

**CLIMATE CHANGE + COMMUNITIES: A CALL TO ACTION**

Annual Conference of the Canadian Institute of Planners – October 2-6, 2010 – Montreal, Quebec

Presentation Notes for the Closing Keynote Address by Larry Beasley, C.M.

“Putting Words into Action: Setting an Agenda for Planners + Climate Change”

We have had an extraordinary 5 days here in this beautiful city of Montreal – even if it has forced us to come face to face with the ugly reality of climate change.

-On behalf of us all I want to thank the Canadian Institute of Planners for having the insight and courage to bring this topic to the forefront:

-In this conference;

-In your strong and important initiative of declaring a clear policy on climate change for our governments and citizens and all the world to see; and,

-In your “Call to Action” that was issued this morning.

-I join everyone here in being honoured to be a member of CIP today because of what you are doing on our behalf and how you are positioning our profession on this topic.

You know, we are out there in the public and private sectors, noses to the grindstone, as professional planners coping with the issues that hit us every day, generally not able to have the big picture and not taking the big stand. You have done that for us. For once, we are truly ahead of the curve, not behind trying to catch up, thanks to your leadership.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to ask you to give a round of applause to our President, Marni Cappe and the Board of CIP and the Presidents and Boards over the last five years – and people like Fellows Beate Bowron and Gary Davidson – for this remarkable leadership on climate change.

And I want to offer a special acknowledgement to the organizers of this conference from here in Montreal and from across the country, and especially to the program chairs, David Witty and Thomas Duchaine and their committee for an absolutely top notch program. Let's give them also a round of applause.

I've heard it said that this topic is not one that would draw the general interest of our membership; that it's kind of a "special interest" topic. But I can say without hesitation

that this has been the most fascinating, educational and vital conference that we have had in many years – and that is saying something because the CIP conferences I have attended have always been really good. And I will argue today that the theme of this conference goes to the heart of the work of every planner in this country – and if it does not do so, they are not doing the work that planners should be doing in this country.

Now, I've been asked to reflect on the discussion of this conference and set out what I see as the agenda for planners to address climate change. The "Call to Action" and the "Global Communique" set a good pace for me.

But I have to admit, it is quite difficult to be a keynote speaker at this conference because the bar has been set so

high – Wade Davis and Jan Gehl and Chantal Hebert were just sensational.

Let me start by saying that I think people have reacted as positively as I have because this conference has struck a special chord of *anxiety* that many of us are feeling.

-On the one hand, we are more and more aware of the “inconvenient truth” that has become absolutely undeniable because it is starting to affect us regularly. The earth is heating up, the climate is shifting, our ambient environment is changing and will continue to do so, no matter what we do over the next while, and this will change everything from our economy to our social relations to our day-to-day experience. This is the message of the scientists, people like Bill Rees and David Brown and Andrew Weaver. The research

will go on and we have to connect that research to policy and decision makers and action. But I think we can say that it is really only among the “idiot fringe”, as Andrew Weaver so hilariously showed, that this issue is now in any kind of debate.

-On the other hand, our anxiety is peaking because many of us have not been able to do something about climate change because of a lack of knowledge and tools and examples and inspiration. At first glance, this isn't the normal stuff of land-use planning, which is our core reference. We haven't had the story or the facts at our fingertips, which is essential in the political world that we work in, if we are to make sense and be listened to.

Well, this conference has given us that. It is something we have truly needed. And to me, of everything, one of the most useful events was the two-day workshop on Friday and Saturday on how to position or communities to cope with climate change. If you were not lucky enough to get in on this session, I highly recommend that you go to the CIP website or call the office or somehow get the handbook. Or, better yet, make sure CIP brings this to your town because it is something that every single one of us and also our politicians really must go through.

It's worth pausing to talk about the Workshop because it sets the frame for everything else I want to talk about today.

The Workshop identified that there are two sides to the strategy to deal with climate change: mitigation and

adaptation. And while it makes the point that every community has to determine its own impacts, negatively and positively, and its own plan to cope, the Workshop went over a very helpful listing of mitigation measures and adaptation measures that really focus on action.

The six-step process that CIP has put together is very compelling and very logical. Every town and city can make it happen. It's the classic planning process: you get started with a political resolution; you get specific on how climate will change where you are; you scope impacts; you do risk assessment and prioritize impacts; you identify and assess adaptation options in the form of a plan; and then you implement and monitor the plan.

Sound familiar? It should do because that is the planning process we all know and it is the planning process that we can apply from experience.

The Workshop and handbook acknowledge, and I would like to acknowledge, the cutting edge work, for big cities, of the City of Toronto and, for smaller communities, of the Town of Kimberley and District of Elkfort, B.C.

The bottom line of all this is that while more than 200 municipal authorities in Canada have committed to acting on climate change, this still has to be brought to ground all over our country as a priority in every town and city and rural district – we need policies and plans and local action everywhere to prepare ourselves for the future – and you have to take home with you a strong commitment to start that process in your community.

That Workshop was a sharp way to open the conference and looking at where we go from here, I am very optimistic that the adaptation agenda will take off. We

are a careful and prudent people and adaptation is a prudent thing to do. We will retrofit our infrastructure. We will introduce health support programs and disease prevention programs. We will upgrade emergency preparedness and support for those at risk. We will deal with the water stresses and the agricultural shifts. This is government at its best and we have a tradition of rising to the occasion as long as you go home and tell the story well and lead your communities well. We will adapt – and for me that is a good response – but it is also just a basic response.

And that’s because I like what Andrew Weaver had to say. He asked “what are we going to adapt to if we don’t mitigate?” He said “adaptation makes no sense without a mitigation strategy”. The fact is that ultimately they go together. So, I want to talk about the mitigation agenda.

Presented in the CanU meeting attached to this conference was some analysis by David Gordon that I have found very useful because it helped me unpack the problems we face with mitigation of climate change, even in the face of all the government declarations in support of Kyoto.

David Gordon has analysed the state of urbanism in our country. Now, I will undoubtedly trot heavily over the subtlety of his findings (David, I apologize for that), but in essence, he shows us that about 13% of us live in the country, about 20% of us live in core cities, and a full 67% of us live in the suburbs. At the scale of 2/3rds of our citizens, we are a *suburban nation*. That is the biggest urban reality of Canada.

Now, we all know that a significant part of our climate change mitigation problem rests with revamping our utility infrastructure into community-based, sustainable forms and reforming our building practices for true green performance. I'm quite confident that, with your efforts, we will make progress on these fronts because these are the parts of urbanism that governments can control. The rest of the urban problem is about transportation that is greenhouse gas neutral – which is almost everything other than the car. This is about alternative transportation modes but also the very structure of our urban formations. This conference has highlighted what we already know, which is that our cities are a big part of our problem and, seemingly some quite simple and obvious principles, operationalized, could shift us into the right direction.

To get at those measures and to understand how best to move forward, let's look back at how our suburban nation came about. How did this all happen?

We all know that the shift to the suburbs got wildly underway just after the War, when people fled from the old, often quite unpleasant city areas and when this was all made possible by a vast increase in car ownership and use – to put this in the lingo of Christopher Leinberger of the Brookings Institute, when we went from “walking” communities to “driving” communities.

Of course, the forensics for this is really obvious. Most Canadians feel the suburbs made their dreams come true. Suburban urban patterns are very spacious – everything uses more space than in the traditional city. Streets are wider, home lots are bigger and houses are bigger, parks

are more common and more spread out, school yards and parks are separated, and retail is generally offered in malls and commercial strips that provide only surface parking so they are much more sprawling. From the dank tightness of the traditional city, people said they wanted more space and that's what we gave them. But there was also a bucolic image that people said they wanted, what I call a "rural mystique", that came into play, so the layout of new areas was very organic, which was characterized by mostly cul-de-sacs and curvy linear greenways; leaving out such features as back lanes and even sidewalks. It was often seen as a benefit that nothing connected with anything else, which was, of course, at that time the romanticized view of the country landscape. And all may have seemed fine, but what happened was that origins and destinations became further and further apart in distance and in time to the point that they are now generally beyond the typical human capacity and

inclination to walk. But, of course, the car became more and more available – less expensive and more plentiful with fuel cheaper than bottled water – so this one obvious glitch in the modern scenario, lack of walkability, could simply be ignored. What the suburbs had and continue to offer in most peoples’ minds, in a word, is “liveability”.

The contrast with the traditional urban patterns could not be more vivid. The traditional city, although it was often shabby and dirty and crowded and dangerous, had everything close together and very inter-connected. It included several qualities that I want to list because I will come back to these later. It had density and a mix of uses and general diversity. It also had a very fine-grained network of public ways, streets and lanes and smaller open spaces, which were all carefully connected. It didn’t accommodate the car very well (and, frankly, still doesn’t) because it was so crowded. For the shorter trips,

you walked. And then, as these cities got bigger in the 19th century, for the longer trips, collective transport was offered, in the form of trams and then buses and rapid transit. In a word, the thing that the traditional city had was “proximity”, something that no one quite realized the importance of until, in our contemporary suburbs, it was gone.

The bottom line of this story, is that these two trends throughout the western world set up the perfect storm for all the pollution and greenhouse gas emissions that are a major part of the challenge we face. And it is not a big stretch to realize that we have to reconcile that contradiction between *proximity* and *quality* as quickly as possible, both in our core cities and in our far-flung suburbs. This takes two programs of change: one is to draw people back to live in a quality city and the other is to bring proximity to the suburbs.

So let's look quickly at our performance in recent years.

This conference has shown us in clear terms that progress is being made in the urban centres right across our country, in both big and modest sized cities. The CanU day over at the Biosphere, which I mentioned before, organized by the Council for Canadian Urbanism, a new group that many of you may want to pay close attention to, was very informative about the innovations underway across the land.

-The public realm improvements here in Montreal and in Halifax and in many other communities are sensational. Renee Daoust's work with the Quartier Spectacular and the Financial District is sensational. The proactive economic development schemes like

we see for Fredericton city centre are totally “with it”.

-The repopulation trends in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Calgary, Ottawa, Edmonton and Halifax, just to name a few that I have seen showcased this week, are pretty much unstoppable, even with the economic downturn. We now have a lot of great home-grown Canadian models to use as examples because of the progress in urban design that we have made over the last decade. The demographic trends are helping us and the planning, architectural and urban design prowess is helping us by putting the big emphasis back on quality.

-These trends have to be extended to many other cores in our country, in Regina and London and

Fredericton and we all have to support the planners in those cities as they develop their own strategies.

-We have a long way to go in all our core cities, there are many issues, but overall, I feel confident we will push that 20% quotient over the next few years, which will be all to the good.

Surprisingly, this conference has also made me optimistic about the smaller communities in this country.

-A thrilling moment for me was to hear the inspirational story of the little village of Eden Mills, Ontario, which has declared its intention to become the first carbon neutral village in North America. It's the classic case of the "little village that could" as the

story goes. To me two of the big heroes of this week are Charles Simon and Libby Little, the two people who are making this real in the most practical of ways with volunteers and sensible thinking and, as they say, “doing rather than talking”. I think Mr. Simon is here and I would suggest that every small community connect up with his work.

-Eleanor Mohammed, in the Climate Change Workshop talked about the strategy in the small communities being what she called “stelp planning”, which is about tucking the right policies into the regular policy work on a quiet basis and using the community development techniques beyond policy and regulation that work so well in a community where people really know one another.

-And if others do follow the lead of Eden Mills and Kimberly, then the 13% of our population might not grow but it will certainly go green, and that will be all to the good.

What we are left with is this [image of suburban sprawl]. I dare say, this is the real “inconvenient truth” for Canada and climate change. This has been the “elephant in the room” in all the discussions of this conference. In my view, this is our biggest challenge, as planners in Canada today: the shape and nature of our suburbs. This is where the battle against greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate climate change has to be fought and won. Now, I am not going to tell you where these particular pictures are from. It does not matter. They could have been taken in any city in our country, adding or subtracting a few trees and a little topography. They are metaphorical – but they make my point. We are going to have to make the re-invention

of our suburbs the grand national mission of this profession over the next generation if we really want to affect climate change. This is perhaps the biggest call to action that I want to make today. This is the call that must match our commitment to climate change adaptation.

This is where two-thirds of us live and two-thirds of us will continue to live for the foreseeable future. But, I am sorry to say that there are not a lot of solutions out there for re-inventing this huge majority of our country's cityscape.

But I think we are going to have to be careful about how we do this. This cannot be a struggle to disavow the suburbs and suburban life. This cannot be about bad-mouthing the suburbs. This has got to be a struggle about

realizing a new potential of suburban life that is consistent with smart growth, that brings much higher levels of proximity and the other urban qualities that I have described, and that will be sustainable over the long run. And, by the way, this will be a lifestyle that will also be more healthy, create new economic development potential and foster the kind of ambient vitality that engenders a fuller social life. These are the birds that Jan Gehl kept trying to hit with his one stone. We are now seeing the vectors of smart growth coming together for progress on all these fronts – which for me is a point of optimism and excitement. Let's keep them in mind: intensification, mixed use, diversity, connectivity, placemaking, collective mobility, walkability, and the organization of daily life into community units.

Yes, we must certainly target the natural “urbanite” for whom the sustainable life choice will be a spontaneous

one, even if they do not want to move to the urban core. So the moves for transit-oriented development centres and housing over shops along the commuter corridors, that people like Patrick Condon advocate for suburban transformation, and the connection of town centres by rapid transit, these will all be smart moves. I am convinced that the art to make this work will be to find a mid-scale for these places that fits more comfortably into the low-scaled setting around them and are appealing to more people than the high scale buildings of the core cities. Toronto is breaking ground on this in their corridor schemes and Vancouver is consolidating the shophouse form in modern guise, even over the big boxes, but we need much more invention for a rich array of suitable interventions.

But you know and I know that most people have chosen the suburbs because the frenetic lifestyle is just not for

them, the services were not right for their families, they just felt too many risks. They have fled the city for a reason. But, you know, we speculate about this because we actually have very little systematic understanding of what their aspirations and foibles are really about. And we've not really put our creative powers to what suburban living conditions that would also meet the test of sustainability might be desirable to these people – and what they might look like.

The fact is that we haven't been designing these places from the point of view of preferred living conditions for as long as anyone can remember. These communities have been laid out by rout. We've been in a deep rut that has been set by: road and street design standards from the 1950's; subdivision lot standards and patterns from the 1950's; exclusionary residential zoning from the 1950's that keep these places sterile; and corporate building

standards from the 1950's, expanded more recently into the big box formats that we have been told are the bottom line requirement for retail development in our community. In fact, once we set the land-use allocations, planners all too often have not actually been too involved in the physical shape of these places.

I hope you remember that in the space of time that I will talk here this morning, the unsustainable urbanism will be expanded – Subdivision Approving Officers all over this country will approve perhaps 50 more subdivisions based on all those old standards and requirements. And many planners have told me that they clearly understand that these are not sustainable forms that lead to sustainable patterns but they are very hard to avoid. They remind me that they manage land-use but not the other key features that make up the totality of suburbia – the streets, the utilities, the shopping malls. I often hear the view that it

is easy in the high-value circumstance of the metropolitan core to be creative, to provide the bespoke solutions, but very much harder out in the low-value circumstance of the urban edge. And that is where the collective brain power of CIP and the resources of CIP and the collaborative potential of CIP come into play. We have to take the kind of leadership in this work that we are now taking on the adaptation side of the equation.

There are two thrusts that have to be on our agenda. I believe in the beauty of small moves that become pervasive over time.

First, as we continue to expand into new greenfield sites, we have to get the basic patterns right from the beginning. I said the other day that we could start with a ritual burning of all the old standards and codes and just

throwing those crazy transportation models in the trash, but, of course, that was a symbolic statement because we have to have something to put in their place. I think we can take a cue from what the Americans are doing in drafting new sustainable urban standards and codes and calibrating the transportation models for human objectives and CIP could take the leadership in this. For example, I think we can be inspired by those wonderful pre-1930's inner suburbs that exist in every one of our cities, where all the standards were more humane, where maturity has brought effective patterns of diversity and where the social networks show us how community action and self-help can be engendered by neighbourhood form. We have to take this back from the engineers and other special interest professionals that have controlled this for too long. I was glad to see Pam Goldsmith-Jones, the Mayor of West Vancouver here and I know she would testify that if we offer politicians new models that are

compelling and that they can have confidence in, they will sponsor them through the political process.

But, in one of the sessions I was in, someone made the point that even if we started building our cities correctly from this moment on, because we only add about 1% to the urban mass per year, it would still take too long given the projections of climate change that we have been shown. Their point was that a more urgent job is to retrofit what we already have – and I think this has to be the second big thrust on our agenda.

On this front we need a huge national creative effort to invent the infill schemes that will add the missing aspects for sustainable suburbanism at the scale that suburban people will tolerate. As a start, I'm thinking of the easy moves such as legalizing secondary suites and rear yard

or laneway housing and micro-lot subdivisions and row houses and live/work opportunities and work places over shops – Brent Toderian calls this “invisible density”, “hidden density” and “gentle density”; it’s the game of moving from the 5 units per acre to the 30 units per acre that Jack Diamond told us is the threshold workable density for sustainable urban structure and movement. I know from some groundbreaking work done recently in Vancouver that there are many models and many variations of infill that have to be brought forward through a rich community process and then regularized in our planning and in our regulations. We have to fold in the connective tissue in the form of pedestrian upgrades and bike ways and a better bus system and links to rapid transit and re-connecting the road grid. And none of this necessarily requires big demolition or displacement or neighbourhood de-stabilization – and it could even offer the profits to sitting residents. This will take types of

plans and new flexible regulations and fluid policies that will test our will as planners. As Pamela Robinson said in her talk on Sunday, “planning needs to be more agile and less anal retentive” and I think she has a point.

But, you know, there is another contradiction in all of this that we also must tackle – or I suspect the rest will just be all talk among planners, among the converted. We have to ask the hard question. Is the public really with us in all of this? Will they change their life patterns and habits to do what needs to be done to achieve the kind of ecological footprint that is necessary?

I often hear planners say, “Well, people are simply going to have to do things differently in the future – they will have no choice” – they usually then add, “...especially as oil prices peak”. But is that really true? After all, we live

in a free society with guaranteed personal freedoms – people will *listen* but they can *do* whatever they want to. And people are wealthier than they have ever been so they are able to buy whatever pleasures and luxuries that they desire.

We have to face that the kind of city that we like to talk about – one that has those sustainable qualities, at whatever scale – that kind of city has so far not proven to be popular among the great majority of Canadians. As one sardonic Canadian mayor has said: “The only thing the public hates more than sprawl is intensification”.

Let’s be blunt: most people hate density because most of it has been so bad; they think of mixed use as probably hitting them negatively and diversity as unsafe and transit is not even in most peoples’ vocabulary and when they try it, it is often not very comfortable or convenient.

Let's do a little survey to illustrate what I am talking about. Raise your hand if the following questions apply to you. How many of you live in medium or high density housing? In a mixed use building? With low income people right next door? How many of you travel every day by transit? I won't even ask how many drive more than 30 minutes to work or how many live in a single family home or, that biggest question for all Canadians, how many drive an SUV. I hope I make my point. Even we – and I include myself here – we, who are avowed as the most committed in our society to a sustainable future, are often in a state of personal contradiction between our theories and our consumer practices. So what can we expect of the average person?

But I also have to say that, to some degree, I understand the consumer at this point – I sympathize with the average person's predicament – because the communities we have

been building since the War seem to trade off the “dream” as the density increases. It is offered as the “consolation prize” of life and it often has been just that.

We have to change that – and I think we can change that by going back to the basics of what people want and need out of city life. That was Jan Gehl’s prime message – “the people scale seen at eye level and at 5 km/hr”. Some of you will know that I call this “Experiential Planning” – Jan called it the making of “people cities” rather than “shit”. This is learning about and then carefully designing the community to deliver the direct tangible experiences that people tell us they want in their lives and for their families and children every day. These become the atoms – the fragments – from which the urban pattern is built up in layer upon layer. My hypothesis is that we can build up a desirable and preferred experience for them in a sustainable package.

This has two fundamental aspects. First, it takes a consumer focus to define what needs to be done in the creation of our towns and cities; and, second, it takes a physical urban design focus at a basic level to realize those consumer hopes and expectations in a sustainable form.

Who is better qualified to lead that kind of inquiry than planners? We know how to help people dream. We have a long tradition of public engagement and we know how to use engagement to teach and motivate and not just to collect attitudinal information. We also know how to put public accords into local action and then how to manage the unfolding of change over time to achieve the results that the community has dreamed about.

We talk about over consumption and unsustainable consumption but we forget that most people feel they only get one chance in this life and there is always a degree of personal fulfillment in the choices they make. So I would dare to suggest that we have to create attractive options for a sustainable lifestyle in the way we shape our communities and we have to help people see the personal fulfillment in a sustainable lifestyle not only because it is good for the world and good for their children but also because it has become something they genuinely prefer and will buy in the market and vote for at the polls. And that is my other call to action today.

So my agenda for us is first to attack the obsolete suburban models but on terms that suburbanites can relate to; and, second, to build green urban products at all scales that we know people will freely select because we have worked closely with them to confirm those urban products.

And then we have to remember one final thing. We have to remember that the world is looking to us for answers and we hold a special responsibility to find answers. As Fatamata Dia Toure as well as Wade Davis, in his hauntingly beautiful lecture, told us, “we are in this world together”. Or as Bill Rees put it more bluntly, “when the titanic sinks the first class deck goes down just as fast as the steerage decks”. There is a whole world out there that does not participate in the greenhouse gas emissions but is certainly going to have to live with the results. And this is a world with the least resources to cope. But even beyond that, my experience around the world has shown me that people in emerging societies still look to the developed world for models – there is no doubt that they often want what we Westerners have and take for granted. Sometimes I lament that they aspire to what we despise but that doesn’t change the fact that, for good or ill, we set

a world pace. And I think we can generate the positive models just as easily as we have generated the negative ones. So our call to action today is not only a call in the interests of our people, it is a call that is relevant to people all over the world.

Let me close by echoing something that was best said by Andrew Weaver but was also stated by many others throughout this conference. He said he had given up on senior governments anywhere in the world doing the right thing, and that, instead, he put his faith in local governments and in grass roots action to lead the way. Chantel Hebert told us straight up that climate change is not even on our Canadian government's agenda. Sadly, I think they are totally right. Over 20 years we have heard endless talk and endless declarations but the greenhouse gas emissions have simply gotten worse.

One delegate yesterday morning came to the mike and said, “it was pretty bleak coming in this morning” and I can see his point. But, you know, one person’s problem is another person’s opportunity. This imperative of municipal government leadership and direct citizen leadership thrusts the planning profession right to the centre of the action in staking out our future. Our fundamental home base is local government either directly as public servants or as advisors. So the agenda for managing and mitigating climate change will need all our attention and we will all definitely be called on to help, whether you are a sustainability planner, a policy planner, a regional planner, a community planner, a zoning planner, a development review specialist, a subdivision officer, a cultural planner, an urban designer or a community organizer.

The fact is that the new sustainable world is going to be a challenge for many of our people. Our job is to take apart the suburbs and put them back together again in a sustainable form. Our job is to take apart public attitudes about suburban life and put them back together in a sustainable form. Our job is to convene the discussions that get the issues on the table and dealt with, to offer totally new solutions and to build constituencies with vision that every citizen can understand and endorse. We don't need leadership from the top, we can't wait; let's be part of leadership from the bottom.

Thank you.