

Does Size Matter?

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This year, Berwyn will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Since its incorporation, growth and decline have been a common theme. The point of this editorial is to consider the concept of growth in the context of community planning, and to suggest that it is okay to be small.

The roots of growth as it is manifested in municipal planning can be traced to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During this period, cities ballooned out as services and jobs became available in urban centres, which made urban living more desirable. In 1800, Beijing, China was the only city to have a population that was greater than 1 million (Chandler, 1987). One hundred years later, there were 12 cities that had a population of more than a million and, at present there are 330 cities with a population of 1 million or greater (Population Reference Bureau, 2007; Mongabay, 2007).

The magnitude of urbanization escalated again in 1957 when Jean Gottmann ascribed the megalopolis concept to a number of urban centres that extended between Boston, MA and Washington DC to form a continuous stretch of urban and suburban development (Gottmann, 1957). Presently, the cities of Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer are rapidly expanding to form another megalopolis.

There are many reasons why both policymakers and citizens desire development. Through growth, policymakers can collect development charges, increase their tax-base, and at the same time may decrease costs for service delivery. Municipalities that become overly dependent on revenue generated from fees collected from development may run into a financial snag when the supply of undeveloped land runs out. Mississauga, a suburban municipality adjacent to Toronto is currently addressing this challenge and has been forced to raise their property taxes by 5.8 percent this year while also decreasing their services (Grewal, 2011). Municipalities in Southern Alberta will need to address similar challenges as undeveloped land becomes scarce.

For residents, there are many draws to “big city” living including increased job opportunities, accessible public transportation, and the availability of cultural, recreational and medical services. Big does not come without its costs, however. In fact, there are a number of concerns, which include inflated real-estate prices, road congestion, and environmental and safety concerns.

The shortfalls of designing “big” suggest that municipalities should emphasize function instead of size. Functional communities meet the basic needs of all residents and are characterized by vibrant economies, affordable housing, the beauty and protection of parks and green spaces, accessible community services, thriving neighbourhoods, clean air and water, a sustainable environment, and engaged citizens (BC Healthy Communities, n.d.). Currently, there are a number of studies and projects in Berwyn that have either been proposed or are underway to ensure function such as affordable housing, downtown streetscape improvement, gateway revitalization, and economic vitality.

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