

Higher density not to be feared

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Most often fear is bred by a combination of lack of knowledge and lack of understanding of what we do know. There is no better example of this kind of fear than the public perceptions that have developed around the concept of higher-density development and what it might mean to a neighbourhood or city.

In fact, many of the perceptions that people have about how their neighbourhoods might change, by embracing higher-density forms of residential development that they fear, are really perceptions about the same set of issues that higher-density development actually addresses in a positive way.

New urbanist settlement patterns and urban-design principles aimed at creating higher-density neighbourhoods actually boldly confront issues such as traffic safety and congestion, long-term sustainability of neighbourhood character, community safety, etc.

The problem is that the unknown accompanies change in any form: When residents who have lived in a particular neighbourhood for some time are suddenly confronted with the prospect that their neighbourhood might change, the first thoughts that form are thoughts about the unknown.

What will sub-dividing larger single-family lots into smaller lots mean to property values? How many new people will be living in these smaller homes? How many new cars will be added to area streets? Will I still have privacy in my yard? How will this change impact my quality of life if I decide to remain living in my larger home? Will I be pressured to sell?

These are all legitimate questions and because the answers to them do not immediately come to mind, the unknown begins to breed fear and anxiety. Out of fear and anxiety comes a reactionary resistance to change.

This kind of scenario is unfolding in just about every inner-ring suburban neighbourhood in the

Lower Mainland as our housing stock and neighbourhood infrastructure ages, as demographics change and as population growth puts pressure on land supply.

It is difficult for community leaders to respond to this public fear, especially when the change is so new and embraces forms of housing that are quite different from those found in the typical 1960s to 1980s suburban single-family subdivision.

As housing and urban-development issues like this get more complex each day, it becomes increasingly risky to rely only on emotional responses bred of fear. Increasing public knowledge and understanding about these issues is vital.

That's what Simon Fraser University's City Program has been trying to do for twelve years now. The City Program, part of the University's Continuing Studies Department, is probably one of Canada's best educational programs focusing on urban issues of interest to ordinary citizens as well as to professionals.

The City Program organizes a whole series of courses, public lectures and workshops dedicated to understanding the city and how we as citizens can participate in shaping its future.

For the past few years, the City Program has been offering a unique non-credit program — the Urban Design Certificate Program — the first of its kind in Canada aimed at addressing the interdisciplinary nature of professional practice in the area of urban development.

What that means is that students in the program become well-rounded generalists, learning skills as far-ranging as visual communications skills to economic fundamentals, and from green building technology to designing environments that reduce crime.

SFU is accepting applicants for the Fall 2004 Urban Design Certificate Program up until September 10. For further information about the City Program, visit www.sfu.ca/city.

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