

Tri-City News

COLUMN: We love suburbia - and that's nothing new

By Kurt Langmann

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At last there is a sensible voice out there regarding the burning issue of urban sprawl

Urbanites love to look down their noses at the pathetic masses who treasure their little oasis of suburban or rural living, even if it means having to commute for hours every day to get to work to pay off the mortgage. Professional experts with their degrees in urban design hector the suburbanites relentlessly, insisting we all move into downtown highrises I've never felt that either lifestyle was superior to the other. I've had the good fortune of living and working in the same suburban community for 33 years now - a rare privilege, I know. But I'm acquainted with people who have to make lengthy commutes - both ways.

One friend refused to give up his West End apartment and urban lifestyle when his employer moved to Coquitlam, so he resigned himself to the daily bus and SkyTrain commute to work in the suburbs. Another friend makes the daily four-hour round trip via bus and SkyTrain from Aldergrove to downtown Vancouver because she couldn't bear to part with her bucolic little piece of rural nirvana. There is nothing unusual about either of these individuals. People are willing to make sacrifices of both time and money for the lifestyles they desire, and they are not willing to give up good, high-paid jobs to do the politically correct thing.

Evidently, it has always been so. A new book, *Sprawl: A Compact History* by Robert Bruegmann, neatly and cheekily debunks many of the assumptions to which many people cling regarding urban sprawl. For starters, it has been with us for centuries and continues to this day around the world. It's universal and it's historic, and is not a recent and peculiarly North American phenomenon caused by the automobile and by government policies.

Writes Bruegmann, "Clearly, from the beginning of modern urban history, and contrary to much accepted wisdom, suburban development was very diverse and catered to all kinds of people and activities. Early pre-industrial cities had extremely high densities in the centre that dropped off rapidly at the edges. Over time, with growing prosperity and availability of mass transportation, densities at the centre reduced while densities in the expanding suburbs increased. Bruegmann shows that this trend appeared in Europe first - not North America - and continues unabated to this day. He cites the example of Paris, which has some of the most stringent anti-sprawl regulations in the world and very high gas prices, where the city population has declined by almost a third since 1921 while its suburbs have grown. The same thing has happened in London, Milan and Barcelona.

"Polls consistently confirm that most Europeans, like most Americans, and indeed most people worldwide, would prefer to live in single-family houses on their own piece of land rather than in apartment buildings," Bruegmann writes.

He notes that Ireland and the United Kingdom now have higher single-family house occupancy rates than the United States while Holland, Belgium and Norway are comparable to the U.S. Half of French households now live in houses. And since 1950, European transit ridership has remained flat while the use of private automobiles has skyrocketed Bruegmann states, "As cities across Europe have become more affluent in the last decades of the 20th century, they have witnessed a continuing decline in population densities in the historic core, a quickening of the pace of suburban and exurban development, a sharp rise in automobile ownership and use, and the proliferation of subdivisions of single-family houses and suburban shopping centres.

This is the reality, and asking whether sprawl is good or bad is the wrong question, says Slate writer Witold Rybczynski. "It is driven less by the regulations of legislators, the actions of developers and the theories of city planners than by the decisions of millions of individuals," he writes. "This makes altering it very complicated indeed. This is not to argue that we should pave over the Fraser Valley or to give up on urban revitalization projects such as the successful Yaletown or False Creek communities. But it helps to understand why people make the choices they do instead of living in denial - which is what makes Bruegmann's book an important read for those who are trying to design and develop a modern Greater Vancouver community.

And to start with, let's stop looking down our noses at people's lifestyle choices and instead, let's try to understand what makes people make the choices they do make. It can only result in a better community - urban, suburban and rural - for all of us.

Kurt Langmann is editor of The Aldergrove Star, a Black Press sister paper of The Tri-City News.