

## COMMUNITY PLANNING EXPERT PATRICK CONDON HAS SMART, PRACTICAL WAYS TO MAKE CITIES BETTER

Business in Vancouver. March 2001.

Peter Ladner - It is always nice to discover there is a better way to do things that is not just better, but also cheaper. For years, we build our cities and housing developments according to certain rules, then one day we realize that the rules are all wrong and spend the rest of our days amazed that we ever could have been so stupid.

Stupid comes to mind, hinting scorn and derision, because paying more and getting more is not stupid; nor is paying less and getting less. But paying more and getting less is.

The words "stupid" and "evil" and "wicked" are sprinkled in Patrick Condon's dissertations on his frustration with the way we build our cities. Condon is the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments in the Faculty of agricultural Sciences at UBC.

'Curbs are evil' is one of his dictums, along with 'Development cost charges punish the virtuous and reward the wicked.'

Condon has taken on the task of helping communities develop in tune with all the policies so earnestly adopted by governments to save the environment; reduce traffic; make neighbourhoods lively, affordable and safe; allow salmon to live; and make transit viable. In spite of all those widely supported policies, he and other architects, developers, planners, engineers and politicians still can't walk through a community that embodies all the principles that prove quality of life can come at less expense. But they're getting closer.

Condon's specialty is the punishing practice of "charrettes." These are closed-door design binges bringing together people with power to make policy changes and practical experts, and forcing them to come up with a community plan before they go home. A few days later, a plan emerges. "It basically comes down to 'I'll forget my law if you'll forget your law,'" explains Condon.

Speaking at a conference on sustainable cities in Vancouver earlier this month, he laid out six simple principles for sustainable communities.

They all seem basic and benign, the very thing we all want in neighbourhoods. There's just one problem: "These principles are all illegal, in some way or another, when you try to put them into practice.'

He knows.

He's been working with the municipality of Surrey rewriting the rules for development in East Clayton, a 250-hectare development site on the city's eastern border along the Fraser Highway.

Surrey City Council officially adopted these principles in 1999 to guide the development of the Clayton plan, but try them anywhere else and you run afoul of engineering standards and bylaws.

Why would we forbid these practices?

1. Locate different dwelling types in the same neighbourhood and even on the same street. This goes against the grain of single-use zoning, allowing secondary suits, multiple-unit dwellings next to single-family homes and other infill housing alternatives.
2. Provide buildings that present a friendly face to the street. Garages go to the back of the house, accessed by lanes.
3. Transit and shops should be within a five-minute walking distance. "For a store, even a small convenience store, to be both viable and within a five-minute walk, it needs to be surrounded by streets containing about 10 units, or 25 people, per acre," says Condon. "Interestingly, this density seems to be the minimum for a viable transit system."
4. Provide an interconnected street system. This ensures that every trip takes the shortest possible route, expanding the reach of the five-minute walk.
5. Provide lighter, greener, cheaper, smarter infrastructure. "This is the opposite of the heavy, grey, expensive and stupid infrastructure we have now," he says. "The way to save the environment, and money, is to pave less, not more."
6. Provide natural drainage systems. That means soaking up rainwater into the soils, not sending it down a storm sewer. "Amblewood Green in South Surrey proves it can be done and that the marketplace will accept it. Here, 100 per cent of all of the water that falls on the site is absorbed by the soil " Condon reports.

Put all this into practice and projections by Condon's team show a development with narrower streets than a typical suburban neighbourhood, smaller lots, the same-sized homes, mortgage-helping rental units in every second home and no storm drains. That adds up to a \$90,000 saving on the price of a home. Those are just the individual homeowners savings. Now look at the public cost savings.

If every new neighbourhood were designed like East Clayton, Condon's research shows:

1. there would be 40 per cent fewer cars on the road;
2. the air would be 40 per cent cleaner,
3. salmon would thrive;

4. the expected doubling of our population could be accommodated without destroying our environment;

5. public expenditure for maintaining and replacing infrastructure would be cut in half; and

6. average wage earners could own their own homes and gardens.

Condon says all that's standing in the way of realizing these gains is inertia, distrust and fear of risk.

We'll watch with interest as Surrey works to expose our expensive, transit-killing, pollution-promoting development rules as the stupid and wicked alternative to these six principles. Peter Ladner is president, Business in Vancouver Media Group.