

ANALYSIS - Suburbs' fabric shifts as jobs move away from the downtown core

BY RICHARD WHITE, FOR CBC NEWS MARCH 2, 2016



A file photo of aerial views of Calgary housing in 2013. Richard White says new suburbs are including retail, business, medical and different types of housing. (Jonathan Hayward/Canadian Press)

Too often when we think of the suburbs we think of a sea of single-family homes with front car garages, small front yards, big back yards and six-foot fences.

Calgary Community Quiz: Do all our suburbs really look the same?

Behind the failure of Calgary's 'core of the core'

Low oil prices hollow out Calgary's downtown core

But in reality, the 'burbs are home to tens of thousands of businesses that employ one third of all Calgarians. The thousands of small, medium and large businesses in our northeast and southeast suburbs are just as much Calgary's economic engine as downtown.

"In the public's mind the downtown has been the focus of the city's boom and now the current gloom, but there is so much more to understanding Calgary's DNA and it is found in the suburbs," said Harry Hiller, University of Calgary urban sociologist.

Calgary is at a tipping point in its evolution.

Increasingly the suburbs are becoming more and more diversified, meeting its residents shopping, entertainment and recreational needs without going to the

city centre. The rise of online banking, shopping and entertainment also contribute to the fall of downtown's importance in the everyday lives of Calgarians.

In today's world Calgarians are much more likely to embrace their community recreation centre, local shopping centre, library or pathways to meet their daily, weekly and monthly needs.

More and more of us are inclined to see the community as meeting all our needs, which results in more social cohesion.

Where the jobs are growing

The City of Calgary's 2013 Employment Areas Growth report (a new one is due this year) shows that 78 per cent of total job growth in Calgary between 2006 to 2011 has been in the suburbs. Both the familiar industrial suburbs, plus a new kind is starting to show up.

First industrial suburbs.

Mostly in the northeast and southeast of the city, where warehouses and manufacturing centres are located.

Calgary has become the major distribution centre for Western Canada.

Our industrial suburbs are now home to large scale western Canadian distribution facilities for the likes of Costco, Walmart, Loblaws, Sears, Canadian Tire Group, Mark's, Forzani Group, Sobey's/Safeway, Gordon Food Service, Sysco and the new one-million-square-foot Home Depot facility.

That's led to a boom in transportation and logistics.

Calgary Economic Development (CED) says those industries employ more than 75,100 Calgarians in 4,647 businesses. This generates \$6 billion in annual revenue. And says CED, if you add in all the related manufacturing jobs, you get another 47,100 employees in about 1,830 businesses and a further \$6.72 billion in revenue.

Those are big numbers.

Roughly 24,000 Calgarians work at the airport through 100 or so different companies. It is a major cargo-shipping centre, moving 134,695 tonnes of goods in 2015.

Then there's Calgary's mega rail/truck distributors.

Canadian Pacific Rail operates a distribution facility on a 100 acre site in Dufferin Industrial Park in the southeast.

CN Rail has a \$200 million facility just northeast of Calgary. Together they receive and distribute as much goods as the port of Prince Rupert.

Industrial parks are going, but its really the suburban office park where we are seeing a new kind of Calgary neighbourhood formed.

One where work and life mix.



Imperial Oil's head office is located in Quarry Park. (Imperial Oil)

Living and working in the suburbs

The traditional suburban office park is dying. No longer are developers building the small office buildings with huge lawns and parking lots that were so common in the late 20th century.

Since the mid-'90s, the City of Calgary has been developing plans and policies that support creating complete communities such as places that include employment, residential, retail and recreational zoning all within close proximity.

Today Calgary's developers are creating suburban villages with more row housing and low and mid-rise condos than single-family homes. These new communities are a hybrid of urban and suburban living.

Indeed, Calgarians are becoming more neighbourhood or community focused.

Take Remington Development Corporation's Quarry Park in the southeast.

It was planned from the beginning to integrate offices, grocery stores, shops, restaurants, mixed types of homes and recreation to create a village of 20,000 workers and 5,000 residents.

In 2008, Jacobs Engineering was a suburban pioneer when they leased 350,000 square feet (the largest office building outside of downtown) of space in Quarry Park to house 2,000 employees. Soon, other engineering and technology firms relocated there, including Imperial Oil and its 3,000 employees.



Quarry Park Retail. (bounce-imaging.com)

Today, almost 10,000 people work at Quarry Park, and 750 of the planned 2,000 homes have been built.

Further south and east is the Seton neighbourhood — still in its infancy.

Seton is one of the most comprehensive mixed-use developments in North America, with more than 2.5 million square feet set aside for the South Health Campus hospital, offices, hotels and shops. It also includes a major park, a recreation centre, a public library, schools and 1,300 multi-family residences (no single-family homes). All of this served by the future Green Line LRT.

Today, suburban community design is all about integration of uses — office, medical, industrial, residential, retail and recreational — not segregation, as was the case in the 20th century.

Calgary could become more like New York City or Toronto where people stick to their neighbourhoods, and those neighbourhoods are more likely to form identity because people stick to them.

The very nature of the idea of "sprawl" changes when we stop looking at Calgary as seen from the core looking out, and begin to see it from suburbs looking in. Many Calgarians no longer perceive their home as "a long way from downtown" but rather "downtown is long way from home."

In the words of Hiller, "It is time we take another look at what makes Calgary tick and realize there is great life to be had in the 'burbs!"

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