

The East Clayton Neighbourhood Concept Plan is based on seven “sustainable planning principles”:

- Increase density and conserve energy by designing compact walkable neighbourhoods. This will encourage pedestrian activities where basic services (e.g., schools, parks, transit, shops, etc.) are within a five- to six-minute walk of homes.
- Provide different dwelling types (a mix of housing types, including a broad range of densities from single-family homes to apartment buildings) in the same

THE GREEN PRINCIPLES

neighbourhood and even on the same street.

- Communities are designed for people; therefore, all dwellings should present a friendly face to the street to promote social interaction.
- Ensure that car storage and services are handled at the rear of dwellings.
- Provide an interconnected street network, in a grid or modified grid pattern, to ensure a variety of itineraries

and to disperse traffic congestion; and provide public transit to connect East Clayton with the surrounding region.

- Provide narrow streets shaded by rows of trees to save costs and to provide a greener, friendlier environment.
- Preserve the natural environment and promote natural drainage systems (in which storm water is held on the surface and permitted to seep naturally into the ground).



PETER BATTISTONI/VANCOUVER SUN

Pretty-as-a-picture homes in the East Clayton feature ‘rear-loaded’ lots: Garages and driveways occupy lanes behind the houses, which are are close to the street with tiny front yards and front porches.

From C3

The consensus is that in the last 10 years, during which it set down community and neighbourhood plans and tried to stick to them, Surrey has got a much firmer grip on development. And none too soon: with a population of about 365,000, the city is thought to be a little over half built out under the terms of its official community plan.

Today, McCallum insists, development in Surrey is “well controlled,” and “East Clayton is just a good example of that.”

Surrey is civilizing most of the highways and major arterials that angle across its landscape, adding grass medians, trees and boulevards.

Even before East Clayton came along, McCallum says, Surrey was nudging developers to build more back lanes and narrower streets so as to discourage neighbourhoods from turning to parking lots.

“It’s been very effective in the newer communities,” he says. “By narrowing the streets, we’re forcing the cars off the streets and they have to start to use their garages.”

Surrey has been encouraging small-lot subdivisions for several years. And McCallum adds that Surrey has sworn off massive shopping centres like the one at Guildford, which require vast stretches of land to be paved. “You’re not going to see those huge paved parking lots any more.”

Surrey is also pushing the use of porous driveways that absorb water, and it has spent big money in the past four years to strengthen dikes, build pump stations, improve drainage and reduce the frequent flooding that has plagued the lowlands, especially in the flood plains of the Serpentine and Nicomekl rivers.

Perhaps most significantly, the city has built Surrey Lake, a four-hectare artificial lake on the boundary between the uplands and the lowlands, which serves as a massive detention pond for runoff water. McCallum, whose administration built it, calls it “an environmental masterpiece” that not only helps control flooding by holding water until it can drain through natural systems, but is also growing into a bird sanctuary, salmon habitat and recreation area.

Surrey Lake opened just last year and “what we have found this year for the first time is a huge number of fields being farmed which had never been farmed in the history of Surrey,” McCallum says.

That includes Fry’s Corner, a low-lying area near the Serpentine River where the Fraser Highway crosses 176th Avenue. It hadn’t been planted in at least 30 or 40 years due to frequent flooding, but McCallum says it’s growing a crop this year.

Planning a revolution

Surrey had been undergoing what Patrick Condon calls “hyper-development” for a generation. One benefit of that is vastly experienced planning and engineering departments and a council that is open to new ideas.

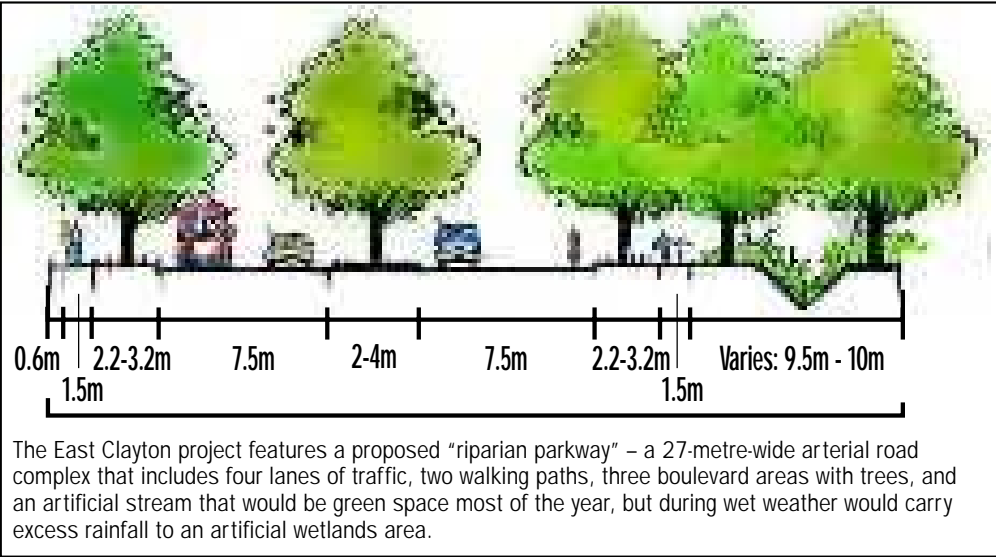
McCallum says council liked the idea that groups other than developers and property owners could have a say in the course of development, as long as the outcome was neighbourhoods where people actually wanted to live.

Council voted in 1998 to climb on Condon’s bandwagon, and picked East Clayton as the site for its first “sustained development” community.

Condon’s UBC group agreed to organize a second charrette as part of its Headwaters Project to produce a detailed plan for East Clayton, which would fit into a general land use plan for the larger Clayton area.

About 15 people sat at the charrette’s main table, including representatives of the land owners, regional transportation officials, fisheries

Riparian parkway cross-section



The East Clayton project features a proposed “riparian parkway” – a 27-metre-wide arterial road complex that includes four lanes of traffic, two walking paths, three boulevard areas with trees, and an artificial stream that would be green space most of the year, but during wet weather would carry excess rainfall to an artificial wetlands area.

Source: James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Livable Environments

regulators, city officials and former Surrey city planner John Turner, who by then was working for developer Milan Ilich’s Progressive Construction group.

Each participant reported back to a larger group of stakeholders and took their concerns back to the charrette; in all, between 150 and 200 people had a say.

The over-all vision called for East Clayton to have a much higher density than most of suburban Surrey. Each home would be within five minutes’ walk of at least a corner store, and most would be walking distance from a multi-outlet retail zone and other amenities.

There would be all kinds of green infrastructure, including “a riparian parkway,” a green strip shaped roughly like a shallow river bed flanked by walking and bicycle paths, following the contours of the land. In dry weather, it’s a recreational amenity. When it rains, it becomes a temporary stream that transports water that can’t immediately be absorbed by the land.

Artificial wetlands would be built, flanked by additional green space in the form of playing fields, with enough capacity to handle the severest winter storms. Even the storm of the century could be accommodated because when the wetlands reached their capacity, they would overflow into the playing fields without flooding residential areas or causing problems downstream.

The riparian parkway would replace the main storm drain interceptor that is built into standard subdivisions, which Condon describes as “a giant pipe that they bury underneath the arterial ... big enough to drive a Hummer through.”

So, East Clayton won’t have regular storm drains?

“That’s the principle, yeah.”

A swinging pendulum

Norman Alexander, Mike McLennan and other owners first approached Surrey council around 1990 with a proposal to develop East Clayton into an upscale subdivision. “Many of us proposed to stay on a portion of our property,” Alexander recalls.

Council wasn’t very interested, at first. It shrugged off the proposal and told the East Clayton representatives they’d have to show they had community support and ask for council’s permission to appear.

They did, Alexander says, “and it turned out there was huge support. Just about everybody in the neighbourhood went, and the place was just jam-packed with people. And then the damn municipality had the gall to say we had packed

the meeting.”

Things didn’t improve much from there. More than 100 landowners, representing more than 90 per cent of the property, participated in the process. Over several years, they would make their representations, council would shuffle them down its priority lists, and nothing would happen.

“Then all of a sudden the pendulum swung right to the other extreme,” Alexander recalls.

“Some chaps up at UBC had come up with this sustainable development concept. The planning department had really bought into it.”

Planning began for the second charrette. Norm Alexander was elected spokesman for the land owners.

“I happen to have been the guy railroaded into being the lead citizen representative,” is how he puts it now.

“It has left a lasting bad taste in my mouth about just how these things work, compared to the way you think they work when you’re on the outside.

“It wasn’t a great experience at all for any number of reasons. It was also a very long one. Good heavens, it must have been 10 years we worked away at that, almost to no avail.”

East Clayton’s hard clay

The land owners’ notion of development and the James Taylor Chair’s vision were mutually exclusive. Some of the land owners could not see the sense in much of what Patrick Condon was proposing.

“Patrick and I were friendly adversaries in this,” Alexander says. “I admire what the man is trying to do, but I’m afraid I just cannot, from a biologist’s point of view, see how this is supposed to work.”

The UBC people were proposing “a softer, gentler approach to development” than the Surrey norm, but at the same time they were calling for extra density.

Their plan required soft surfaces to allow the land to absorb water. But the land owners in East Clayton knew there was hard clay just below the surface. You could barely push the full depth of a shovel into the ground, the clay was so hard.

“We knew the nature of that ground,” Alexander says. “It rains, the water rushes off the surface, and then it dries up right away. That was East Clayton.”

Alexander didn’t much like the way the planning process unfolded. For one thing, over the 10 years he was involved in it, most of Surrey’s planning division personnel turned over three times; there was no continuity. For another, he says, Sur-

rey did its planning backwards. Instead of checking the engineering feasibility of a project before it was approved, Surrey would insist the project had to be approved by council before it sent its engineers to find if it would work.

Nor could he see the approach to wildlife. He figured blocks of land would have to be set aside to provide animal habitat, and Surrey wanted a certain percentage of the development to be green space. But instead of enough land to provide “forest-like park conditions,” Alexander says, Surrey was content to count “little narrow strips” such as boulevards alongside streets to achieve its quota of green space. So much for animal habitat. Nor was he impressed with the density, or the grid layout.

“We thought it would be quite a gentle development, roads following contours instead of just barging straight up and down the hills. And we got this damned sustainable development, which on the one hand was going to carpet the land with houses, and secondly was going to come up with all these neat ways to keep the water from barreling off the hillside and down into the creeks. One was just a direct contradiction of the other.”

Alexander gradually grew frustrated by the planning process. From one meeting to the next, there would be “all kinds of little changes” without explanation, which always favoured what the city planners wanted, even if something else had been agreed to at citizens’ meetings. And the planners were always deferring to the developer’s views.

The developers “just got their way at every turn. It was a very sad exposure to municipal planning.”

While they were failing to stamp their vision on the plans for East Clayton, the landowners were being approached by developers to sell their land in ways that made some of them feel threatened. Alexander eventually bailed out, sold his East Clayton property and moved to Chilliwack.

“It got to a point where I said, ‘That’s it, I can’t be rational about this any more.’

“We were just being used as window dressing so they could say that they had talked to the people.”

Chilliwack, Alexander says, is a fine place to live. He has a place on the edge of Sardis, where the trees are close and the lots are big, and it reminds him of East Clayton, before everything changed.

High-pressure development

McLennan tells a similar tale, although he hasn’t sold and left.

“I participated in virtually every process in terms of the evolution of the East Clayton area,” says the 44-year-old Microsoft systems engineer, who bought into the area in 1983. “It took about 10 years of my life, all my volunteer time.”

McLennan didn’t necessarily want to sell, but he wanted the option. At one point, Surrey sought to zone East Clayton “permanent suburban,” a designation that would prevent it from ever being subdivided.

“That would have wiped out the ability to view those holdings as a potential nest egg for the future.”

McLennan thinks Condon’s group — he calls them “those academics from UBC” — didn’t add much more than a lot of time and cost to the planning process.

“I think that the concept of reducing the downhill flow of water during periods of peak rainfall and that type of thing is very important, don’t get me wrong on that,” he says.

But it seems unfair to him that the landowners — long-term, tax-paying residents of Surrey — were forced to go through a convoluted planning process that delivered practically nothing of what they wanted, “whereas other parties that go in, basically get everything given to them on a platter.”