

Local politics gets in the way of efficient urban development

Researcher argues that's why planning powers should be removed from cities

June 5, 2013, Victoria – Effective and efficient city development requires national or provincial planning rules that can prevent local politics from overriding the common good, argues a study being presented at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The study, by Chris Leo, a senior scholar at the University of Winnipeg, looks at development in Winnipeg as an example of urban planning concerns.

Leo says he chose Winnipeg because its urban planning is about average for North America, though “it’s something close to the worst case in Canada.” Though the city has a plan, he says, that plan gets “cheerfully ignored.”

“The city regards planners as people whose job it is to sit down with developers to put together plans that the developers want and that can pass City Hall,” he says.

The result, he says, is an inefficient city that ends up spending more than it should on a wide range of core urban services.

One example of those inefficiencies is large block of undeveloped land between downtown Winnipeg and the neighbourhood of Transcona to the east of the city.

Leo says that block of land remains undeveloped because the people who own the land aren’t interested in developing it, and the city doesn’t force them to do so.

Yet the city services the land, as well as the developed areas further out.

If that land were developed, the city would draw tax revenues from it. But undeveloped, it’s a drain on resources, and forces the city to spread its services over a wide area.

“It’s easy to forget that everything the city does is influenced by distance, from mosquito control to snow clearing to transit,” Leo says, explaining that a denser city is more cost effective.

Leaving land like that undeveloped “is not atypical of the kinds of things we do to shoot ourselves in the foot,” he adds.

Leo argues that because developers are big players in local politics, their desires often trump the common good at the city level. Therefore, he says the only effective way to force better planning decisions is to remove decision-making power from the cities and move it to the provincial or federal level.

He cites successful examples of this having been done, both in Germany and at the state level in Oregon.

He says developers will accept more stringent planning rules as long as those rules are clear and consistent, and as long as procedures move quickly so they can get on with their work.

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