

HALTON HILLS & AREA PARADE OF HOMES

By Mack Parliament
Director of Publications
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More and more the lives of Canadians are shaped by the activities of government at the local, provincial and federal levels. Government never seems to tire of reaching into the pockets of taxpayers to finance its objectives or to pay the interest on debts.

It is therefore refreshing to have among the vast array of government departments, one concerned with the present and future quality of life in Canadian cities, which can show taxpayers some concrete examples of its accomplishments—maybe just around the corner. Many other government departments are too distant from the average citizen for him to see or understand its activities.

The department, the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, is relatively new and was formed only in 1971. It has 296 full-time employees; and employs another 126 under personal service contracts and had operating expenses last year of \$15.3 million.

Why should there be a Ministry of Urban Affairs? One might ask, since the country is engaged to get along without one for more than 100 years after Confederation.

The answer lies in the changing pattern of Canadian society. In only about 50 years the country has been converted from one of thinly populated rural communities and a few large, but unimaginatively designed cities, to one of the most urbanized countries in the world. While Canada was gaining stature as an industrial nation requiring a large in-city labor force, the population grew quickly and has doubled since 1941.

This rapid growth which was concentrated in urban centres exerted pressure on existing facilities such as housing, utilities, social services, public transportation as well as educational and cultural facilities.

The kindest thing that could be said about urban planning in the earlier part of the century is that it was haphazard and, as years passed, some communities were classic examples of bad planning, or the lack of planning in any recognizable form.

These things, coupled with the effects of growth, the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources and industrialization with its attendant pollution, all dictated the need for a central agency to research existing and

emerging problems and assist in developing policies to resolve them. So the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs (MSUA) was born.

Although still only a fledgling department compared to some of the older ones in business since Confederation, a major restructuring was undertaken last year. Among the most significant changes was the linking of the ministry with Central Mortgage and Housing Corp. (CMHC) under the same official, William Teron, with the rank of deputy minister.

With the reorganization MSUA plans to foster "a consistency between federal urban policies and objectives" and give encouragement and support where possible to provincial and local governments in their development plans—in short to improve living conditions in Canada.

Some Canadians often feel they see very little of a tangible nature in return for the tax dollars they contribute to the public purse. They don't collect unemployment insurance, welfare payments, receive any subsidies, transfer payments or participate in any of the government housing programs. They do, however, use the government's post office and have to pay again for what is sometimes very poor service.

Yet with Urban Affairs on the scene government is brought closer to the people who pay the taxes and hopefully all will benefit through general improvements in urban life. Better still, some of the pitfalls of growth and aging, which have plagued older cities in other countries may be avoided.

During the last fiscal year, for instance, continuing financial and mechanical assistance was provided to both municipalities and provinces involved in developing and implementing development plans. Among cities receiving such help were Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, Halifax and Saint John.

But smaller centres were not overlooked. The ministry has been cognizant of the fact that in increasing numbers Canadians are moving to smaller communities. It conducted a study on this migration and found residents of small and medium-sized cities generally favored growth, while those in larger centres wanted to slow down or limit growth. This is puzzling in light of the fact many residents of small communities moved there to escape the undesirable aspects of big city life. However, half

of those polled did not want to live in a city of more than 50,000.

A variety of training programs have been established to help provincial government officials hone their skills to deal with the complex problems of urbanization.

MSUA has also expended considerable effort on evaluating the federal role in urban transportation systems. Residents of cities with good public transportation can be in some other centres.

Cities such as Lethbridge, Kamloops and Red Deer have already been granted funds to improve their transportation systems. Others have prepared applications and will likewise likely obtain assistance.

Although Urban Affairs is young in years, its weight and imagination is being felt across the country and unlike some other federal government departments, the results of its programs are apparent to Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen. Hopefully the quality of life of Canadians generally will improve because the federal government recognized the need for a central agency, which would provide expertise to all municipalities, which they may be unable to afford themselves, and back it up with financial assistance.

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