

# City Centre Plan holds promise

BY JORDON COOPER, THE STARPHOENIX MARCH 10, 2014 2:20 PM



SASKATOON, SASK.-- NOV. 7, 2013--Downtown Saskatoon as seen from the Saskatoon Tower in Saskatoon November 7, 2013. [RICHARDMARJAN/STARPHOENIX]

**Photograph by:** richard marjan

If you look at growth patterns of Saskatoon, one could say that Mayor Don Atchison has overseen the largest transformation in the city's history.

We have had a lot of successful mayors, but none has overseen this kind of simultaneous and large-scale change that has affected the very nature of Saskatoon.

Atchison was elected as a mayor of big ideas. One idea he has championed but we haven't seen progress very far on is to have 10,000 people living downtown. When you look at that goal, you are looking at almost 6,000 new apartment units. We now have fewer than 2,000 units, so there's a long way to go.

When you look at simulations of what that looks like in an area not much larger than Saskatoon's downtown, it is staggering. We will need several 30-storey towers, along with a lot of mid-rise units. To have 10,000 people in the city's core would drastically reshape Saskatoon, and require an investment of hundreds of millions of dollars.

However, despite the cost, cities need to have such spaces. Studies show about 60 per cent of people love the suburbs. Having lived in a suburb, I know that it was a great place to grow up - a big

yard, extremely large park, easy access to Meewasin Valley, and a mall nearby.

About 40 per cent of people want to live in denser urban environment. Streets covered with Wi-Fi, sidewalk cafes, walkable streets, bike lanes, reliable transit, and easy access to the downtown. It may not be the best place to live if you own a big dog who loves to run, but it offers a lot of other amenities.

The problem for the latter group is that 95 per cent of new housing in the city is traditional suburban housing, with only five per cent what one would consider urban residential. The result is that when something comes available, it is sold at a premium price because there is so little of it.

The houses in Nutana and Caswell Hill are great homes, but they sell at a premium because people will pay for proximity to urban experiences that Broadway Avenue, 20th Street and downtown Saskatoon provide. In most cities, there is not enough of such places to go around.

Why aren't there more? Well, some areas are broken. For instance, 22nd Street and Idylwyld Drive are dominated by multiple lanes of constant traffic. You could build all sorts of towers along those roads, but they don't offer much quality of life because these roadways are designed for constant automobile traffic, not pedestrians. It would take a massive amount of money to fix those corridors.

Then there's the cost. A four-storey walk-up apartment is often stick built, which means they are less expensive. Going higher means more expensive construction techniques, and to pay for it, you have to built tall. More storeys mean a bigger investment and a bigger risk. While those kind of mid-rise and highrise apartments are common in larger cities, it's tough to be the first one to start building and lead the transformation from three storeys to 20 storeys.

Sometimes city planning makes developers nervous. The high priority that we give cars in Saskatoon means that streets with potential to be great urban spaces are often turned into thoroughfares. The latest example is 33rd Street, with the city looking to make it

into four lanes of traffic by removing parking. That will kill any chance that area has of becoming a complete street and providing the kind of amenities that people want to live near.

So, how do we get 10,000 people living downtown? The new City Centre Plan has some amazing ideas that will make people want to live there.

To kick-start the needed housing, the plan mentions a subsidy of \$4,500 for each unit sold. A similar program added 1,000 units to Edmonton's downtown core. It's a start and, if it happens in Saskatoon, it could generate the momentum needed for more development and also provide a reasonable amount of housing units for those who want to live downtown.

I don't know if I buy the predictions by the mayor and city administration that Saskatoon will become a city of 500,000. I do know that if they can execute the new City Centre Plan, as well as some ideas coming from the Riversdale Business Improvement District, we will be a world-class city.

Saskatoon is on the right track with this. I hope that we see Atchison's vision realized. If successful, it will mean more to the long term future of the city than even the bridges.

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