

OPINION

Working together better than conflict

City hall and industry need to find solutions

This is the first in a series of articles addressing housing industry concerns about the City of Calgary planning department's Plan It initiative.

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

City council opted to defer planning of new suburban districts for one year while they complete the Plan It analysis of growth options for Calgary and surrounding communities.

Although the development industry argued that taking a one-year holiday from new community planning is bound to cause supply constraints and rising home prices, city council didn't buy the argument, noting that even by the industry's calculations, there is an aggregate approved land supply of five years.

Further, the market has clearly slowed from its 2006 peak, indicating that this could be just the right time to do a major overall study.

So, what is in this initiative that can benefit the development and housing industry?

Let's begin by looking at two of the biggest problems facing the industry: NIMBY-oriented resistance to higher densities, and increased municipal development charges.

Several recent articles in the Calgary Herald have focused on the development and housing industry's frustration with rapid and growing NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) resistance.

This is a recurring issue, and the latest iteration is somewhat unique in that while there is general support for higher density developments — in hopes of reducing traffic problems and for the increased likelihood of being able to provide services and amenities — residents near proposed projects simply don't want the higher densities situated near their home.

In other words, build it, but build it somewhere else.

NIMBY resistance, including the Calgary cases, is a well-documented issue.

We empathize with industry members who are frustrated with the loss of time, and the increased costs and energy incurred by the process of trying to fulfill a city-initiated drive for higher densities — only to have the rug pulled out from under them when local NIMBY advocates storm city hall meetings with orange stickers on defiant lapels, and anger and aggression in their demeanor.

Often, city hall backs down from its ideals, and everybody loses in the delays.

The second problem relates to development charges.

These are the subject of a major campaign by the Canadian Home Builders Association — Alberta (www.albertahousingaffordability.ca).

CHBA-Alberta has studied the impact of development charges on home affordability, determining that approximately \$24,000 is added to the price of a new home in Calgary just to cover development charges.

These charges are over and above the direct cost of servicing and de-

veloping each new neighbourhood.

In both of these problems areas, NIMBY resistance and increased municipal development charges, the industry has positioned itself as an opponent to the city.

With respect to the first problem, developers and builders are calling on the city to simply use their legislated power to overrule NIMBY concerns.

Legally, this is possible, but politically, not likely.

With respect to development charges, the industry is calling on municipalities to demand more from the provincial government.

However, this is also unlikely, as it doesn't really address the problem; it simply transfers it to a different source of funding (one that is purely politically driven).

The question is: "Where does that money come from?"

Today, the answer is that it comes from future residents, who frankly don't have a vote today, leaving the prospect of a transfer to current taxpayers highly problematic.

There is more than one way to tackle challenges. The confrontational approach is one, but it demands time, energy, and an ability to overcome the foe.

In reality, the city holds all the cards through the power granted it under the Municipal Government Act, and local politicians skillfully balance that power with political realities — in other words, the need to be re-elected.

Ditto applies when considering the expectation of having provincial politicians provide a taxpayer-based source of new funding.

Research into various forms of conflict indicates that negotiating techniques aimed at "win/win" are far more likely to yield positive results.

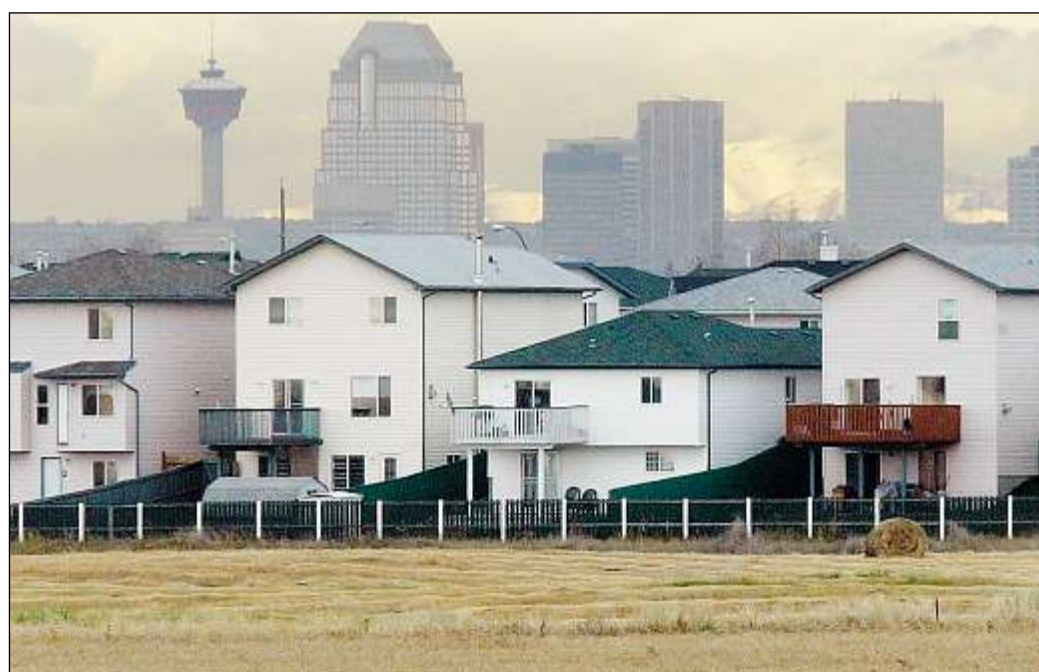
These techniques rely on a skilled and patient re-focus on "issues" rather than "positions," and on jointly beneficial solutions rather than just winning your side.

Another approach of considerable interest is aikido, the Japanese martial art of "blending with" the opposing force rather than direct opposition.

In the next few articles, we will illustrate how the industry may be able to blend with the city's planning initiatives in order to gain, not lose, from bold planning initiatives such as Plan It.

In general, we promote a search for jointly supported solutions over fractured confrontation, so that the result is a better city form for all.

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Photos, Calgary Herald Archive

NIMBYism involving housing density is a recurring issue faced by Calgary developers.



Bev Sandalack



Jim Dewald



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