

Shifting Gears

**Making Calgary a magnet
for young talent**



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Who We Are

Canada25 is a non-partisan organization dedicated to engaging the perspectives of young Canadians, living at home and abroad, in Canada's public policy debates. We asked young Canadians between the ages of 20 and 35 to visualize their country 25 years in the future and challenged them to develop and implement the policy ideas that will make their vision a reality.

For 2002, Canada25 has turned its attention to Canada's cities: **How can Canadian cities become magnets for attracting and retaining young talent as well as engines for social and economic development?**

We held **11** roundtables across Canada and in the US and engaged more than 350 young Canadians. Our work cumulated in a national forum held near Victoria, British Columbia.

Our national report, *Building Up* (available fall 2002) sets out our vision for a great city, built around density, diversity and discovery and outlines our eight priorities for action: fighting urban sprawl, creating a new national transportation strategy, building great city universities, tuning up the city economic development engine, maximizing the benefits of immigration, fighting the effects of urban poverty, fostering creativity and supporting the arts and marketing what we've have.

In addition to working on national priorities, the Calgary chapter of Canada25 will be also be focusing on issues unique to this city. This report was prepared by the Calgary chapter of Canada25 and translates our vision and national priorities into a concrete action plan to be implemented here, in Calgary. We look forward to working with other stakeholders in the city to bring this vision to life.

Our vision

A great city is one that buzzes with **energy**, one that is full of innovative people doing big things. The city is **diverse** – in class, income, and colour – and fights to maintain that diversity. It has rich, living **culture** – in all meanings of that word – not only because of government support, but also because the citizens recognize the importance of their relationships with one another. This recognition also manifests itself in **engagement and involvement in the community** – social capital is strong, though not necessarily in traditional ways; while service club membership and bowling league enrolment may be declining, citizens are still active in civil society.

There are also elements of urban design that are common across great cities – people live where they work and play. **Density is high**. Public transit is a preferred choice. Young people can afford to live downtown. Classes and socio-economic backgrounds are **mixed in neighbourhoods**, not least through the innovative provision of social housing. **Environmental sustainability** is a major factor in the design of built space and infrastructure. Public spaces are vibrant and attractive. **People want to be there.**

Calgary can be a great city... if we try.

Calgary at a crossroads

Calgary's vibrant economy and abundant recreational activities have attracted a young and highly educated work force to our city. The city's booming population and its astonishing urban sprawl have also resulted in traffic snarls that grate on the nerves of its residents. This annoyance, combined with changing attitudes and lifestyles have stimulated a dramatic increase in the construction of high-rise condominiums, trendy town houses and chic infills in the city centre.

Suddenly, living in the inner city is becoming a popular option in Canada's most suburban city. Paradoxically, the city's transportation problems are proving to be a blessing in disguise.

Traditionally, a city's prosperity has largely been determined by its proximity to natural resources. In the new economy, however, the rules have changed. Human capital rather than natural resources will determine where companies locate their operations. Calgary's young, highly educated and skilled workforce provides the city with a competitive edge in the information age. The question for our civic leaders is this: **How can Calgary continue to attract and retain young talent?**

We believe that Calgary is at a crossroads. We can choose to build up, more than out. We can choose buses and bikes instead of SUVs. We can choose a different path. In our view, developing an exciting, dynamic and sustainable urban environment is the key element in attracting and retaining Calgary's young and talented workforce, who can choose to live and work virtually anywhere in the world. The economic prosperity of our city is dependent on making Calgary a more attractive place to live and work. We believe that today is the day for our civic and community leaders to make the tough decisions and implement policies that will transform Calgary into an urban oasis.

Issue 1: Density

Calgary must build up more than out.

Due to its prairie location, Calgary has no natural borders to halt its relentless urban sprawl. While the abundance of land has helped make single family housing affordable for a large proportion of the population, the cost to the entire community has been immense. Calgary's outward expansion requires the construction of new roads, schools and recreational facilities. Low-density suburbs (and even new suburbs at 6-8 units per acre are low density) render public transportation inefficient, ineffective and very expensive. While we don't pretend that our civic leaders can eliminate urban sprawl, we do believe that city hall can recognize that the problem exists and implement policies to slow it down.

City Centre

The dramatic increase in the construction of condominium complexes in Calgary's central neighbourhoods, such as Eau Claire, the Beltline, Cliff-Bungalow Mission and Hillhurst-Sunnyside have shattered the long held myth that Calgarians simply don't like multi-unit housing. Despite the high demand for quality multi-unit housing and the benefits that an increase in density would bring to the city, our civic politicians often cater to the desires of long established residents in some communities who oppose any increase in density or any form of redevelopment.

The city has also failed to recognize that the Beltline communities, home of Calgary's highest density neighbourhoods, have different needs than their suburban counterparts. High-density urban neighbourhoods create opportunities for vibrant streets and a pedestrian oriented lifestyle (consider that thirty per cent of Beltline residents walk to work). This also naturally results in more garbage and more wear and tear on sidewalks, parks and streets. Unfortunately, the city's maintenance program is woefully inadequate and too many areas in the Beltline are in disrepair, resulting in the perception that these neighbourhoods are unsafe and undesirable. Safety remains a serious concern that has kept many Calgarians from moving to the city centre.

We also note that the majority of new condominium construction is focused on the high-income market and is inaccessible to lower income Calgarians. We need to think about smart ways to increase the stock of affordable rental housing in the city centre.

Established Suburban Neighbourhoods

The low-density neighbourhoods that surround the city centre dominate Calgary's urban landscape. Revitalization of these communities through the construction of modest multi-unit housing projects, such as duplexes, townhouses and low-rise condominiums is often impeded by city regulations and organized opposition from within these communities. These obstacles can dissuade new investment and can lead to the eventual stagnation of these neighbourhoods. As a result, established public facilities, such as schools, libraries and recreational facilities are often under used.

New Suburban

The new suburban communities developing around the edge of the city can be a testament to poor urban planning. Although there has been an increase in the construction of multi-unit housing in the suburbs, and we applaud the increases in density forced by city regulation in the mid-1990's, the overall design of these communities is still focused on automotive transportation, with MacKenzie Towne and Garrison Woods being the only two notable exceptions. Furthermore, the city has done little to discourage its outward expansion, despite understanding the problems that result from urban sprawl. As a result, the city is forced to build new schools, new recreational facilities and new roads in order to meet the growing needs of the new suburbanites. Effective public transportation is expensive and these neighbourhoods lack the vibrancy of those located in the city centre.

Policy Recommendations

To increase density, Calgary must:

Reconfigure the calculation of property taxes to provide an incentive for people to live in either: (i) higher density housing, (ii) the city centre or (iii) established neighbourhoods.

Revise the city's zoning by-laws to facilitate medium and high-density redevelopment in the city centre and in established neighbourhoods (e.g. Bridgeland, East Village).

Mandate mixed density, higher density and multi-use development in all new suburban communities, with an emphasis on designing communities around central transportation and commercial hubs, such as High Street in McKenzie Town.

Design new suburban communities for people, not for cars, by adopting pedestrian and transit friendly designs.

Ensure that most new suburban neighbourhoods include affordable housing.

Mandate public consultation with respect to the development of each new suburban neighbourhood (e.g. consultation process used in developing Garrison Woods).

Devote the necessary resources to improve the appearance, maintenance and safety in the city centre, especially in the Beltline communities.

Issue 2: Transportation

“Curing congestion by building new interchanges is like fighting obesity by loosening your belt” – speaker at Calgary roundtable

Calgary needs a bold new approach to its public transportation strategy. Currently, the city has emphasized expansion of existing roadways and construction of new interchanges as a solution to its transportation woes. While these initiatives might provide short-term relief to Calgary’s traffic congestion, we do not believe that these solutions will provide sustained relief in the long term given the growth rate of the city’s population. **The only effective solution to reducing traffic congestion is to reduce the number of private vehicles that travel on Calgary’s streets on a daily basis.** We believe that an effective transportation policy has to focus on public transit, personal transportation and transportation policy.

Public Transit

Contrary to popular belief, Calgarians are not averse to using public transit. Currently, the transit service runs overcapacity during rush hour. Park-and-ride lots at LRT stations are full and rush hour buses are at standing room only. It’s clear that Calgary Transit effectively serves a portion of the commuting public and we applaud the recent increase in transit service implemented this fall, and the recent commitment by Council to maintain these extended hours.

What is also obvious, however, is that the current structure of Calgary’s transit system makes public transit a completely unreasonable option for a majority of commuters, despite the recent service improvements. Express buses are still limited in number and the frequency of service drops dramatically after rush hour. Even during peak periods, there is insufficient transit in many areas as buses and C-Train cars are filled to capacity. Many workers, including the majority of young professionals, do not leave work during rush hour, which often dissuades them from using public transit all together. Furthermore, the system is virtually ineffective for the majority of workers who work outside the downtown core.

Personal Transportation

We recognize that the automobile is the primary method that most Calgarians use to travel throughout the city. However, Calgary's excellent bike path system and the implementation of high occupancy vehicle lanes (car pool lanes) on Centre Street N. provide good examples of how the city can facilitate alternative methods of personal transportation.

Furthermore, increasing the density of housing around existing employment centres, such as the downtown core, Mount Royal College and the University would allow more people to bike or walk to work. Furthermore, the city should analysis why it has been unsuccessful in creating new employment centres outside the downtown core, even though the creation of employment centre has been long established city policy.

Transportation Policy

Calgary's transportation policy appears to have conflicting objectives. While the city has implemented a number of policies to increase transit use, it has failed to make meaningful improvements to transit service. For example, the reduction in the number of parking stalls in the downtown core appears to have resulted in higher parking fees rather than a significant increase in transit use. Furthermore, Calgary Transit's emphasis on peak time service creates a transit system that is running at capacity during rush hour and unused for the majority of the day.

Policy Recommendations

To improve transportation in Calgary, we must:

Make the reduction of the number of private vehicles on Calgary's roads the principal focus of Calgary's transportation policy. The majority of public funds should be spent on a significant expansion of public transit, including: (i) the expansion of the LRT system; (ii) increasing the frequency of transit service; (iii) increasing the hours of operation of transit; and (iv) the creation of H.O.V. lanes and dedicated transit lanes (e.g. Ottawa's Transitway). We also encourage the City and Calgary Transit to be thoughtful about the meaning of "peak" and "non-peak" in a world where fewer and fewer people work 9 to5. Perhaps an increase in evening hours may be made up for by fewer mid-day trips during the week.

Increase cross-town transit service from each quadrant of the city to employment centres outside the downtown core. For example, it should be easier to travel from Northeast Calgary directly to SAIT, the U of C and the Foothills hospital, which are the principle employment centres in Northwest Calgary.

Implement and lobby for policies that promote public transit and alternative modes of transportation, such as: (i) lobbying the federal and provincial governments to make transit passes a tax-deductible expense, (ii) expanding the universal transit pass program to businesses and other organizations,

and (iii) requiring building owners to install showers and locker facilities for cyclists.

Encourage the construction of high-density developments near existing transit hubs, such as the redevelopment of the Bow Valley Centre site near the Bridgeland LRT station.

Develop new transit hubs off the LRT line. For example, the construction of Park'n Ride stations combined with express bus service in suburban neighbourhoods could provide a cost effective solution for transit in Calgary's low-density suburbs.

Improve connections to transit hubs through bike and pedestrian pathways, park and ride lots and shuttle service.

Construct and improve bike paths, bike lanes, HOV lanes and transit / bicycle only thoroughfares (e.g. Ottawa Transitway).

Establish a public transit link from the Calgary International Airport to the city centre, either through an extension of the Northeast LRT line or by way of an express bus to the city centre.

Issue 3: Community and Environment

Calgary must nurture its green-spaces, preserve its community spirit and cultivate a vibrant urban culture in its quest to attract and retain young talent. We certainly have natural jewels in this city: the forests of Fish Creek Provincial Park, the Bow River pathway system and the grasslands on Nose Hill are but a few. However, it is Calgary's unique community spirit that truly makes this city a special place to live. The thousands of volunteers who clean the city's riverbanks, run the Calgary Stampede and do everything else in between are Calgary's most treasured asset. However, to become a truly great city, Calgary must develop an urban culture that will educate, entertain and enrich the lives of its citizens.

Public spaces and green-spaces

Many of our green spaces are under utilized due to poor design. Access to some of Calgary's significant green-spaces by public transit is limited. In new communities, there can be too much emphasis on private yards, which isolate residents from each other and discourage interaction within the community.

Community Design

Many of Calgary's suburbs are uninteresting additions to the city's urban landscape. Stringent architectural controls and overly restrictive zoning regulations have produced cookie cutter housing and dull neighbourhoods. Our suburbs are designed for cars, not people. In many communities, a quick trip to the corner store is impossible by foot. Most suburbs lack public art and public spaces where citizens can gather and interact.

Urban Culture

Urban culture, to put it bluntly, is what makes a city cool. A city with great urban culture is a city that encourages, embraces and celebrates its diversity. It's a city with great neighbourhoods where citizens go to eat, shop, drink, listen to live music and people watch. Urban districts such as 17th Avenue S.W., Kensington, Mission and Marda Loop are Calgary's centres of urban culture and their continued development must be encouraged and supported.

Calgary, unfortunately, receives poor marks on the issue of cultural diversity. The city has made policy decisions that have sent a strong negative message to certain communities. For example, the lack of civic investment in Northeast Calgary (the region has fewer parks, libraries, arenas than any other quadrant in the city) has not gone unnoticed by its residents. The almost decade-long failure by the mayor of the city to declare gay and lesbian pride week has been a national embarrassment. The lack of cheap studio and performance spaces has driven

many young and talented artists to cities that recognize the value of the arts. Calgary can and must do better than this.

Policy Recommendations

To improve Calgary's urban environment, we must:

Offer incentives for the construction of energy efficient, medium and high-density developments that emphasize (i) public green-space rather than private yards (ii) innovative architectural design, (iii) mixed use buildings (iii) pedestrian traffic within in the community, (iv) public transit and (iv) environmental protection through energy efficient design, the incorporation of renewable energy sources and recycling facilities.

Draft and implement a civic cultural policy that (i) addresses the lack of affordable living, work and performance spaces for local artists, (ii) encourages the installation of art in public spaces such as in parks, sidewalks and building exteriors, (iii) facilitates the construction of low cost performance spaces and (iv) supports the creation of an international calibre public art gallery.

Rethink the design and use of community centres. Mixed-use community centres could be home to a variety of community services, provide office space for volunteer groups and a place for artists to create and present their works.

Preserve environmentally sensitive green-spaces, such as the Weaselhead, while improving public access via pathways and public transit.

Improve the visual appearance of the community by increasing the amount of trees, shrubs and flowerbeds on public property and encourage private landowners to do the same.

Ensure that city policies support diversity and distribute civic resources equitably.

Support the continued development of existing urban cultural centres, such as 17th Avenue and Marda Loop, and facilitate the development of urban cultural centres in other areas of the city.

Focus on high-quality public space in high-density neighbourhoods by constructing new and revitalizing existing parks and plazas to make these communities more attractive and appealing.

Issue 4: Urban poverty

As Calgary has grown, the poverty problem in our city has grown even more – the number of homeless people today is estimated at over four times that of only seven years ago. **Our members care passionately and deeply about the issue of poverty** and the need to help those at the bottom of the ladder. Whether or not they are economically empowered, regardless of their political persuasion, they are unanimous in their call for a just and equitable community.

We recognize that the **lack of affordable housing** in Calgary is a serious issue that requires immediate attention from the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government. The number of homeless citizens living on Calgary's streets is completely unacceptable, especially considering Calgary's wealth. The fact that a significant number of Calgary's homeless have jobs makes the lack of affordable housing more appalling.

We strongly endorse the recommendations of our national report regarding the development of community-focused solutions to the problems of homelessness, increasing the availability of rental housing and making investments in human capital. Furthermore, **we call upon the Mayor to immediately convene an Urban Poverty Roundtable** composed of leaders from government, business and the non-profit sector to begin working on solutions to this urgent issue.

Why this all matters

“The country with the strongest cities wins.” - Glenn Murray, Mayor of Winnipeg

Our analysis is predicated on the belief that **young talent matters**. Calgary’s civic leaders must recognize that retaining its talented young workforce is vital to the city’s future economic prosperity. Young people are willing to move if presented with better social and economic opportunities elsewhere.

The results of our roundtable discussions and research can be summarized into one sentence: **A great city is one that embraces diversity, has a vibrant urban culture and allows the majority of its residents to travel to school and work without having to get into a car.** That, in a nutshell, is the vision of Calgary offered by our constituency.

We believe that Calgary can become a great city only if there is a fundamental shift in thinking by our civic and community leaders. This report provides numerous recommendations and suggestions on how policies can be changed to produce a better Calgary. We look forward to working with Calgary’s leaders in our quest to make Calgary a great place to live.