

Treading Lightly toward Calgary's Future

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It is often said that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. Eugene O'Neil famously observed that there is no present or future, only the past, happening over and over again, now. I was reminded of this when I read the editorial, "Bigger pie, bigger footprint", in these pages on October 12. The editorial takes issue with recent work sponsored by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) that seeks to measure the ecological footprint (the cumulative resources necessary to support each citizen) of 20 Canadian cities. At nearly 10 hectares per person, Calgary exceeds the Canadian average of 7.25. The editorial defends the status quo arguing that while Calgary is an economic engine that consumes a lot of resources, it "bakes a bigger pie" for more people to eat. Further, and perhaps most crucially, it is asserted that to reduce the city's footprint it is necessary to "kill growth". This assertion misses two important points about the metaphor of the footprint. First, it is less about shaming us for our resource consumption and more about sparking innovation in how we think about, measure and improve our economic, social and environmental performance. Second, reductions in a city's footprint do not mean a drop in welfare. In fact, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests the opposite may be true.

With respect to the first point, it is becoming increasingly clear that conventional measures of wealth or well-being mask some important facts. For example, a 2001 study by the Pembina Institute found that despite steady GDP growth in Alberta since 1982, average real disposable income and real weekly wages, adjusted for inflation, remained virtually unchanged. Meantime, per capita taxes increased nearly 500% since 1961, and household debt now exceeds disposable income. Maybe those pies aren't so big after all? Maybe we need a better analytical frame to contain more of the costs and benefits of our current growth path?

With respect to the second point, two different national surveys recently found that the most unhappy Canadians live in cities where income is highest. Proof again that as a measure of overall well-being, economic growth and income alone are poor benchmarks.

So, how to move forward? Calgary needs to resist the seduction of easy measures of wealth such as GDP or income because they lead us into what Ronald Wright artfully calls "progress traps". He makes this point beautifully in his 2004 Massey Lectures: "A small village on good land beside a river is a good idea; but when the village grows into a city and paves over the good land, it becomes a bad idea. While prevention might have been easy, a cure may be impossible – a city isn't easily moved." When an economy grows beyond a certain threshold the additional benefits of growth are often exceeded by costs that aren't seen or counted until it's too late. As a result, it is instructive to supplement traditional measures of wealth with such things as the costs of crime, family breakdown, resource depletion and pollution. These "genuine progress" measures strive to offer a more complete picture of well-being. Footprint studies such as the one sponsored by FCM are useful as a guide to city activities that are big resource consumers or sinks – and that represent opportunities for innovation and improvement. And so it is that Calgary shouldn't be defensive about its footprint. The FCM has done the city a service by establishing a baseline. The can-do attitude that distinguishes so many of the people and institutions in the city can now take over. This is *not* about Calgary becoming less productive or doing without. It *is* about finding newer and better ways of delivering the services that Calgarians need. Novel partnerships between industry, academia and the NGO community could quickly lead to ideas that speed the replacement of coal-fired generators (a key contributor to the city's footprint) with more benign forms of energy. Individual organizations headquartered in Calgary such as Suncor are already skilled in this type of innovation.

At the close of the nineteenth century, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* described how wealthy Londoners felt they had to demonstrate their wealth through conspicuous consumption. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we have come a long way toward understanding the consequences of our consumption choices – partly through the use of tools such as the

ecological footprint. Calgary should use the FCM study to broaden its vision from a primary focus on the size of the pie to a more holistic view of the ways in which that pie is baked, and might be baked in the future. Now that's a recipe for real success.

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