

Good planning facilitates people working together

American visitor's championship of sprawl courts disaster



BOB RANSFORD
SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES

REAL ESTATE MATTERS

I'll agree with Randal O'Toole on one point. Government strategic planning inevitably does more harm than good. But I must diverge with him on most of his other flawed thinking on what makes an urban region livable.

O'Toole, a researcher with the Cato Institute in Washington D.C., is well known for his libertarian rants against any form of urban planning. This notoriety is likely behind the Fraser Institute's invitation to O'Toole to speak at the institute's offices, at 1770 Burrard, on Wednesday.

At heart, I am a conservative who has often cheered on the Fraser Institute when it has exposed the nonsensical interventionist moves by government to disrupt the forces of supply and demand in an effort to engineer certain outcomes in our mixed economy, where such intervention does little more than disrupt.

But I'm also a strong believer in community. Building community requires people to work together to choose certain options and set certain standards that will guide the way we all live our lives so that we can pursue our dreams and enjoy a high quality of life. You can't enjoy freedom without order.

Government strategic planning, conducted in the ivory towers of power

behind closed doors, results in projects like the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge at a time when every indicator tells us we should be finding means to decrease the reliability on the automobile.

On the other hand, much good is achieved when people work together in their communities and when the circle is extended wider to include people across a region, making decisions about how they want to live and then choosing the trade-offs necessary to protect their quality of life.

O'Toole rejects this kind of planning as if it were some kind of dangerous collectivism. In a prelude to his speech next week, O'Toole revealed the kind of extreme libertarian values that often has me also questioning much of what the Fraser Institute promotes.

He began stirring the debate last week in an op-ed piece in *The Vancouver Sun*, rejecting any form of land-use planning in the Greater Vancouver region, claiming such intervention changes people's lifestyles.

Building community should change people's lifestyles. We come together socially, organize our economies around interaction and have chosen to settle collectively because human nature finds its most satisfaction from this sense of community.

We have failed in many ways planning our settlements, sacrificing quality of life, not because we have worked too closely together and planned our settlements in the kind of coordinated fashion that O'Toole deplores. In fact, our quality of life is suffering because we haven't worked closely enough together.

Imagine a region where, as O'Toole advocates, land-use planning is entirely in the hands of local governments

or where there is no planning and individual landowners make their own decisions. Imagine allowing development to sprawl across the region, consuming viable agricultural land, defying any logic when it comes to transportation facilities and pushing up the cost of infrastructure every kilometre it is extended further.

In O'Toole's world, we should have more cars on the road. "Discouraging driving is even dumber," he wrote in his article.

Who welcomes longer commuting times? In O'Toole's world, you simply build more highways until they became clogged with congestion, and then you would build some more.

Obviously, O'Toole has no sense of what makes a place. Perhaps he hasn't ever visited a place that felt special because of its human scale, its mix of uses, its architectural detail that produce delight. To him, the unique character of a community is defined by the backyard, regardless of where the yard is and how it represents merely one among tens of thousands of identical back yards. In O'Toole's mind, "the mania for density" is destroying this "unique character of communities."

Thankfully, most are coming to realize that the kind of community O'Toole champions is exactly the kind of community that lacks "community."

Despite this extreme view, which rejects the notion of people working together to create communities that sustain better lifestyles, that's thankfully what is happening more often than not today.

Bob Ransford is a public affairs consultant with CounterPoint Communications Inc. He is a former real estate developer who specializes in urban land use issues. E-mail: ransford@counterpoint.ca