their concerns. Planners noted as well that some developers pushed for high rise towers in the new town centre putting the planners on the defensive over density and height issues. Rapid market growth and provincial policy promoting intensification in designated areas gave added impetus to smart growth principles but may also generate resistance. Planners looked to higher levels of government for some assistance to address commitments like transit that have been difficult to honour.

Planner M02 - The other problem is the funding. The funding to put the transit in place really isn't there. We talk about this development being "transit supportive" and will support the VIVA service along Hwy 7 and they say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We've heard it all before, but everybody out here drives and that bus is not going to be the difference between - it's not really urban. So this is just going to get more people sitting on the road with me." I think if there is a greater commitment - and it can't be at the municipal level, it has to be at the provincial level - for transit funding, it will certainly make the jobs of planners like me way, way easier, because right now it's tough.

Infrastructure seemed a special concern for council members, partly because the community's growth is constrained by sewer capacity. Councillors spoke often about the need for federal and provincial investments to assist municipalities. Some indicated that they did not support private communities because of debates around infrastructure and taxation. One councillor noted that new urbanism communities also generated particular infrastructure concerns for the town.

Councillor M06 - You asked me what I thought about new urbanism, and I have had some experience with a few new urbanist communities. They are beautiful, but the lane-based stuff can be a real problem... Q. *In what ways?* ... With all of the new lanes, they have a problem. I don't think the municipalities have wrapped their heads around it yet. Assuming that these developments are not private condominiums -- which most new urbanist developments are not, they are free hold -- assuming that, you have twice as many roads. The municipality has to maintain them. That means plowing etc... The lanes are not very wide, and with new urbanism the roads are not very wide. It causes problems for maintenance. It causes problems for snow plowing. It causes problems for emergency response vehicles.

Most of the developers interviewed in Markham seemed reasonably supportive of new urbanism and smart growth ideas, or at least said nothing specifically critical of them. They indicated that mixing uses and creating an attractive public realm made sense. They did not advocate private communities. However, one developer made his reservations about Markham's principles crystal clear.

Developer M07 - they're probably leading edge with Cornell, which was the Duany concept, who is a designer out of Florida, who had this live-mix-work-mix-blah-blah-blah, which doesn't work and it all sucks. But that's a whole different interview.

The respondent expounded about Canadian consumers wanting attached garages in our winter climate; customers expecting convenient parking in front of the store (not behind it); residents needing sunshine in their yards and some private space. He argued that the new urbanism vision ignores the reality of consumer preference. But, he said, Markham doesn't want to hear those complaints or admit it made a mistake in buying into the principles.

Developer M07 - How can you go and hire an expert and say "Yeah, no we don't buy into it," or change two years later? Even if it's a mistake, how do they change? How do they keep their jobs and go out and say "Oh we made a big mistake on this, it doesn't work." So they've got to force it through. I see it, not only with this, but with other things, they've got to force it through because they've got to protect their jobs right? They went out and started this whole new concept and if it doesn't work how do you go out and say "Oops, I made a mistake. We blew millions, and we made people build plazas. It doesn't work." You can't do that. You're out of work. Even with common sense I just don't get it, because I sit there and I talk to them. We fight with them all the time: "this doesn't work!"

Councillors interviewed understood the critiques but generally defended the concept of new urbanism, arguing that the market takes time to develop and to adjust to a new policy context.

Councillor M04 - There are shops designed -- and unfortunately some of them have floundered because the mass hasn't come in yet to support the commercial area -- but the concept is that within a five to ten minute walk there are 5,000 residences, theoretically sufficient to make that node work. And there are five nodes in the whole area, so that theoretically within five to ten minutes you can walk to a shop for the local things you need: bread, milk, maybe a video, cleaner. You should be able to maintain that with that density of people.

In Markham, planners enjoyed the support of the council in advocating and implementing new urbanism and smart growth. While they remained strongly committed to the principles, they compromised with the development industry where they thought it necessary to help the developers achieve their objectives for marketability. While some developers remained sceptical about new urbanism, most appeared to have resigned themselves to working within the town's planning paradigm. Accordingly, Markham has experienced considerable success in meeting many of the new urbanism and smart growth principles it adopted.

How effective is planning?

Planners from all three places described good planning as focused on the quality of the public realm, and on an open and connected community. They used the terms new urbanism, smart growth, and sustainability almost interchangeably in relation to a constellation of principles that they advocated; some added in the "triple bottom line" and "best management practices". While some of the planners acknowledged that they had allowed some private amenities and gated communities, all spoke critically of the trend to privatization. Proud of their new urban community projects, the planners described winning awards and hosting tours of visitors to see the places. Several planners admitted they would love to live in their new urban community if they could afford to do so.

For planners, adopting new urbanism and smart growth principles reflected a commitment to urbanism. Planners in the three cities put it differently, but the basic message was that they want these suburbs to be cities.



Surrey Planner S09- Developers still come here, but they ...still think in their mindset – “suburban residential”: people getting in their cars. The difficulty I have in talking to the developer is trying to convince them is it is a suburban community in transition to becoming an urban community. “Please, if you have a shopping center, don't make it auto-oriented! Let's

cut down the number of parking spaces. Let's bring up the number of shops close to the sidewalk. Let's create a pleasant walking environment. Let's do all those wonderful things you see in an urban area like Vancouver, or a higher density area." And, they always meet that with a lot of resistance.

Calgary Planner C09 - We're not just the baby-boomer single-detached type of suburban format anymore.

Markham Planner M08 - Well I guess the only other thing I want you to know is I don't consider Markham a suburb. I guess we are, but I like to think that we are city unto our own and building out as a city. ... I've just never thought of us as a suburb. That was the only thing when you said that I thought, "Well, why is she talking to me? We're not a suburb." But I guess we are in the larger scheme of things. We'll come into our own in the next decade, and I don't think anyone could call us a suburb anymore. It takes a while getting there.

The differential success in implementing new urbanism and smart growth ideas in the three cities implicates variations in alliances and organizational structures. Markham, with a council united behind planning staff, made the greatest progress in achieving its aims. Council's decision to structure municipal staff into interdisciplinary teams made implementation possible. In Calgary, current land development pressures may be contributing to making council more supportive of smart growth, thereby empowering planners to take initiative. Unless Calgary finds ways to bring its engineers on board, though, planners' ability to avoid private solutions to infrastructure problems will remain limited. Planners in Surrey face significant challenges in implementing the smart growth ideas in the public sector: with council not proving especially supportive, planners lack the tools to achieve the plan vision.

Fundamental economic, political, and consumer issues prove extraordinarily challenging to resolve in trying to implement new planning principles.

Calgary Planner C05 - Economists say that when you have a subsidized good you have an abused good. There's a constant tension between societal objectives, which seem to favour mass transit and a more condensed housing form, with individual preferences for single-family homes and the private automobile. Public policy does not seem to be able to resolve that conflict. ... In areas where you have condensed housing and high use of rapid transit, it's because land economics have forced consumers into that form of housing or that form of transportation, more so than public policy. It's almost like the economic system of costs and subsidies to the consumer is working against the public policy system. The economic system will, in my mind -- purely my opinion -- will usually win that battle because it's adjudicated through elected representatives who are inherently shorter term in some of their thinking because they have to run for office. It's not their fault, but the mechanism between taxation and land economics in public policy has to be elected people. ... that dynamic seems to favour land economics. So, the suburban sprawl problem becomes somewhat unresolvable. Even though we might have good community design, that good community design in itself still represents a

form of suburban sprawl. McKenzie Towne is a very well-designed community, it promotes transit and so on, but it probably does not resolve suburban sprawl to the extent that you may have to solve it in order to address the broader problem.

Planners acknowledged that achieving their principles is a long term project that will take time as well as political commitment.

Markham Planner M03- The idea, in theory, of having a mix of uses, having stores near where you live is obviously beneficial. Having a walkable pedestrian-friendly community where people focus their amenity space onto the street as opposed to their back yards, is great. In Markham, have we actually achieved it? It is too early to tell. All of these communities in Markham, except for a few exceptions, are on the periphery, and not well served by transit at the present time, although that is going to change. They have, in many ways, the trappings of urbanism, without having a lot of the infrastructure yet. That doesn't mean that that isn't going to happen. Certainly there is a better potential for it to happen in a community designed in a more compact form, but it hasn't happened yet. It is because they are so new, and largely not completely built out.

Some of the councillors we interviewed were committed to principles of new urbanism or smart growth but several expressed hesitance about interfering too much in the market. Many of them suggested the need for education to change residents' views to promote density, mix, and other smart growth goals. Some acknowledged public resistance to continued growth.

Most of the councillors spoke to infrastructure issues. Water, sewer, and transit were issues in the three communities. Respondents said that municipalities need help from the provinces and the federal government. They implied that the shortage of municipal resources gives developers greater leverage to get what they want. The increasing prevalence of private amenities and roads has become a means for municipalities to get development without the operating costs that go along with it.

Although councillors suggested that most developers want to build good places, several also noted that councils have to be able to say "no" to the industry at times.

Calgary Councillor C11- The tough thing politically, although I think it's easy really, is that we have to forget ... we're not going to get elected each three years based on what we forced for smart growth, because the benefits will manifest themselves 10 or 20 years later when most of us are gone doing something else or dead. But that's still no excuse not to do it, because a lot of the pains we're having now are from not doing it by council, planners and developers 20, 30 and 40 years ago.

While developers understood what planners hoped to achieve with their plans, they argued that the market has its own logic that warrants respect. The market shapes whether planning ideas are adopted or not. Developers described consumer preferences as difficult to overcome or transform: they accepted that people want parking, like their garages attached, and prefer privacy. But because developers needed a level of certainty for their investments, and knew that delays eat into the bottom line, they indicated that

they propose what they believe the city will approve. In Markham, the poster child for new urbanism, developers learned to live with lanes. In Calgary, with its “say-do gap”, developers negotiate each case. In Surrey “it’s a bit of a free for all” where developers have considerable influence.

Developers argued that high land prices drive development trends. In some cases, that means density in the suburbs – which makes the smart growth advocates happy. But prices also fuel condominium development which may facilitate private enclaves. According to some of the developers interviewed, planning policy alone has been ineffectual in shaping land development patterns.

Theory / practice

What does this investigation of three communities suggest about the divergence between planning theory and practice? First it confirms that market constraints affected development practice. Even where political commitment to new ideas is strong, planners and councillors have to make compromises and adjustments to address market demands and consumer preferences. Some planning aims prove elusive despite concerted efforts. Planning theory has typically seen planners as capable of manipulating the market through policy, but clearly the market frustrates and resists the normative values planners promote.

Second, cities where council clearly supported the new urbanism / smart growth / sustainability agenda had greater success in influencing development practices and converting developers. Moreover, cities that created appropriate administrative structures to facilitate united action on their vision have greater luck in implementing their agenda. Thus the integrated multi-disciplinary teams in Markham enabled buy in from all departments, where Calgary’s separation of functions made achieving its principles challenging. As a theory new urbanism and smart growth has paid insufficient attention to organizational issues and political will.

Finally, the study shows that the pressures for private sector solutions to development problems are strong. Municipalities find it hard to promote the “public” vision of their plans when they lack the resources to provide infrastructure and amenities. Developers increasingly turn to condominium / strata projects to obtain variations on standards that can accommodate higher densities and lesser infrastructure requirements. Achieving “smart” or sustainable communities will take a greater investment in municipal government than many upper level governments have thus far proved willing to provide.

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Notes:

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² For instance, a quick scan in 2004 found several organizations with postings related to these issues; e.g., EPA 2004, GreenOntario 2004, SmartGrowthBC 2004, Smart Growth Network 2004.