

The Daily Gleaner

Green Matters for the Daily Gleaner

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By Valerie Hillier

The Struggle for a Sustainable Balance in our Cities

Traveling by vehicle across the continent has definitely given me the opportunity to see things in a way not possible by air travel. So far this winter we have traveled down along the eastern seaboard covering parts of Maine, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Washington, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Florida all the way to Key West. We've traveled along the interstate, as well as old highways, through old and new urban centres, and some rural areas as well. I have noticed that many big box stores and supercentres are locating themselves just off interstate exits. And on a directly related note, I'm noticing a troubling trend of decaying downtown centres. I've seen many small "Mom 'n Pops" doing their best to hang on, and downtown associations doing their best to maintain parks and walkways while storefronts remain boarded up and for lease. Though it may be that many businesses gave up during the recession, it is also very apparent that these small enterprises are fighting within a highly competitive consumer and retail industry.

In seeing all this it has occurred to me that urban planning is more important now more than ever before. Not just to keep our downtowns vibrant and local businesses from going under, but also to avoid environmental damage resulting from urban sprawl. Apart from some of the obvious environmental implications: increased risk of flooding, and reduced wildlife habitats and wetlands; urban sprawl also results in heavier traffic flow, longer commutes and further development such as planned communities made up of large single-family homes.

Though at first, it may seem understandable why cities choose to approve this type of development (i.e. job creation and attracting new residents), without proper planning municipalities might find themselves spending more money down the road than anticipated. Along with the possibilities of large-scale environmental damage; increased infrastructure costs might include things such as increased transit routes, and water and sewage provision. Additionally there may be added costs to maintaining historic and arts districts where, coincidentally, small local businesses often thrive.

Most of my time this winter has been spent in Florida. In reading local newspapers I have found out about an action plan that the state is implementing, known as the CERP - Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Currently in the early stages, the CERP, which covers 16 counties over an 18,000-square-mile area including the everglades, was approved in 2000. It will take more than 30 years to complete and current cost estimates are more than 10 billion dollars. Implementing the CERP is vital for this region as it lays out a plan to capture fresh water that now flows unused to the ocean and the Gulf of Mexico and redirect it to areas that need it most. The majority of the water will be devoted to environmental restoration: reviving a dying ecosystem stumped by roadways and man-made dykes. The remaining water will benefit cities and farmers by enhancing water supplies for the south Florida economy.

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As the climate warms and natural disasters become more frequent and fresh water diminishes, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the long-term environmental implications of development, while maintaining overall sustainability. In traveling through the Miami area, which covers such a vast region of everglades, widespread environmental damage is strikingly evident. Seeing how Florida is now learning a very costly lesson due to poor planning in the past, I can say that I do not envy the job of any city planner or City Councilors when studying and making decisions on municipal development.

And though we, as citizens, often express our desire for environmental sustainability, we must also understand what that means and how it may affect us, and encourage and support changing ideas about sustainability. For instance, to avoid urban sprawl but to still provide enough housing for growing populations and families, it may mean building up rather than out. To increase the availability of greener energy and reduce our dependence on oil and coal-fired plants, we may see large-scale installations of windmills and solar gardens near to where we live. In my mind, this about striking balance and understanding the role we each play in accomplishing that. We cannot express the desire for environmental sustainability, and at the same time be reluctant to adapt to changes in our lifestyles and our communities. It is also vitally important that we encourage our city officials to better understand what full spectrum sustainability means - as it relates to the social, economic and environmental health of our communities – and to endeavor to make the right changes now rather than later.

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