



Great cities are affordable and original

**By Heather Douglas, President & CEO, The Calgary Chamber of Commerce
As published in The Calgary Herald, Thursday, May 1, 2008**

Imagine, for a moment, a clan of ancient humans camped at the intersection of the Bow and Elbow Rivers, warming their bodies around a fire and debating the future. One wit suggests their descendents would develop a macabre society, cookie-cutter in its identity and blandness.

Perhaps, a wise sage speculates, humans would reproduce themselves in identical patterns. Maybe, proposes another, most work would be done on machines running on the same operating systems. After much laughter a cheeky youngster suggested his descendants would dine at places where people passed food out a window into the arms of the buying public. Imagine the hilarity when a perceptive teenager proposed a great settlement where everyone lived in duplicated houses and shopped in similar commercial corridors.

The wise sage told everyone to go settle down because they getting silly. "No one in their right mind will do anything that bizarre." Everyone slept easily.

Or did they? Today we have human embryonic cloning, fast-food restaurants, identical subdivisions, indistinguishable suburbs, distressingly similar malls, and everything is fed through transportation utility corridors bringing in cars, electricity, water, sewage, and satellite connections. Welcome to the 21st century.

In the Calgary Chamber of Commerce's quest to help transform Calgary into one of the great global cities, our membership is keen to help City Hall and the development industry build communities, office towers, arts and cultural centres, and sports facilities that will attract and retain the world's brightest and most talented.

We're selfish, we admit. The Chamber's membership needs these workers to contribute to the city's economic growth and prosperity. Many potential employees are young and just launching their careers. They want affordable housing in interesting (non-cloned) neighbourhoods. With average house prices at \$385,000 these recruits need yearly salaries of \$83,000 to become proud homeowners. The average Calgarian earns \$67,000.

This week the Calgary Chamber of Commerce released its first major policy research study on Calgary's affordable housing challenges.

"The transformation to high-density, mixed-use, walk able and transit-oriented forms of development," the study states, "involves significant time and risk to both the city and developers."

Developers have piloted two innovative communities - Garrison Woods and Mackenzie Towne - and buyers flocked to those areas to live. They were successful because the City and the developers were committed to making them succeed. We applaud them for their efforts.

To foster this spirit of cooperation, the Chamber makes several recommendations:



- The mayor and Council gives their planners clear policy directions to work with developers and ensure each project is sustainable, reasonably priced, and distinctive so Calgarians live and work in communities they are proud of.
- The City streamlines the land use policy into an omnibus document, we suggest the catchy title of Municipal Development Plan, so no one has to search through 40 to 50 policy documents to understand the approval process and requirements.
- The City incorporates a variety of alternative design standards, similar to Europe (and like those developed for Garrison Woods and Mackenzie Towne) into its standard specification books to provide more diversity and options for prospective buyers.
- The City ensures there is sufficient and accessible transit infrastructure to encourage people to leave their cars at home.
- The developers include community consultation in their timelines to engage citizens, listen to their concerns and make design changes, where appropriate. Many excellent applications are bogged down because of a vocal minority.
- The Council continues to treat each zoning approval application with a balanced, what is best for the entire city approach. We commend the alderman on making decisions based on a defensible, principled, effective and consistent framework.

Calgary is such a young, vibrant city. We don't have to settle for a bland, cookie-cutter look to our skyline. We have the ability to bring design, creativity, and fun into our suburban neighbourhoods, workplaces, and green spaces. Surely we can attract the best and brightest when we are committed to building affordable housing.

As the campfire burned from embers to ashes, our ancestors did sleep easily. They knew their descendants had the ability to build the floodplain at the confluence of the Bow and Elbow rivers into a truly great city.