

Sewell says suburbs subvert conservation and privacy

By AGNES KRUCHIO

Suburbs are inefficient, expensive, waste energy and only serve to enrich big developers, Alderman John Sewell told a symposium on suburbia sponsored by the York urban affairs department last week.

"Only some five per cent of the people can afford to buy suburban houses," Sewell said. The alderman for Ward 7 has developed a reputation as opponent of development in the late 60s and early 70s through controversies such as one in Trefann Court.

"Anything only 5 per cent of the population can afford, we should scrap," he declared.

Suburbs waste energy because things are far apart and suburbs "make you travel all over for the simplest of things". Moreover, he said, because houses are as few as 7 per acre, they do not help insulate each other, and there is much energy wasted through heat loss. The low density also causes long stretches of roads and sewers to be installed, again, wasting energy.

"If you want to save energy," Sewell said, "don't build a suburb. They are bad."

There is much wasted land in suburbia, said Sewell. He used York as an example of what he found wrong with planning for the suburbs. "York is the perfect suburban development," he said. "Buildings are far apart, there is grass between buildings that you have to hire someone to cut (it's not attractive or functional grass) and it is not a pleasant place."

He quipped, "I hear people here get driven to the parking lot." "From any reasonable point of view, suburbs don't work," Sewell asserted. According to Sewell, the ideal city is the one before 1945, before the onset of suburban expansion and the widespread advent of the automobile. Cities were more compact then, making it easier for people to get around. The first real suburb in Canada was built only in 1952. E.P. Taylor decided to buy some 2,000 acres of pasture on the northeast end of the city and created

Don Mills. The success of Don Mills created a trend to more and more suburban developments. There is a myth fashionable among town planners, Sewell said, which is called 'decentralization'. This said Sewell, means that office centres will spring up in the suburbs.

"What it says, is," Sewell said, "that you have a suburban area with relatively low density and somehow, in the middle of it, you put a centre of employment... and suddenly you have a place where things are happening."

But according to Sewell, this will never happen. Cities have historically developed in areas where something, such as a cross roads, was already happening. "Other people then want to get in on the act," said Sewell, "and there is a city."

Decentralization will not work, Sewell stated, because in the suburbs the density is simply too low to make anything happen artificially.

"There will never be any sparks flying at such low levels of intensity." Suburbs have a density of less than 30 people per acre, Sewell said, while the city of Toronto has

about 80.

According to Alderman Sewell, we shouldn't build any housing below a density of 80 people per acre.

Land speculation must go, he said as he outlined his plan for the city of the future.

"If you don't wipe out land speculation, you will never have cheap housing in a compact city where people can live comfortably," Sewell said.

He said developers currently buy land at \$10-11,000 an acre, then proceed to sell it for \$150,000. He wants the government to buy up land but only at the price the developers paid for it, plus the cost of maintaining the property.

And finally, he warned against people accepting the 'myth' that transit will solve all problems. "We simply can't afford cities that force large numbers of people to travel long distances every day, quickly" he warned.

Sewell spoke at the end of a day long series of lectures that attracted planners, architects, lawyers, representatives of developers and concerned citizens' groups. Tapes of the lectures are available in the urban studies department.



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