

A Response to the City of Calgary Proposal for Blanket Rezoning  
April 13, 2024

It's been said the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The City of Calgary Proposal for Blanket Rezoning is full of good intentions which cannot deliver on promised diversity and affordability without decimating mature neighbourhoods and negatively impacting their residents. It is a reactive and poorly designed urban planning experiment which stands to fail as similar experiments have failed in other Canadian jurisdictions such as Vancouver, which now has the highest priced and unaffordable housing in the country.

While increasing diversity and affordability are highly commendable, the proposed tactics to achieve these objectives have not been carefully designed or evaluated. Planned, organic growth and intelligent densification resides with communities, active and properly staffed planning departments and thoughtfully-considered Local Area Plans.

Our household opposes this plan. Calgary's housing crisis **will not** be solved by decimating the character and functionality of existing communities and neighbourhoods including Varsity Acres where we've lived for the past 25 years.

### **A peek under blanket upzoning**

Who stands to benefit and who stands to lose with blanket upzoning?

Winners? Land speculators, developers and builders able to financially participate in the ongoing commodification of housing. Also the city tax rolls and its planning department which won't have to review so many tedious objections from pesky neighbours. Who else? Non-resident investors, landlords or neighbours who never kept up their properties to community standards but can now sell them for land value regardless of upkeep.

Losers? Existing homeowners who carefully chose their neighbourhood based on its affordability, amenities, preferences and city zoning in good faith. They hoped to age in place and renovated and improved their properties believing they were in a de-facto long-term "contractual" relationship with the City and that the City would uphold existing zoning. The proposed blanket zoning is tantamount to tearing up this contract.

### **How did the housing crisis happen?**

Commodification of housing has been amplified since the 2008 financial crisis. Investors piled into the housing sector to achieve gains unavailable in the market. Governments have consistently failed to take actions to improve housing availability and stem the commodification of housing. This in tandem with poor planning around immigration policy has created a crisis.

The City of Calgary too has played its part. It has enabled and encouraged urban sprawl for decades, approving new communities without restraint while neglecting older neighbourhoods. Now that the cost of maintaining a city with a large footprint has come to roost and high building costs, higher mortgage rates and gasoline prices have made the suburban product less palatable, the city is attempting to overcorrect. This is equivalent to making U turn while travelling 100 miles an hour. Has the city finally committed to curtailing urban sprawl? Not really. Fixing the housing shortage has now been placed squarely on the shoulders of mature communities.

The City of Calgary is also selling off excess land instead of retaining it for potentially thousands of affordable housing units of various structural types.

### **A personal example**

As 25-year residents of Varsity Acres, we carefully chose our community based on numerous factors, primarily affordability, single family residential, full front yards with back lanes for cars, close proximity to the C -train, the availability of good schools, nearby hospitals, malls, parks and eventually the nearby University of Calgary for when our child was of age. We bought a 26-year-old house in need of work and planned to renovate gradually as we could afford. We wanted a smaller environmental footprint and fewer emissions through reduced driving.

The choice then and now was always between immediate or delayed gratification. The suburbs featured large modern homes small front yards few public amenities, poor public transit, long commutes and ongoing worries about high gasoline costs.

Mature neighbourhoods offered a large tree canopy, parks, libraries, good public transit with aging housing stock and infrastructure. A house could always be improved or renovated later but you can't refurbish an entire community.

We've slowly added to and renovated our modest bungalow and have more renovations to go. At 61 and 69 we still hope to update that circa 1973 kitchen and bathrooms but we've never regretted living by our values. We have mature trees, lilac and rose bushes, chirping birds on our properties and squirrels, as well as many established amenities close by.

We feel let down by the planning failures of the City of Calgary. We were led to believe that our area would stay as a primarily single-family residential neighbourhood, that the city would continue to honour our choices and values. Not so. I've upheld my end of this contractual agreement but now the City of Calgary wants to wholly rewrite the terms. That's tantamount to Danielle Smith wanting to take Albertans out of the Canada Pension Plan. Future residents and employees may have that decision to make but those who've paid into CPP expect to receive CPP. There is a concept known as grandfathering. *You don't break a contract unless you wish to court mass protest.*

What's happened in the 25 years since we bought our home? The suburbs grew on steroids. Those who purchased new homes in remote new neighbourhoods and into Cochrane started choking the nearby Crowchild Trail and creating a 24-hour traffic hum that makes it impossible to keep windows open at night. Crowchild has been widened and the amount of traffic continues to grow. I've asked for additional noise attenuation to deaf ears. My deep suburban neighbours enjoy paved streets while mine has a ton of potholes. My street was resurfaced -- not repaved -- more than 10 years ago. Appeals to my City Councillor have suggested I take up this cause and the noise attenuation issue on my own time with the relevant city department. In the interim, I've opted for three pane windows for energy efficiency, but primarily for noise attenuation.

The suburbanites then started parking on my street to get to their jobs either downtown or at the University Research Park. We eventually needed to get permits to park in front of our own home, and now in July will have to pay handsomely for that privilege.

Now a dense and bleak landscape may be coming to the property next door to my home or yours.

Allowing up to 12 residential units up to 3 stories high on single family residential lots will wreak havoc on existing communities without increasing affordable housing. R-CG and H-GO can have major negative impacts on neighbouring properties due to their outsized building envelope, causing massing, overshadowing, reduced privacy, less softscaping, fewer trees, a preponderance of waste and recycling bins, increased noise and increased on-street parking. Lot coverage will go up to 60% of land vs. the 25 to 45% for single family and detached homes.

Any neighbours who weren't keeping up maintenance of their own or a rental property needn't worry since upkeep won't matter if there's a huge uptick in land values. Their home will be purchased regardless by land speculator, or developer. These hastily-constructed new builds will be priced higher or close to the price of my modest bungalow. Blanket upzoning will also shift the market to more profitable family units, gradually reducing the stock of single-family homes.

**Current infrastructure can't bear the strain of needed improvements.** This includes, roads, sewers, schools, parks and emergency services, congestion, overburdened public amenities and a need for significant upgrades to infrastructure which may not have been anticipated or budgeted for.

**Parking and Traffic Congestion concerns have not been adequately addressed.** Increased density typically leads to more vehicles potentially exacerbating parking shortages and traffic congestion. This will further diminish the quality of life for residents, reduce the attractiveness of neighbourhoods for buyers, and negatively impact property values. The proposed changes do not adequately address these challenges, particularly in areas without robust public transportation options.

While adding more housing units is intended to improve affordability through increased supply there is no guarantee that new developments will be accessible to lower-income households. Developers target returns of 20-25%; builders add more than 14% to the final home price. The land component of the majority of most lower density housing forms is 25 to 30% ; that's materials, labour, marketing, project management and profit. Developers and builders are incentivized to deliver housing with an acceptable profit margin and with the fixed cost component there is little scope for providing affordable versus market rate housing.

The market will continue to produce housing units financially out of reach for many, particularly in desirable neighbourhoods, thus not effectively addressing the core issue of housing affordability for all segments of the population.

### ***What is intelligent densification?***

There is a need for a balanced approach to urban development, intelligent densification, infrastructure, and the environment, that balances the needs of existing residents with those of future residents. We need a citizen and community-centered approach. Upzoning needs to center around activity nodes and corridors such as LRT stations, major roadways and commercial centres. I fully support the conclusions reached by Stephen Shawcross and Sano Sante in their report ***The Unassailable Case Against Blanket Rezoning***. It recommends:

- 1) That the City abandon the Blanket rezoning initiative/bylaw in favour of Comprehensive Neighbourhood Plans (Local Area Plans) that identify specific areas/sites to be rezoned for duplex, townhouse and multiplex structures along with multi-family uses, including four and five storey, mid-rise and hi-rise buildings.
- 2) That the City establish a Community Land Trust along the lines as previously described to deliver below market rate housing in both ownership and rental tenure in a variety of structural types.
- 3) That the City identify and make available under a lease structure, municipally owned parcels throughout the City to provide land for the Community Land Trust initiative.
- 4) Additionally, the city may consider allowing secondary suites and laneway housing in all zones, along with a review and modification of existing regulations.

Additionally, I suggest the following:

- Tax incentives for the development of legal secondary suites and small backlane residences on top of garages
- Tiny houses on existing lots
- Tax incentives to add a storey to existing homes to accommodate larger families, intergenerational living, or downstairs rental suites.

- Increase the size of the planning departments rather than introduce blanket zoning. Increase the fees for development application to fund this initiative.

We also agree with ideas put forth by NDP MLA Sarah Hoffman on the need to re-establish a provincial Ministry of Housing that will:

- Work with all orders of government to **open unused and underused land for housing** and incentivize municipalities to reduce permitting timelines and promote more density.
- **Offer low cost and no cost loans to developers** with the condition that a third of their units are non-market affordable housing tied to income or permanent supportive housing and another third are below market.
- Provide land and funding to **nonprofits, co-ops, and public housing management bodies** so that they can provide more low-cost affordable housing.
- Work with our universities and colleges to **accelerate innovation in homebuilding and encourage pre-made modular housing** so that we can build more units and do it faster and at lower cost than ever before.
- **Draw on rural Alberta expertise** by enhancing the role of Housing Management Bodies so that affordable housing is available for front line and essential service workers in rural Alberta.
- **Engage non-profit partners within Alberta's diverse cultural communities** so that housing meets everyone's needs. This means ensuring that funding formulas for public housing are structured to allow for adaptations in size to accommodate large and extended families.
- **Stop criminalizing poverty** and invest in long-term solutions based on compassion and offering dignity to those who are looking for transitional, safe, and more permanent housing.

Regards,

Sandra Sobko and Bruce Seifred