

How much space do we need?

by Ralph C. Martin

A Nova Scotian friend who lived for decades in Ontario, and of course will always be a blue noser, was back in Halifax to visit friends just before building a dream home near Guelph. She was struck by how much smaller and perfectly adequate the Halifax homes were in contrast to her planned baby palace, in rural Ontario. She called a halt to the process and went back to planning a more compact, affordable, and in the end, more pleasant place to live. She learned there is such a thing as too much floor space.

After publication of last month's article about Green Dots (development-free zones wherever there is class 1, 2 or 3 land i.e. dependable agricultural land or wherever there are ecologically important landscapes, such as wetlands) across Ontario, several people contacted me to offer suggestions. It is advisable to develop rust belt areas such as parts of Hamilton before considering rural areas between the Green Dots. If class 4, 5 and 6 land between the Green Dots is developed, then priority should be given to such places contiguous to rural hamlets, towns and built up areas to gain efficiency in providing services. Furthermore, any development should be subject to good planning policy and not a license to indulge in rural sprawl.

High density development along with urban growth boundaries was a consistent theme of responses. Some rural commentators were reluctant to welcome too many non-farmers and were proponents of high density development in cities to keep the countryside peaceful. Nevertheless, there is also a growing discomfort with excess square footage of rural houses on lots, large enough to feed a cow, that are instead used as a type of go cart range for luxury riding lawn mowers.

How much living space do we need? Increasingly this will become a public and political question rather than a personal prerogative. Green Dot land should be preserved to address pressure on yields as we venture into a future with variable weather patterns. Good planning policy may increasingly constrain building and lot sizes for single family homes in order to preserve dependable agricultural land and environmental services.

I've wondered for years why our houses also need to shelter cars, sometimes up to three or four. An old National Film Board movie shows Martians coming to Earth and assuming that cars are the reigning Earth species with subservient humans scrambling to polish, feed and then tuck them in at night. Surely, it isn't necessary to cement over soil and use energy to pamper cars in a warm enclosure.

The living space we need may be more a matter of adapting than showcasing. Smaller spaces for families (on average just a whisker over 2 people per household) might become quite comfortable if public spaces were designed with more walking/ski/snow shoe trails, benches in green spaces and/or bright greenhouse lounges, with salad vegetables and flowers, easily accessed during long winters (no need to travel south), and more swimming pools, gyms and sound-scaped kitchen party rooms, with readily available musical instruments.

In faith communities, congregations struggle to maintain large sanctuaries in historical buildings and to meet rising costs of heating. In many cases, there are also numerous rooms for teaching children, which are only used one hour per week.

The challenge of reducing maintenance and energy costs per religious attendee is a new opportunity for faith communities to lead. What would happen if two congregations in Guelph agreed to sell one of their buildings and to use only one building? They might still want to respect their different traditions and spiritual practices. Could it be that this is no more than a scheduling problem?

Perhaps one congregation could meet on Sunday mornings and the other could meet for weekly services at another time. They might agree to switch time slots every 6 months. Although the Sunday morning period is traditional for Christian churches, it is not necessarily sacred and some other faiths might at different times. The sanctuary could be scheduled for special events such as weddings and funerals of either congregation. With imagination and attention to detail, it might be possible for three or four congregations, or even more, to collaborate in the use of just one building.

Another approach is to rent school buildings which are not used on weekends. I heard one minister say "it's too hard to create a sacred space underneath a basketball net." Another suggested the extra effort of doing so may help us step more lightly in creation. Forgoing the

materials and energy required for a dedicated building, much of which is used only once per week, is also an act of reverence.

With our new awareness about preserving land and living within our energy, waste and greenhouse gas limits, it's time to explore new ways of appropriately meeting all our needs.

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