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Winnipeg rethinks suburban sprawl with downtown reinvention

By SIRI AGRELL

From Monday's Globe and Mail

Fighting back against the rush to the suburbs that began in the 1970s, the city is moving to realign itself, coaxing life back to its centre as it looks to the future

It's 5 p.m. on Portage Avenue and a parade of cars, buses and pedestrians is making its way out of the downtown as quickly as possible, speeding past shuttered storefronts and lonely side streets. But for the first time in years, the daily commuter rush is passing something new: construction.

An unprecedented level of development is under way in the Manitoba capital, as Winnipeg attempts to reverse decades of movement out to the suburbs.

"We want to have a situation where you don't have a massive population downtown between nine and five and then all of a sudden it's six o'clock and it's empty," says Mayor Sam Katz. "But what people don't realize is that you can't correct the mistakes of the past in just a year or two."

Around the world there is a growing understanding that suburban sprawl is unsustainable, and that, for cities to survive, they must shrink back in on themselves, tightening up, promoting density and pushing their growing population into space already served by existing infrastructure and social services.

For Winnipeg, the need for change is especially pressing. The city's population in 2006 was 633,451, but of those, only 13,470 lived downtown. A rush to the suburbs in the 1970s gutted the inner city and crippled downtown retail. Heritage buildings that would be hot commodities elsewhere have sat unoccupied for years, and parking lots seem to occasionally outnumber the cars that use them.

Now, the city is desperately trying to realign itself, drawing life back to its centre as a way to sustain its economic core.

And it is not alone.

Most planning experts agree that sprawl is creating a looming bubble, and that governments will soon be forced to contend with the hidden costs of a thinly spread-out population and how it uses everything from health care to energy.

In Ontario, the provincial strategy known as Places to Grow is designed to increase density in key locations, especially close to major transit routes.

And Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi took office having promised to put distance between municipal politicians and the developers pushing for more housing on the city's outskirts. He is an advocate of Plan It Calgary, which aims to

cultivate downtown walking, cycling and transit and focus on sustainable land use as the city welcomes an estimated 1.3- million more people over the next 60 years.

On the other end of the spectrum, Detroit, Mich., has offered the world an apocalyptic vision of the urban future, having recently begun razing huge swaths of its abandoned inner city.

Ken Greenberg, a Toronto-based architect and urban planner, says cities around the world are realizing that promoting population density is no longer negotiable.

"Whether you like it or not, what's going to drive the change between city and suburb is the cost of energy," he said. "This is a crisis. It's not even worth debating whether it's worthwhile making these changes, the trick is to get ahead of the curve as much as possible."

This means getting people to live inside cities rather than on their periphery, as sprawl requires new infrastructure and support services, which municipal governments do not have the money or the time to adequately provide.

In Winnipeg, Mr. Katz hopes to bring about at least 3,000 people into the downtown core over the next few years.

It may not sound like a lot, but it requires a change of mindset as well as changing laws.

Winnipeg's hollow centre is largely the result of an archaic municipal bylaw, first introduced in 1919, which enforced a strict separation of land use. Some streets were for commercial buildings, others for housing, and the distinction stalled downtown residential development.

According to Mr. Katz, this bylaw prevented the building of mixed-use developments, like the condos that have become ubiquitous in other city centres.

"You go to any other major downtown, Chicago, Boston, you will see retail on the main floors and then mixed-use residential above. For whatever the reason, it wasn't allowed here," Mr. Katz said.

When city council wanted to start pushing mixed use in 1988, they discovered that the bylaw was still on the books and set about changing it. But it was only in 2004 that new zoning bylaw 100-2004 was introduced, allowing mixed-use development and truly accommodating private-sector investment in downtown living.

Now it's just a matter of convincing people to actually live there.

Programs like the city's arms-length Centre Venture Development Corp. and the Portage Avenue Action Strategy were created to promote a new downtown vibe.

The idea is to build up communities around existing draws like the MTS Centre, an indoor arena that hosts acts like Roger Daltry and is home to the American Hockey League team, the Manitoba Moose. New hotels, condos and retail projects are planned for the historic Exchange District and The Forks, a popular market destination at the confluence of Red and Assiniboine Rivers that will be home to the \$310-million Canadian Museum for Human Rights, slated to open in 2013.

In March of 2010, the city and province teamed up to offer \$20-million in development grants and tax incentives for the construction of downtown residential units, and the money was snatched up within 10 months. Another \$20-million in funding was announced earlier this year.

The city is also hoping to develop some of the 154 surface parking lots spread across Winnipeg - valuable real estate that sits empty outside of business hours - and has offered a tax credit to homeowners who buy new infill-housing in established residential neighbourhoods.

So far, it seems to be working. Next year, construction will begin on a \$45-million residential high-rise called Heritage Landing, the first private-sector project of its kind in more than 20 years. The riverfront property will include 19 townhouses, a 25-storey tower and three floors of commercial space.

Near City Hall, the historic Avenue Building and Union Bank Tower are both undergoing dramatic conversions that will introduce residential units and student housing to Portage Avenue.

And the municipal government is not acting alone. Some of Winnipeg's biggest names have thrown themselves into the effort.

Lloyd Axworthy, former minister of foreign affairs and now president of the University of Winnipeg, has been tapping into the city's business community as part of his development of the school's downtown real estate holdings.

After his appointment in 2004, he created an arms-length renewal corporation with the flexibility to negotiate loans and acquire property on the school's behalf, and seems to have set about buying much of the western end of Portage. He hopes to help rebuild his city around an education hub, and envisions the school's expansion spawning downtown student housing, retail, restaurants and even pubs, although he admits the latter would make the city's Mennonite forbearers shudder.

Already, the faculties of business and continuing education have moved into the John and Bonnie Buhler Centre on Portage Avenue, which opened last August with the help of a \$4-million gift from the philanthropist couple. Just a few blocks away, past a row of abandoned store fronts and empty bridal outlets, Ray McFeetors of Great West Life has given his money and his name to a new student residence and day care. And this fall, the \$40-million Richardson College for the Environment and Science will open at the corner of Portage and Langside Street, the recipient of a \$3.5-million donation from the city's Richardson family and a glittering sign of modernity in a desolate part of the city.

"I think it's starting to buzz now," Mr. Axworthy says of Portage. "I think a lot more people feel secure now in the downtown. And they are excited."

Jino Distasio, director of the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg, says the city is just beginning to recover from the suburban rush of the 1970s when the downtown and its surrounding inner city neighbourhoods witnessed population losses as high as 50 per cent.

"We're still fighting the culture of Winnipeg that downtown is a negative," he said. "Downtowns have changed and they need to reinvent themselves."

The city was dealt another blow by the big-box store explosion of the 1990s, which fuelled further migration to the suburbs while gutting downtown retail environments.

But for good or bad, he believes Winnipeg has perfected the "urban intervention model," leveraging government dollars to invest in the right kinds of revitalization projects before it's too late.

Whether the city is truly able to change, he notes, will depend on whether other groups take up the cause.

"The public investment can take us only so far," he said. "We have to make sure that, privately, people want to come into the downtown core because they can make a profit and they'll be successful. And, more than anything, people have to want to live here."

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