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Winnipeg must learn to deal with unaccustomed growing pains

By: **Jino Distasio**Posted: **1:00 AM** | Comments: **0 (including replies)**

For the first time in decades, Winnipeggers are facing the pressures associated with increased growth and development. This is resulting in residents "defending" neighbourhoods, our downtown and heritage buildings from unwanted change or even outright demolitions. Often this struggle pits residents against city planners, developers or business interests such as the case in the Corydon area. This raises the question -- is Winnipeg becoming a "big city"? And if so, how do we manage big-city problems while capitalizing on this rare boom period?

For some of us, it is not that long ago Winnipeg was bleeding our brightest and best minds to other parts of Canada. In the late 1980s and well into the 1990s, our population and economy sputtered as the engines of British Columbia and Alberta hummed along. In the mid-1990s, Winnipeg hit an all-time low when our net migration numbers had us losing upwards of 5,000 residents per year. Winnipeg now draws in many more than it loses.

What is interesting in this shift is our planning and development were geared toward managing for slow or stagnant growth with policies firmly in place to deal with a declining housing market, widespread poverty and a devastated downtown retail and commercial landscape.

While these issues are still present today, we are now forced to respond to much more rapid growth and a housing market that has increased from an average selling price of less than \$100,000 to about \$250,000 with few vacancies in the rental market. On the development side, suburban growth has fuelled a massive expansion in the retail sector with South Winnipeg leading the pack. In the downtown area, education and health, entertainment, the museum and the condo boom within the Exchange have all contributed to a re-imaged downtown that is finally shaking the "Detroit of the North" moniker that emerged in the 1990s.

Over the past few years, Winnipeggers have vigorously questioned development opportunities that perhaps a decade ago we would have not batted an eye toward. The skirmishes over the proposed water park, heritage building demolitions, high-density and infill housing projects in Wildwood, Corydon, Whyte Ridge, Lord Roberts and elsewhere, have all seen an increase in community mobilization.

While opposition is necessary and certainly a right exists for residents to defend their neighbourhoods, it also signals a growing tide in Winnipeg toward increasing conflicts with the development sector. Even Swedish giant IKEA's proposal was debated.

In reality, Winnipeg has moved away from a climate of offering enticements and inducements to

developers to now having much more control over what the outside community certainly views as a growth market.

The retail landscape is a good example that continues to see the latest brand stores opening in malls.

Within all the euphoria, there is certainly room for good city planning to help guide but not stifle development. Good planning helps to ensure we get the best outcome for the city. But we need to ensure we don't unduly shackle development nor should we ignore opposition. Planning is really about the negotiation of multiple stakeholders with the outcome certainly geared toward creating great neighbourhoods and districts.

Citizens, planners and others want and demand a voice in how neighbourhoods and our city develop over time. If we know anything, it's that all good things come to an end. Many who left Winnipeg have since come home after the lustre of the Western boom dulled. What we need to do now is capitalize on Winnipeg's growth position to create a great and vibrant city.

We have to look at growth as supporting our need to expand our transportation network and to fix crumbling roads while also investing in our aging communities. We must take advantage of this opportunity but not to the extent that we lose our history.

In the words of Tom Cochrane "Not many ways out of this cold northern town / you work in the mill and get laid in the ground / If you're gonna jump it will be with the game. / Real fast and tough is the only clear lane To the big league."

If Winnipeg has truly made it to the big leagues, it's time it understands the realities of growth and change.

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