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FAST FACTS

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An Alternative Approach to Dealing with the Infrastructure Deficit

In the Friday April 8th *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jim Carr, President and CEO of the Business Council of Manitoba, proposed a new plan for dealing with the province’s infrastructure deficit. He recommended the government add a one per cent levy to the provincial sales tax, which will be dedicated to infrastructure repair and improvements. The 2011-12 Manitoba budget, released a week later, incorporated a version of his recommendation with a promise to spend “. . . the equivalent of one point of the provincial sales tax on municipal infrastructure and public transit.” According to Mr. Carr’s calculations, this will raise \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years to help fix our crumbling roads, sidewalks, and other public property.

Certainly, it is a positive step that Manitobans are beginning to acknowledge the plight of our urban spaces. Nevertheless, with Winnipeg’s infrastructure deficit alone already at \$3 billion—and the Winnipeg Public Service projecting an increase to \$7.4 billion over the next decade—it would appear what is necessary for dealing with this problem is more than just a tax increase. Rather, citizens must look critically at how we build our cities—because it is ever more apparent our current approach to urban development is simply unsustainable.

According to the City Mayors Foundation, Winnipeg’s urban density is just 1,400 people per square kilometre, lower than cities like Vancouver (1,650), Ottawa (1,700), Montreal (1,850), and Toronto (2,650). This makes Manitoba’s capital city, home to over 60% of the provincial population, one of the more sprawling urban centres in the country. This ‘urban obesity’ costs all citizens money, over both the short and long terms. A study done in Albuquerque, New Mexico, found the public infrastructure cost of a house in a new suburb is 22 times higher than for one constructed in an existing neighbourhood, because of the need to put in new items such as roads and service lines. The excessive cost of sprawl is then only compounded once construction is complete, as fewer people must foot the bill for the maintenance of more streets, sewage systems, and other public amenities.

It is time we recognized the high cost of continuous outward urban expansion, and looked at ways to design our cities that assure efficient use of both space and tax dollars. Fortunately, Manitobans will not have to come up with such innovative approaches to development on our own. It is widely acknowledged cities should be built up, not out, to ensure effective use of land, and Canadian architects elsewhere have taken this to



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 for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
 MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
 T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
 ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
 www.policyalternatives.ca

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heart in designing attractive residences that require less space. In Whitby, Ontario, for example, the Rowe Condominiums building will offer two-storey homes ranging in size from 1,107 to 1,818 square feet on the ground floors, and traditional condominiums on the storeys above. Even more ambitiously, developers of the Dockside Green community in Victoria, British Columbia are currently in the process of turning a 15-acre site into a 2,600-resident mixed-use neighbourhood with over 1.3 million square feet of affordable condos, four-storey houses, retail space, and offices.

Municipalities across our province should strive to see the establishment of similar mixed-use structures and communities on existing urban land at the forefront of future development. In Winnipeg, the proposed Yards at Fort Rouge project is an excellent start, and proposals like this one should take precedence over conventional planning. Even taking steps to promote urban densification through less dramatic means, such as infill development or the construction of secondary suites, could go a long way towards curbing sprawl. Not only would this put us in a stronger position to deal with our infrastructure deficit, but these types of projects could also offer the diversity of housing necessary to meet the needs of families of all sizes and income categories—a major asset in a province where the ‘two parents with children’ household is no longer the norm for many families. Moreover, greater density would make it easier to provide high-quality public transportation—leading to a reduction in unhealthy car exhaust pollution—and could free up land for parks, gardens, and other public spaces necessary for building interactive, healthy neighbourhoods.

Undoubtedly, ideas such as these go beyond Manitoba’s conventional approach to urban development, which may make some citizens skeptical of their success. Nevertheless, it is clear the status quo is forcing us to live beyond our

means, and we cannot continue in this manner. Surveys continue to show a majority of Canadians want to live more sustainably. One need only look at the state of our cities to recognize, however, that if we want urban centres that can provide affordable comfortable lifestyles for future generations, then what is necessary is not just a tax transfer but a more efficient city design. Municipal governments should work with citizens and developers to push urban evolution towards that goal. The new way will require fewer roads, power lines, and sewer systems with more people per square kilometre available to pay. For a province in need of major repair, that kind of development just makes sense.

Benjamin Gillies is a political economy graduate from the University of Manitoba. His research interests include urban development and energy policy.



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