

The StarPhoenix

Moving Saskatoon to one-planet living

BY PAUL HANLEY, SPECIAL TO THE STARPHOENIX MAY 28, 2013

Saskatoon city council's recent decision not only to build but also widen another bridge to make it easier for more cars and commuters to move around the city is just another example of a great conundrum facing municipal governments. They surely know that the way cities are designed contributes to dangerous climate change and a deteriorating ecosphere, yet convention locks them into unsustainable technologies such as the automobile and design approaches such as expanding suburbia.

Fundamental change to the status quo just seems too radical. So they will keep talking reduced emissions and smart growth and a dense urban core and a better transit system and more bicycle paths, they will make some positive changes and they will continue to build our cities for cars and consumption, not living.

The title of the 2013 State of the World Report from the Worldwatch Institute asks the question: Is sustainability still possible? The answer is certainly no, unless cities and citizens and corporations and all levels of government start making difficult choices to change the status quo. But how hard would that be?

In a chapter called Getting to One-Planet Living (free at www.worldwatch.org/node/12813), authors William Rees and Jennie Moore take a look at how one Canadian city, Vancouver, could reduce its ecological footprint. Ecological footprint refers to the productive ecosystem area required by a population to produce the renewable resources it consumes and to assimilate its (mostly carbon) wastes. There are only 11.9 billion hectares of productive ecosystem area on the planet. If this area was distributed equally among the seven billion people on Earth today, each person would be allocated just 1.7 global hectares (gha) per capita.

Worldwide, our ecological footprint already exceeds Earth's capacity by 50 per cent. And people like us, the 20 per cent at the top of the global economic scale, are mainly responsible for overshooting the planet's ecological capacity; we use about 80 per cent of the world's resources and produce most of the greenhouse gas emissions. The fortunate 20 per cent would have to make major adjustments to reduce humanity's ecological footprint to a sustainable level.

Vancouverites, for example, have an ecological footprint of close to five global hectares per person, almost three times their fair share of global hectares. Rees and Moore report that 51 per cent of Vancouver's ecological footprint comes from supplying food (and most of that from animal products), 19 per cent from transportation, 16 per cent from buildings and 14 per cent from consumer goods. In Saskatoon, our footprint is likely even heavier since we use more fossil fuels for electricity production and rely more on cars to move around.

How could a city like Vancouver - or Saskatoon - reduce its footprint down to a sustainable level? It won't be easy. "Even if average Vancouverites followed a vegan diet; avoided driving or flying and only walked, cycled, or used public transit; lived in a passive solar house that used almost no fossil-based energy; and cut their personal consumption by half, they could only reduce their per capita ecological footprint by 44 per cent (from 4.96 to 2.8 gha per capita). That seems like an impossible challenge already," comment Rees and Moore, "and yet it is still a full global hectare beyond the one-planet threshold."

Clearly, a major change in everyone's lifestyle is needed, but that can never be accomplished without action from all levels of government to support change. Another big part of the footprint of city dwellers is their share of the ecological footprint that results from activities that are provincial or national in scope, such as the ecological impact of the Canadian military. Things such as demilitarization, switching to preventive health care (the current health care industry has a huge ecological footprint), and reducing "perverse subsidies" to fossil fuel industries are all necessary steps to reducing our footprint, but are beyond the scope of municipalities.

Another challenge involves advancing a paradigm of sufficiency, meaning a shared social commitment to consuming enough for a good life but not so much that total use exceeds biophysical limits. And that calls for another challenging shift in the status quo.

Read more: <http://www.thestarphoenix.com/health/Moving+Saskatoon+planet+living/8442536/story.html#ixzz2UbTeoWhW>