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Downtown Calgary as seen at night.

ZONING NEEDS OVERHAUL?

Author Don Elliott of *A Better Way to Zone: Ten Principles to Create Livable Cities*, says zoning often discourages the very development that bigger cities like Calgary need and want.

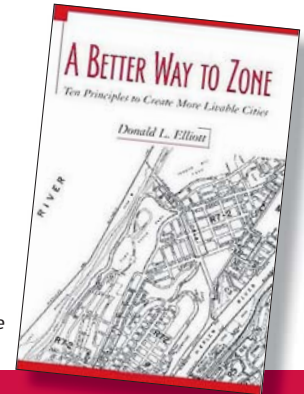
Zoning has become so complex that it is often dysfunctional and in desperate need of an overhaul. His book examines the politics, economics, law, techniques and process of land development and zoning in America.

It provides a vision of the future of zoning — one not tied to a particular picture of how cities should look, but rather how they should operate.

Elliott identifies 10 principles for change that he feels would produce more livable cities, as well as make zoning simpler to understand and use.

For more information, visit the website at www.abetterwaytozone.com

— Richard White



One size definitely does not fit all

Optimism for mixed-use projects

Every city in North America wants more mixed-use developments — “but nobody is sure exactly what it means and everyone is struggling to figure out how to make them work.”

That’s what Don Elliott of Clarion Associates in Denver, Colo., told a recent workshop on the topic, which was jointly held by the City of Calgary and the Urban Development Institute.

A graduate of Yale and Harvard universities, Elliott is a senior consultant with the American land use consulting firm.

He is also the author of *A Better Way to Zone: Ten Principles to Create Livable Cities*.

Elliott outlined five key types of mixed-use developments:

- Low-rise residential buildings with some retail at the street (such as The Bridges redevelopment on the site of the demolished Calgary General Hospital in Bridgeland);
- Highrise condos/office buildings with retail at the street (such as the Keynote project on 1st Street S.E. and Macleod Trail north that is to contain office and residential towers set above 40,000 square feet of retail).

■ Condo/hotel/office complexes (such as the Hotel le Germain, which is across from the Calgary Tower on the corner of Centre Street and 9th Avenue).



RICHARD WHITE

■ Transit-oriented, high-density condo/office developments (such as the London at Heritage Station condos near the LRT stop in southwest Calgary).

■ Mixed-use communities (such as Quarry Park, a massive redevelopment on the site of a former gravel quarry in southeast Calgary).

In addition to the complexity of mixed-use development, there is also a continent-wide debate of whether or not they should be optional or mandatory for developers.

“Why do we want mixed-use buildings, blocks and communities?” asked Elliot at the workshop. “Is it the character they create? ... Their pedestrian orientation? ... The reduced carbon footprint?”

The utopian vision of mixed-use development would include a mix of offices, residential, retail, restaurants, recreational and health care facilities, all within easy walkable/cyclable proximity (about 20 minutes).

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Above, the Olive project in The Bridges in Bridgeland. The area is an example of low-rise residential buildings with some retail at the street level. Left, London at Heritage Station as seen in 2007. It’s an example of a transit-oriented, condo/office project.

GERMAIN TO THE CONVERSATION

The Hotel Le Germain on 9th Avenue, located across the street from the Calgary Tower, is probably Calgary's most ambitious and risky urban vertical, mixed-use development.

This \$110-million project consists of an office tower, an 150-room boutique hotel and 42 luxury condos on just a quarter of a downtown block.

Designed by Montreal's Le May Michaud Architecture Design, the office and hotel buildings serve as

the two pillars supporting luxury condos high above the street. Collectively, the three buildings create a huge archway which will showcase a major public artwork.

The contemporary design and use of wood as the exterior finishing for the hotel building make a unique and somewhat quirky architectural statement, contrasting sharply with downtown Calgary's mainly big-box conservative corporate designs.



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An artist's rendering of the Hotel Le Germain, a \$110-million project that is across the street from the Calgary Tower.

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WHITE: Highrise urban

In North America, there are very few places where you can live, work and play in the same neighbourhood (especially in suburbs) because zoning only allows for commercial or residential, institutional or industrial — never should they mix.

Mixed-use developments are usually associated with highrise, high-density urban areas like Calgary's inner-city Beltline district, which offers an alternate lifestyle to the suburbs.

Garrison Woods is an example of an inner-city mixed-use community, while McKenzie Towne is an example of "town-centre" suburban mixed-use.

Several more town centre and mixed-use areas are planned for new communities at the edge of the city, but the actual execution of these plans may be years away.

After Elliott made his comments, the 50 or so participants — already organized at tables with equal representation by city and the private sector — were asked to identify and discuss the obstacles and opportunities for mixed-use development in Calgary.

The obstacles

Participants at the table I was assigned talked a lot about the obstacles to mixed-use development in Calgary — particularly about how there is a very small market for non-traditional housing in Calgary.

They talked about how, for most Calgarians, their home is their biggest investment, with few willing to risk moving into



“Whether vertical, horizontal or linear, each mixed-use opportunity presents unique market dynamics as to what it can support.

DAVID ALLEN,
CARMA DEVELOPERS

a building or community that might not be an easy sell because of the small market.

David Allen, vice-president of Calgary land with Carma Developers, stressed that “understanding the uniqueness of market opportunities in and around a potential mixed-use area is vital.

“Whether vertical, horizontal or linear, each mixed-use opportunity presents unique market dynamics as to what it can support — from single-family to higher density residential, commercial, retail and even institutional.”

Another obstacle was the complexity of mix-use developments. We discussed how difficult such projects are to modify to keep pace with



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When Jacobs Engineering selected Quarry Park as the site of an office building for its 2,000 employees, it kick-started the development.

changing markets.

It is not unusual to redesign a project/building two or three times between the time the land is purchased, the concept is developed and approved, and then gets to market.

Each time you make changes, you have to re-calculate building, infrastructure, public space, parking, taxes, utilities and operating costs.

This gets even more complicated when you have public, commercial and private tenants in the same building or block.

The result is mixed-use developments take longer to plan and get approval — and

are riskier.

It was agreed that mixed-use development requires a major catalyst — a pioneer of some kind, ideally a major employer — to drive the development.

A good example in Calgary is Remington Development Corp.'s Quarry Park, where Jacobs Engineering kick-started the project with a 400,000-square-foot building to house its 2,000 employees.

This led to numerous other office buildings being built, which then supported the development of a retail centre and more recently residential development.

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THE WATER'S FINE

The 11th annual Buildex Calgary trade show and seminars still has a broad range of exhibitors and speakers — and still has room for more attendees.

The two-day show is being held Nov. 3 and 4 at the BMO Centre in Stampede Park. General admission to the trade show is \$25; prices for seminars vary.

On Nov. 3, the trade show runs from 9:30 to 4 p.m. with seminars scheduled from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. On Nov. 4, the show is open from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., with seminars running from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. There will be 60 speakers and 40 seminars. For information and registration, visit www.buildexcalgary.com

— Marty Hope

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STAGE: South Health Campus

The stage is set for something similar to happen around the new South Health Campus, which will be the catalyst for the development of Seton community in southeast Calgary.

The campus is to include a new hospital and it aims to be the employment anchor of a new downtown for a “city” of more than 120,000 people — making it Alberta’s third largest — south of Fish Creek Provincial Park.

Other major mixed-use communities planned in the near future for Calgary are East Village — on the site of one of the city’s oldest communities near City Hall — and Currie Barracks, which is part of the Garrison Woods redevelopment on the site of a former military base.

One of the biggest barriers to medium- and high-density, mixed-use development in inner-city Calgary is the strength of community groups in established single-family neighbourhoods.

They are often opposed to the potential increased traffic and the general uncertainty of what impact a mixed-use development may bring.

One key to any successful community is that it be allowed to evolve over time.

This is particularly true for those living near LRT stations. In order to realize the full benefits of LRT, Calgary must increase the density of people living, working and shopping near every station.

Although this won’t happen overnight, it must happen — and happen strategically.

Such mixed-use communities are too good of an opportunity to be underutilized. We must capitalize on the investment we have made in the LRT system.

The need to link vision with reality is critical, too.

City planners and some politicians are often guilty of developing long-term policies and zoning regulations based on ideal or future assumptions of housing/employment markets and trends

rather than on existing markets.

Developers operate on a shorter term. They are building what the market wants today or in the near future.

There is a need to create flexible community plans and zoning policies that allow developers to design and build residential, office and retail at densities for today’s market — but that also allows for increased density and diversity as they evolve over time (for example, suburban office parking should not be restricted today based on future LRT or Bus Rapid Transit service).

These obstacles combine to make mix-use developments more costly and difficult to finance — which in turn makes them less affordable and therefore less able to compete with traditional housing developments.

The opportunities

Despite the many obstacles to mixed-use development in Calgary, there was much optimism at the workshop.

Several opportunities were identified. Our group thought Macleod Trail represents an ideal opportunity to create a new mixed-use corridor.

The old car lots and strip malls were seen as excellent opportunities for medium density (think 15 floor) residential/office buildings with good access to existing LRT and bus routes.

Chinook Centre could be the heart of the Macleod Trail Corridor.

Stadium Shopping Centre near 16th Avenue NW. was also identified as an excellent potential as a mixed-use development site, serving both the nearby Foothills Medical Centre and the University of Calgary.

In fact, every LRT station was seen to have potential for mixed-use development provided that the essential catalyst can be attracted.

An LRT station surrounded by single-family homes makes no sense in an urban planning model.



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The South Health Campus is to be the anchor of a new ‘downtown.’

Each station will need its own catalyst to capitalize on its unique opportunities — and each will evolve when its time comes.

The Westbrook Mall/LRT Station, for example, is currently being set up to become a model LRT, mixed-use development that will demonstrate how mixed-use, inner-city projects can revitalize an entire community, provide alternate housing and lifestyle choices to existing residents, and reducing urban sprawl.

Final words of wisdom

Just how complex is mixed-use development?

Allen of Carma Developers nicely summed it up: “To achieve success, a potential mixed-use area must consider and balance many highly localized factors.

The uniqueness of a mixed-use area’s land, building and infrastructure costs — along with what the marketplace desires for residential designs, prices and commercial offerings — will result in the ultimate mix of uses an area can support.

“Being respectful of existing residents

and business owners who may surround a mixed-use project is also a key ingredient to a positive result.

“A one-size-fits-all, mixed-use policy is not the answer. It’s a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the uniqueness of a potential mixed-use area which will bring success.”

One of the things A Better Way to Zone author Elliot said that particularly resonated with me is “that a healthy relationship between the city and its developers is the key to a successful city.”

In the recent past, city officials and Calgary’s development community have had a rocky relationship.

I believe — a belief which I have found to be shared by several private sector participants — that more workshops like this one will help both sides better appreciate that we are all trying to do the same thing: create a better city for all Calgarians to live, work and play, today and in the future.

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