



Transcript of Plain Language Podcast: Climate Change and the Residential Development Industry in Ottawa

[Sound up of a busy urban street]

The scientific community has reached a clear consensus regarding climate change: Humans are altering the environment, and these alterations are endangering us – especially in cities, where 80% of Canadians now live. Multiple sources, from the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (known as the IPCC) to independent research institutes to Canadian government sources all concur that Ottawa is in for a rough climate ride. Dangers from changing regional weather patterns include an increase in flooding [sound of hail], dramatic freeze-thaw cycles and ice storms in the winter, and heat events in the summer.

Conversely, cities contribute to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions, mostly from transportation and electricity use – both of which are directly tied to urban form. In other words, low-density development and the corresponding need to commute long distances result in increased levels of the pollutants that cause climate change. The city of Ottawa and, indeed, all levels of government in Canada – municipalities, provinces and the federal government – clearly state in their policy documents that cities must become denser and stop sprawling into farmland on the outskirts of urban areas.

However, there is a hitch. We Canadians love our large single-detached suburban houses, and the development industry has prospered for decades supplying this type of residential urban form. Despite government rhetoric, and rising energy costs and greenhouse gas emissions, Ottawa keeps expanding into low-density suburbs.

Judging by the urgent debates about climate change, it is time to ask some critical questions about the way we manage population growth in Ottawa. If single-detached, low-rise housing in commuter suburbs is considered the least efficient and most carbon-intensive urban form in North America (due to vehicle and building energy consumption), why do we keep building this way? Will this type of urban form become prohibitively expensive to the City and taxpayers? If weather increasingly impacts on construction, who will pay the added costs? Are Ottawa taxpayers and the building industry aware of (and planning for) the projected toll climate change will take on infrastructure like bridges, sewers and emergency services? What are the impacts of increasing insurance premiums on high-risk urban form? Will farmland near cities become more valuable as costs rise for imported food? Is the residential development industry aware of the economic, environmental and social risks to an apparently outdated model of urban development?

[Sound up of construction tools]

And this last question about the building industry is at the heart of the paper. Residential development is one of the largest and most diverse economic sectors in Canada. The sector includes real estate professionals, infrastructure contractors, various trades and planning professionals, building material suppliers, trucking companies, legal and insurance professionals, mortgage lenders and so on. The sector has generated jobs, taxes and enormous profits for decades from a rigid business model. Given that housing is also directly tied to cars and other “consumer durables”, it’s easy to see that there’s a lot invested in business-as-usual. In fact, the sector is largely silent on environmental issues except when it resists government attempts to regulate sprawl and/or cut greenhouse gas emissions.



In sum, Ottawa's severe climate has always made it tough for builders working outside on the thousands of housing units that we construct per year here. Climate projections for the region suggest that conditions for builders will become even more challenging with increasing freeze-thaw ice and rain events. And legislators are determined to take steps to fight and adapt to climate change through taxes on carbon and by forcing denser urban development. It remains to be seen how weather and regulatory changes will affect housing costs and Ottawa's urban form. Will the development industry adapt, or will the industry continue to resist transitioning into a new environment?

[Sound up of busy urban street]

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