Is smart growth dumb?

BY DAVID FLEISCHER Staff Writer

Randal O'Toole thinks smart growth is about as dumb as you can get. The Thoreau Institute economist contributed an essay slamming the planning strategy to A Breath of Fresh Air, a new book published by the Fraser Institute think tank.

It challenges a mindset which has become all the rage in York Region and across the continent.

Simply put, smart growth means an end to sprawling, car-oriented suburbia. In its place should rise transitfriendly communities where you can live, play and work.

The province's Places to Grow legislation has made it the new normal in the GTA and communities like Markham Centre are developing in response. But Mr. O'Toole is not impressed.

Q: Has the smart growth idea been around long enough to evaluate it?

A: Yes. California has been doing various versions since the 1970s, Hawaii since the 1960s ... Are more people riding transit, riding rail because of higher densities? The answer is, no. One per cent of travel is by transit. Maybe 98 per cent is by car.

Has it has any effect on preservation of open space? Well, their urban growth boundaries are preserving marginal pasture land, but it's forcing people to drive 100 miles to build their homes on prime farmland.

It's also making housing very expensive. In Canada, the city that has done the most planning for smart growth is Vancouver, and it has the least affordable housing.

Q: But when you talk about housing prices in a city such as Vancouver, there's also geography and the economy; how high on the

list does planning rank? A: Number one. Seventy per cent of the Vancouver metropolitan area has been ruled off-limits to developers. There's plenty of room for growth if they allowed people to live in those areas.

RANDAL O'TOOLE: Thoreau Institute's pundit not impressed by transit plans.

So people are having to accept housing they don't really want.

Most Canadians and Americans is a single-family home on a lot, where they can have a garden or place for their kids or pets to play.

Q: Is the model we've been living with, with a downtown, suburbs and bedroom communities, outdated?

A: It's definitely outdated. The part that's outdated is the downtown part.

In many metropolitan areas, more than two-thirds of the jobs are not in any kind of centre and that's because we have such good personal transportation, namely automobiles.

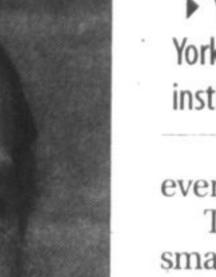
We have much a better distribution of jobs and that's a remedy for congestion.

When we draw an urban boundary, we're saying we're going to deny people access to low cost land. I don't think government knows where people ought to live. I don't think government knows where jobs ought to be.

> Q: You cite Los Angeles which is regarded as the epitome of car-centred sprawl...

A: That's amazing because it's really the epitome of smart growth. It's the leggers" because in the South, you had highest-density metropolitan area in either the United States or Canada. It's built billions of dollars of rail all over the place...and yet people

drive



▶ You can read Mr. O'Toole's chapter at Yorkregion.com or visit www.fraser institute.org for more information.

everywhere.

That just shows us, all the things smart growth wants us to do, is not going to discourage driving.

If you want to have a smart growth city, what you want to do is turn it into Los Angeles and yet, as everybody agrees, it's a city they don't want to live in. It's the most congested, the most polluted (by cars) city in America.

Q: Here, in York Region, there's high growth and they're saying we can't keep sprawling outwards. What should they be doing?

A: They should be sprawling further outwards! You have the lowest density of any country in the world, practically. You have the most unocagree their preferred form of housing cupied land - why are you suddenly afraid of sprawl?

500,000 people in 20 years? Big deal - Houston is growing by 130,000 people a year and there are no restrictions on development . . . and you can buy a four-bedroom, brand new house on a quarter-acre lot for \$170,000.

Q: Is there a point of diminishing returns if we keep sprawling, away from downtown?

A: Most of the people who work in the downtown core live 20 minutes away from the downtown core. People who live further out, the jobs are moving out too. If you talk to people in the suburbs you'll find they never go to downtown Toronto, it's too congested!

Q: Are you saying government should give up on public transit or treat it like a niche thing...

A: You're spending 75 per cent of your region's transportation budget on a form of transportation that's only 1-800-263-2231 carrying 5 or 10 per cent of the people. You've got an anti-automobile crowd and a pro-rail crowd working together. My friend calls it "baptists and boottwo lobby groups against the legalization of alcohol, one for moral reasons and the other made money from illegally selling alcohol.

Q: But if you want to get people out of their cars, you can't just have busses in mixed traffic; you need LRT and subways where people feel they're moving quickly...

A: In the United States the average speed of LRT is 22 miles per hour and that's not going to get me out of my car. Subway is a little faster.

The only subway system that's doing really well is New York City and that's because they've got a legacy system.

They're building a new line that's costing \$2 billion a mile; there's no way that makes sense.

This whole idea is insane. We call it "faith-based transportation planning" because they're not looking at the results or what's happening in other cities. They're just saying, "we think it's going to work here."

Q: How would you sum up your point of view? A: Basically it comes down to this:

smart growth has two flaws. Firstly, it relies on government

coercion of how people live. Secondly, it doesn't do the thing it promises. It doesn't get people out of their cars or save open space or stop obesity. So, not only do you have the unethical aspects of coercion, it doesn't even work.

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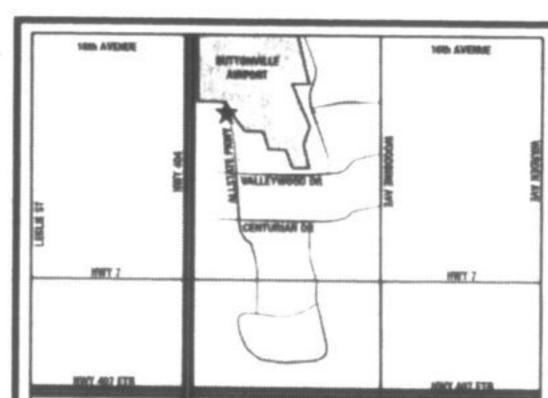
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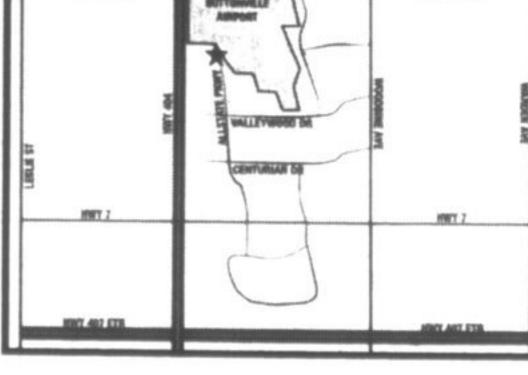
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