

# URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN A SLOW-GROWTH CITY: The Case of Winnipeg<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In North America, growth has long been the Holy Grail of city politics, for reasons that are not entirely frivolous. Since it is of the essence of city life, even more than of life generally, that change is constant, some growth is necessary to avoid decline. As some people or activities vacate a city, or part of a city, either something else must take their place, or decay sets in. A certain amount of growth, therefore, is essential to a city's well-being. But where does this desirable level of growth begin and end?

Growth has especially been associated with the right wing in city politics, both in Canada and the United States. Pro-growth sentiments, and the promotion of growth as a central concern, are virtually synonymous with the urban right wing, or at least the corporate right (Stone 1987)—the developers and other major local corporations that are such an influential element in North American city politics. However, an unconsidered acceptance of rapid growth has become common property at all points on the political spectrum.

In fact, deference to the god of rapid growth has become a virtual given in North American society, a sort of mass neurosis, in the sense that virtually everyone is in some way caught up in the belief that "the Big Apple"—New York, Toronto, Los Angeles, or the nearest metropolitan centre, wherever one happens to be—is deserving of obsessive attention.

The attention is not all favourable. Those who make their lives outside the metropole's realm often feel resentful of it, decrying it as a breeder of crime and false values, or maintaining that its administration and its residents are the favourites of the national or regional government, while perhaps simultaneously nurturing a sense of inferiority. But, whether the attention is favourable or unfavourable, it bespeaks an obsession with growth, a sense that it represents power, importance, legitimacy. Our objective in this study is to put that emotional baggage aside and try to think dispassionately about the differences between major cities and "lesser" centres.

Specifically, we want to establish a distinction between the characteristics of slow growth and those of rapid growth, and to think about the policies appropriate to each condition. Our argument is that our common obsession with rapid growth has lulled us into a failure to make that distinction, with the result that we tend everywhere in North America to follow urban policies appropriate to rapid growth—policies that are especially damaging to the health of slow-growth cities. Our discussion is primarily theoretical. While there is a great deal to be gained from a careful empirical study of a representative sample of the two types of cities, our purpose in this study is to undertake a preliminary exploration of a topic that has apparently been ignored altogether.

However, a theory is not useful if it does not refer to reality. In these pages, the concrete points of reference will take the

form of examples, primarily from Winnipeg, which is a reasonable example of a slow-growth city whose growth, we contend, has been flagrantly mismanaged thanks to the unthinking pursuit of fast-growth policies.

It has become a local cliché, of both the left and the right, that Winnipeg is a city in decline. Winnipeg's situation is probably more nearly the rule than the exception in North America. Edmonton is sometimes sarcastically referred to as "Deadmonton." Ham-

ilton's inner city is decaying, and the city is widely considered to be in decline, and Saint John has been struggling with decline for decades, indeed, for more than a century. More examples could easily be cited. In the United States, examples are even

easier to find: Detroit, Duluth, Omaha, Des Moines, Camden, New Jersey—the list goes on.

Without trying to generalize about all these examples—and referring now to Winnipeg—it is our contention that the decline, which is real enough, has nothing to do with any failure of needed growth. It is true, of course, that Winnipeg is becoming a less important centre in Canada because a number of other cities are growing faster, but to say that adds up to decline is to be hooked on growth. Metropolitan Winnipeg's population, for a long time, has been growing at about one per cent a year. For example, from 1986 to 1996, the population of the Winnipeg Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) grew from 625,304 to 667,209, a percentage change of 6.7 per cent, or less than one per cent a year (Statistics Canada 1986, 1996), and

the economy has been growing at a rate of perhaps two or three per cent.<sup>2</sup> For those who are not hooked on growth, that is not decline: it is a description of a metropolitan area that is steadily becoming wealthier, in the aggregate.

In what sense, then, is the decline real? It is the city of Winnipeg, and especially Winnipeg's inner city that is in decline, not the CMA. Population growth within the city limits crawls along at less than one per cent a year, while municipalities bordering the city are growing at rates at least twice as fast, and in some instances more than five times as fast. Until recently new housing starts within the city were about half of those in the CMA, despite the fact that much new municipal infrastructure remains underutilized, and older infrastructure is deteriorating at an alarming rate. Some of the most alarming deterioration becomes visible only when an automobile or truck plunges through a hole that suddenly opens up in the street. This has occurred several times in recent years, thanks to deteriorating sewer lines.

The visible inner city is deteriorating less spectacularly, but possibly even faster. Despite heroic efforts on the part of all three levels of government and the local business community, once-bustling Portage Avenue is now a problem area, and Selkirk Avenue, the former commercial heart of the North End, is moribund. Unoccupied retail premises are a common sight on Portage and are virtually ubiquitous on Selkirk.

There has been substantial housing deterioration in the inner city, and boarded-up residences are becoming an increasingly common sight in some of the worst neigh-

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bourhoods. Some neighbourhoods are beset by gangs. Much of the inner city has been red-lined by insurance companies, with the result that home-owners applying for insurance may be refused, or may be required to pay more than the standard premium.

It is our argument that the glaring disparity between the health of the metropolitan area as a whole and that of the inner city is a result of a set of growth policies based inappropriately on the premise of fast growth—a result of the fact that our obsession with growth makes it difficult to think about city development in any other terms. Our prescription is to accept slow growth as a reality and rethink our policies accordingly. Once we do, it becomes clear that slow growth has advantages, as we will see when we consider alternative policies for housing, infrastructure and services, economic development and immigration.

## Housing

One of the big advantages of slow growth is that it keeps housing prices down. It is a matter of common experience that the "hot" housing market that goes with fast growth—for example, in New York, Los Angeles, Toronto or Vancouver—tends to produce house prices that escalate more rapidly than they do in slow-growth centres. That is no problem for those who are capturing the top jobs, but it produces nightmares for the poor. A New Yorker trying to make a living as a cleaner or receptionist in one of the glass towers of Manhattan may be forced to choose between a long commute she cannot afford or residence amid warring gangs in a decaying neighbourhood. Others, unable to pay for any housing at all, find

themselves joining the ragged army of the homeless.

In other words, fast growth produces not only prosperity, but also poverty, and the cost of housing is an important reason for that. It is likely that the proportion of the homeless to the whole population is larger in a fast-growing city, although that point would be difficult to prove conclusively. Counts of the homeless are notoriously unreliable to begin with, and comparisons between different cities are trickier yet. For what it is worth, a comparison of slow-growth Winnipeg with the prosperous, burgeoning Pacific Rim city of Portland, Oregon (Leo 1996), bears out that impression and, in the process, confirms that slow growth has its advantages.

On the surface, Portland appears to have it all. It has the public transit system Winnipeg city officials have been dreaming of for years, but cannot afford, with downtown transit malls for buses and a rapidly-expanding light rail system. Aside from transit, the excellent condition of streets and public facilities, the quality, finish and design of downtown buildings, the preservation of heritage: all these speak of the prosperity that comes with economic growth.

The contrast with Winnipeg is striking. Developers are not clamouring to put up office towers, hotels and malls in the inner city. City Council finds it hard to say no to questionable development proposals, and to demands from prospective developers for public subsidies, while Portland's city government imposes daunting conditions, and cheerfully refuses proposals that are deemed unacceptable (Leo 1998). Winnipeg's streets have more potholes than those in Portland,

and there are more buildings boarded up downtown.

While much of this can be blamed on poor decision-making and gullibility, the reality is that many of the economic opportunities of the 1990s are less readily available to Winnipeg than to Portland, Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, and many other cities. But there is another side to the comparison.

A visitor to Portland from Winnipeg is bound to be struck by the numbers of homeless people wasting away on the benches in the well-kept parks, or aimlessly wheeling their shopping carts past the beautifully-finished buildings. There are homeless people in Winnipeg, too, many of them in shelters, some of them sleeping in garbage bins, even in the winter—an awesome comment on the will to survive. But the numbers of them are much smaller. That impression is confirmed by figures. According to Susan Emmons, director of the Northwest Pilot Project, a Portland housing advocacy group that has a reputation for careful documentation, some 1,700 people were homeless in Portland in the summer of 1995. That same summer, Darren Lezubski of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg estimated the numbers of homeless in Winnipeg at 200 to 300. If those figures are correct, metropolitan Portland, which has about twice the population of metropolitan Winnipeg, has perhaps three times as many homeless people per capita as Winnipeg.

It is no surprise that homelessness is a relatively manageable problem in a city where it is possible to buy a house on a relatively pleasant residential street for \$40,000 (Can.) or less, and where rents are similarly

affordable. The fact that housing costs are modest in a city where downtown housing is decaying yields a policy opportunity. Government incentives for the provision of decent lower-income housing do not come at a high price to the taxpayer, and they can bring the added benefit of stabilizing decaying neighbourhoods. In the process, a city that is not notable for its attractiveness to investors can become notable, instead, for its agreeable and humane social environment. Paradoxically, that, in turn, is a selling-point for potential investors.

It would be relatively easy for Winnipeg to make itself an exception to the rule that cutbacks in public spending bring with them the decimation of government-sponsored affordable housing programs. In 1995, the governments of Winnipeg and Manitoba spent some \$55 million (Can.) in a futile attempt to keep a major-league hockey team in town.<sup>3</sup> Supporters of this quixotic and financially ruinous venture repeated incessantly that the Winnipeg Jets put the city "on the map". A mere fraction of that expenditure would have accomplished a great deal in the provision of support and incentives for the creation and maintenance of affordable housing. Such a program could have made inroads on homelessness, revitalized decaying neighbourhoods and created jobs.

In the past, decision-makers have shown their awareness of these realities. Over the past two decades, a great deal of new housing has been developed in Winnipeg, and older housing renovated, some with the help of government grants and loans, some through private initiative, thanks to the much-criticized Winnipeg Core Area Initiative, together with a welter of other federal, provincial and local programs. As a result,

new and renovated housing for people of all income levels was created throughout the inner city, and home-owners renovated their properties with partially forgivable loans from the government. Co-operative housing for elderly people, immigrants and others offered the stability of home-ownership, together with a sense of community, to people for whom these benefits might otherwise have been out of reach.

But these housing programs did far more than just provide needed housing and home repairs. The presence of affordable housing for people of all income levels is a priceless asset. It populates the inner city and thereby makes it safer. Thus it helps to make inner-city residence a live option for better-off people and bolsters the stability of neighbourhoods that badly need the boost. In the process, it helps to keep the inner city from being abandoned in a flight to the suburbs and provides a crucial support for inner-city commerce. In the 1980s in Winnipeg, it helped to keep the inner city marginally viable and supported business, as well as providing support for people who needed help. Winnipeg's inner city may be in a parlous condition, but it would be a great deal worse without the housing that was added, and renovated, in the 1980s.

Ironically, though, Winnipeg, like both slow- and fast-growing cities elsewhere, is no longer accepting the challenge of housing provision. Virtually all the housing programs that helped to sustain Winnipeg's inner city through the past two difficult decades have been discontinued. When the cut-backs of the 1990s started to bite, Winnipeg had a historic opportunity to distinguish itself favourably from faster-growing cities. It could have found the money to maintain cost-

effective programs for the provision of affordable housing, while those in faster-growing centres were being savaged. In the process, it would have made at least some inroads into the problem of homelessness, provided a crucial support for the inner city, including inner city business, and created much-needed jobs.

This could have been one of several planks in an overall development strategy designed to keep Winnipeg vital, even in bad economic times. Instead, City Council and the provincial

government tilted at the windmill of major-city status, wasted \$55 million of public money, and placed itself

on the map as an NHL loser city with empty pockets. That strategy was typical of those being pursued by slow-growth centres throughout North America, but clearly there is a better way.

## Infrastructure and services

In this section, we are concerned with the building and maintenance of all the facilities that are needed to serve the city, including roads and public transit, sewerage, water, parks, education, library branches, community centres, police and fire protection. But it is useful to begin with roads. The ideas about road systems that are being applied in Canadian cities, whether fast- or slow-growth, have two sources that are important for our purposes: 1) developer proposals, and 2) the norms and conventions of civil engineering.

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The contribution of developers is that they decide on the parcels of land that they think will be suitable for profitable development. In Winnipeg and many other cities, they have good reason to expect a sympathetic hearing from local government, and, as part of the cost of development, they accept the obligation of building, or paying for, the necessary road connections. It then becomes the obligation of the city to work out the development of the rest of the city's transportation system to accommodate recent and expected future development.

For example, a burgeoning of new subdivisions at Winnipeg's southern edge in South St. Vital and South St. Boniface contributed to a city decision to build an expressway serving that part of the city—Bishop Grandin Boulevard—and occasioned the opening-up of an under-used and heavily subsidized bus line into Island Lakes, one of the new subdivisions. It also eventually stimulated the replacement of the Norwood and Main Street bridges with a massive new eight-lane structure. These bridges, located downtown, are part of the road system leading to the newer southern subdivisions.

In all of these respects, Winnipeg was following the conventions of modern North American city-building: developers decide where they want to locate new development and pay for some of the services immediately required by the new subdivisions. The city ensures that they become connected into the city-wide service network, and that the city-wide network is expanded as necessary to accommodate them. It is in deciding on the character of this expansion that the norms of the engineering profession take over.

Engineers now in the profession were trained to develop road systems on the assumption of ever-expanding traffic volumes. They believe in large-capacity roads and bridges, and they have been trained to associate their judgments in these matters with their professional integrity and to resent "political interference" with those judgments. Their belief-system colours the alternatives they present to politicians.

It is important to emphasize that we are pointing to a belief-system, not some special penchant for the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Indeed, engineers are probably less vulnerable to the charge of feathering their own nests at public expense than many other professionals. The Association of Professional Engineers of Manitoba, a typical case, is self-consciously protective of the public interest and shows no reluctance to let colleagues whose professional standards are found wanting feel the full weight of the Association's censure. The problem is not self-aggrandizement, but a predisposition to assume and promote rapid growth, to favour roads over alternative forms of transportation, and sometimes to go to questionable lengths in promoting them.

Many examples could be found (Leo 1977), but a recent case in point was that of the Norwood Bridge, the inner city-suburban link already referred to. When the plans for the Norwood Bridge reconstruction were being mooted, city officials presented four alternatives, including the following two. It would cost \$78 million for a six-lane, divided bridge that was pictured as providing a "fair" level of safety, and "poor" traffic capacity, accommodation for transit and accommodation of traffic during construction. By con-

trast, an eight-lane divided bridge that was rated "good" in all four categories would cost only \$80 million (City of Winnipeg 1992). That was an easy decision: only \$2 million extra for a vastly superior bridge. Such "easy decisions" are standard items in the arsenal of public servants who have made up their minds about which course they wish their political masters and the public to pursue.

Council chose an eight-lane bridge, and it soon became obvious—as it often does in such cases—that the "easy choice" was not so easy, after all. By the end of 1995, the cost of the new bridge had escalated to \$100 million (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 December 1995, A4). And with only one of the two spans built—still less than the six-lane alternative that was portrayed as inadequate—traffic line-ups at rush hour had greatly eased. Given the bias, or lack of reliability, that is apparent from this course of events, it might well be questioned whether the officials' advice is deserving of any trust at all. Was a new bridge necessary in the first place? On the face of it, it is not obvious why Canadian bridges are routinely declared to have outlived their usefulness in decades, while European bridges last centuries.

Over-building of bridges and roads exacerbates the dilemmas Winnipeg will face in future. Increased road and bridge capacity has two consequences. First, an improved route draws traffic as it becomes the route of choice for drivers who previously favoured other routes. Sooner or later, this increases pressure on City Council for further road-works. For example, traffic line-ups at a bridge entrance may be replaced by line-ups of vehicles on the bridge waiting to exit onto a narrower road. Such consequences are not unanticipated by engineering staff, and re-

sulting public demands for widening of the road leading away from the bridge may be seen by them as long-overdue recognition of necessities they understood to begin with.

A second consequence of increased bridge and road capacity is reduced travel time to the urban fringe, which leads to an increase in the economic viability of sprawl and leap-frog development. The upshot is intensified political pressure from developers for the approval of subdivisions that will be costly to serve—pressure the councils of slow-growth cities have frequently shown themselves unable to resist, precisely because they are predisposed to see rapid growth as a self-evident virtue. It is a vicious cycle, in which each new attempt to solve the "problem" of inadequate road capacity has the ultimate effect of exacerbating the problem (Downs 1992: 27-33).

The high priority accorded road projects tends to crowd out alternatives. In Winnipeg, City Council has readily agreed to one road project after another, heedless of the fact that each one exacerbates the sprawl dilemma. Meanwhile, transit facilities that could contribute to the amelioration of sprawl are postponed indefinitely. Since the mid-1970s, plans have been underway for the construction of the Southwest Transit Corridor, a rapid transit line consisting of cost-effective diesel buses running on a concrete strip dedicated exclusively to transit.

This line is considered viable because it connects two population concentrations—downtown and the University of Manitoba—along the relatively heavily-populated Pembina Highway corridor. It would ameliorate traffic congestion along Pembina Highway—the artery connecting the University of

Manitoba with the inner city—and encourage cost-effective, compact development along the route, in contrast to road and bridge projects' encouragement of sprawl. Estimated total cost for the entire facility would be \$70 million (City of Winnipeg 1997)—less than the lower-cost alternative for the Norwood Bridge, which was deemed inadequate. However, the estimated cost is a moot point, because postponement of the project has been a routine feature of City Council's annual budget deliberations for at least two decades.

Councils need to reconsider their indiscriminate compliance with road proposals, to the neglect of alternatives. Politicians need not accept the norms of civil engineers as the major determinant for the extension of transportation infrastructure. As well, instead of, in effect, delegating to developers the right to decide where the city will expand, cities could exercise their authority to determine the location, development mix, and densities of new subdivisions.

In theory, that power is being exercised now by city councils through their planning departments, but in practice the main influence over those decisions rests with developers. Alternative models are available, both for the planning of roads and transit, and for the development of more compact forms of development. Ironically, they are beginning to be applied in fast-growing cities (City of Calgary nd, Oregon Department of Transportation 1995, 1,000 Friends of Oregon 1997), while many such slow-growth

centres as Winnipeg continue to ape what they imagine to be the winning ways of rapid growth.

To stick with our main example, Winnipeg could have developed very differently. It seems very likely that the Norwood Bridge project could reasonably have been much more modest than it was. With a less auto-dependent, more compact form of development, the suburban road system—of which Bishop Grandin is only one example—could have been less extensive, and the transit system less of a drain on the treasury. Roads are typical of the situation for other services. Governments are allowing their cities to expand rapidly, at ever lower densities, primarily in response to developers' calculations about where the profit picture looks favourable for them, without serious consideration of how all of these developments will be tied together with infrastructure and serviced.

When a proposal for a new subdivision is brought to Winnipeg city planners, three cost factors are taken into consideration: roads, underground municipal services (sewer and water service), and parks. If the subdivision proposal incurs extra costs in any of these areas, the developer is responsible. When negotiations are complete, and the subdivision proposal comes before City Council, the typical reaction is delight over the "fact" that a sizeable chunk of new tax assessment will be added to the city's coffers "with the developer covering all the costs."

Once the subdivision is in place, however, the new residents rightly argue that, as residents and taxpayers of Winnipeg, they deserve services comparable to those other residents enjoy. City politicians have no valid

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answer when they ask, why is there no conveniently-located library branch and community centre? Why are police and fire response times here slower than in other subdivisions? Why do we not have a neighbourhood school? City Council and school boards have no politically realistic alternative but to spend money to fix the problems.

It is easy to see, therefore, why—with Winnipeg expanding at ever lower densities—residential property taxes have reached tax-revolt levels, while downtown infrastructure deteriorates. Indeed, the problem is now largely out of the hands of City Council. For some time, residents of the metropolitan area have been voting with their feet, and accepting the property tax reductions they can achieve by moving beyond the boundaries of the city. Businesses are beginning to follow.

With exurban migration under way, City Council has lost much of the control it once might have exercised over new development. Developers now have alternatives: if the city is not sufficiently generous in dealing with residential subdivision proposals or commercial developments, it is becoming increasingly easy for them to find a parcel of land for a similar development in an adjacent municipality.

Recent studies suggest that these patterns of development are, in the long run, unsustainable, or at least dangerously cost-ineffective, in any urban area (Blais 1995, *CUPR Report* 1996, Greater Toronto Area Task Force 1996). Even the wealthiest and fastest-growing metropolitan areas have experienced inner city deterioration in the face of uncontrolled suburban and exurban development. The South Bronx turned first into

a jungle and then into something resembling a post-war saturation bombing site, as Queens and Long Island expanded. Most of downtown Detroit became an unoccupied wasteland ringed by older neighbourhoods and prosperous suburbs.

Such decay is a complex phenomenon, and some of its causes can be sought in such disparate phenomena as family breakdown, crime, welfare dependency, inadequate education, and de-industrialization. However, there is no doubt that untrammelled suburban expansion is a major cause. In the long run, therefore, the typical North American metropolitan development pattern seems likely to be sustainable only at the expense of inner city deterioration, usually followed by deterioration of the first ring of suburbs.

That is bad enough, but the problem is even more acute for slow-growth cities. A fast-growing city can mask the costliness of sprawl development, at least for awhile. A leap-frog subdivision approval may not incur an immediate financial penalty if growth potential is strong enough to assure, within the foreseeable future, that infill development will help to pay for the needed infrastructure. Downtown decay may not occasion immediate alarm when there are proposals for commercial developments to replace decaying downtown residential districts, though it is unlikely that, in the longer run, simply filling empty spaces with office towers will suffice as a strategy for the prevention of decay.

Whatever the situation in a fast-growing centre, the piper demands immediate payment when the city council of a slow-growth city calls the low-density tune. Here there are no heavy pressures for new development,

and assurances of growing tax revenues, to cover up mistakes. Politicians in cities like Winnipeg, and provinces like Manitoba—in cities like Des Moines and Omaha and states like Iowa and Nebraska—need to understand that their mistakes will catch up with them, possibly within their current term of office.

For them, it is important, not only as a substantive matter, but also from the viewpoint of *realpolitik*, to be conservative in their approvals of subdivisions and new roads, to support infill development and more compact forms of development, to seek out viable alternatives to private automobile trips, and to instruct their officials accordingly.<sup>4</sup> In not doing so, many slow-growth cities have passed up their chance to remain viable and attractive places to live.

## Economic development

Like residents of many slow-growth centres, many Winnipeggers are torn between defensive self-assertion and dyspeptic self-castigation. Local boosterism reflects this mood, and conveys the suggestion that Winnipeg lacks some kind of legitimacy. An undercurrent of desperation is palpable, both in advertising campaigns on such themes as "Winnipeg: 100 reasons to love it" or "Love me, love my Winnipeg," and in the declaration that it is the Jets that keep Winnipeg "on the map". What comes through most clearly are two contradictory messages, often asserted simultaneously, the first self-depreciatingly, the second defensively: 1) since Winnipeg is not Toronto or Vancouver, there must be something wrong with it, and 2) there is absolutely nothing the matter with Winnipeg.

Economic development efforts in slow-growth cities often reflect that same mood of ambivalence with a hint of desperation. Predictions of economic changes tend to take the form either of pessimistic warnings of a clouded future or of declarations that "the big break" is just around the corner: if the Jets go, \$50 million a year will be lost to the economy; if the Canadian Wheat Board is abolished or relocated, 5,000 jobs will be lost; Winnipeg is about to become a major North American transportation hub, thousands of jobs will be created and millions added to the economy.

These recent examples of speculations trumpeted in the local media are just samples of what amounts to a steady stream of journalistic manic-depression. Economic development efforts are undertaken in a mood akin to that of an addicted gambler, simultaneously desperate and hopeful.

Often, the primary focus of economic development efforts is the attempt to attract new businesses or to lure businesses to relocate. Such a strategy is more likely to yield fruit in a fast-growing centre. If a city such as Toronto, Boston, San Francisco or Vancouver can offer an attractive environment, good facilities, a favourable tax regime and predictable regulations, large companies will consider locating major facilities there, because they will find the things they need there: the best talent in corporate law, accounting, engineering and financial services, the most reputable universities, and so forth.

Slow-growth centres are not in a position to match such attractions. To be sure, Winnipeg has much to recommend it: a superior park system, a good education sys-

tem, good recreational facilities in the wider region, reasonable commuting times, affordable housing, glorious summer weather, and a transit system that—despite excessive low-density development—still runs efficiently and economically. However, for most firms, these advantages do not add up to a unique set of attractions.

When it competes for major firms, Winnipeg generally finds itself having to offer free land, interest-free loans, and a variety of other incentives—incentives that will reduce the net economic benefit gained. Nor are there very good reasons, especially in the economy of the 1990s, for them to spend more than modest amounts to attract large companies. The idea that a city has to build its economy on branch operations of major corporations is passé. In the economy of the 1990s, small firms can and do prosper, and this is where a slow-growth economy is likely to find its best opportunities.

We can see more clearly why this is the case if we consider some findings in the micro-economics literature. Large firms, capable of operating on a national or global scale, have some competitive advantages, while small, locally-based enterprises have others. The balance of those advantages has varied over time (Brown 1992: ch 11). Some 60 years ago, Ronald Coase (1937) argued that the activities a firm engages in can be coordinated either internally, through the firm's own organization, or externally, through market mechanisms. Which is better depends on the costs involved.

When a firm's activities are coordinated through the market, *transaction costs* will be incurred. These are the costs of making contracts (or informal arrange-

ments) with other firms. Contracts must specify responsibility and action under foreseeable circumstances, provide for enforcement, and still cannot eliminate the risks of having one's partner fail to fulfill the contract or having your own company forced into an unexpectedly costly fulfillment (Williamson 1975).

Co-ordinating all aspects of production within a single firm, however, produces *administrative costs*. Management becomes more complex

and the decision-makers become isolated from the operations of individual units, thereby producing higher management costs, delayed decision-making, and increased errors. Often, individual units of a large organization are assigned costs to cover upper management, sales force research and development, and advertising that is disproportionate to what they gain from those activities.

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In the three decades following World War II, many firms found administrative costs more manageable than transaction costs, and firms grew increasingly larger and more diverse. Managerial literature, as well as practice, made much of the synergies that could come from having complementary products, providing different goods to service the same markets, or having a common financial base.

The development of new corporate structures and financial controls encouraged managers to believe, partially correctly, that they could control a highly diverse firm with-

out having a great deal of experience in each of the component parts. Their shareholders, for the most part, were happy to have a firm that was diverse enough to provide a portfolio effect, with gains in one part of the organization balancing losses in another, in such a way as to reduce overall risk (Chandler 1997, Lewellen 1971, Mayd and Myers 1987, Stultz 1990, Vernon 1977, Weston 1970, Williamson 1986).

However, a series of interrelated events in the world economy that began to make themselves felt in the 1970s have reduced transaction costs and increased the advantages of networks of co-ordination among smaller firms. Among these are events and changes in markets and technology that tend to favour small-batch production of relatively customized products, rather than long runs of standardized goods. Among these changes and events are vastly-improved, low-cost systems of communication that operate on a global scale, and global-scale market competition that has greatly increased in both intensity and scope (Piore and Sabel 1984, Hirst and Zeitlin 1989, Storper and Walker 1989, Scott 1990).

These developments have made it easier for firms located anywhere to target markets at home or anywhere else, secure support services nearby or at a distance, and compete effectively with often unwieldy, large-scale organizations. In the financial world, this transformation has been complemented by the growth of mutual funds, which provided the portfolio effects that had previously been an advantage of diversified firms. Fund managers, in time, became increasingly convinced that more focused firms produced greater returns. Moreover, they found it difficult to assess the financial per-

formance of highly diverse firms, and tended to steer away from purchasing their shares (Jensen 1986; Denis, Denis and Sarin 1997; Berger and Ofek 1995; Lamont 1997; Stein 1997).

In summary, small, flexible enterprises have in recent years been prospering, while the fortunes of large centralized firms have been on the decline. One result has been a great deal of frantic downsizing of large, diverse firms, through "spin-offs"—in which a division is transformed into a separate company—or by selling or closing down branches that are no longer an asset to the main organization. For example, in 1993 some \$17.5 billion (US) worth of spin-offs occurred in Britain and the United States; by 1996 it was over \$100 billion (*The Economist*, 5 April 1997, 59). The impact of downsizing has been felt in many communities in the form of branch plant closings or moves, with the accompanying loss of jobs.

However, the fact that a company is divesting itself of a branch is not necessarily a signal that the branch is not viable, even if it is being closed down. It may be an "innocent" victim of the parent company's response to the fact that a large, diverse company is no longer as competitive as it once was. When the parent firm formulates a new, narrower business strategy, a particular local branch may simply not fit the strategy. It may be closed down, instead of being sold, because the parent firm lacks the time or opportunity to find a buyer, or—in a case where one or more branches manufacture the same product—because the parent wishes to limit the number of competitors it will face in future. Such branch plants can often be saved if local resources are mobilized.

For slow-growth cities, there are lessons here. Much of the literature on globalization and the expansion of world markets has stressed the disadvantages these changes bring, especially to communities that are neither corporate headquarters nor centres of high technology (Noyelle and Stanback 1983, Smith and Feagin 1987). These assertions are true. Rapidly expanding world markets, and the relative decline of assembly-line manufacture, have devastated some communities and placed all under intense pressure. Large numbers of good blue-collar jobs have been lost; intense competition among communities for branch plants, offices and entertainment facilities has made life all too easy for businesses looking for subsidies from the public purse; the Hobson's choice between low-wage jobs and welfare has reduced many families to penury, and unemployment has left others homeless.

But few things are all bad, and global markets offer advantages, as well as disadvantages, even to slow-growth communities. In many areas of endeavour, locational advantages are not what they once were. As we have seen, modern communications make it easier than it has ever been before to find something that can be done well locally and market it globally. In Winnipeg, the University of Manitoba, Health Sciences Centre, the Institute for Biodiagnostics and a newly-constructed federal virology lab represent concentrations of research expertise in certain areas of medical science which, in turn, have a capacity to attract companies that will create jobs, including good ones.

Hog production and processing, while raising serious issues of both environmental and labour standards, may offer some opportunities for the creation of good jobs. A

24-hour airport, if shrewdly-managed, may form the nexus for the creation of transportation industry jobs at modestly decent wage levels.

These and other advantages can be enhanced by local, regional or national government policies that make credit available to prospective entrepreneurs; that offer assistance to employees who want to take over local branch plants that are being shut down and run them as independent businesses; and that provide assistance and advice to co-operative ventures and local entrepreneurs. There is no need to limit these efforts to the political sphere. Leaders in the business community should be encouraged, or pressured, to contribute some of their skills and resources. From their perspective, it can be cheap advertising if they get some good publicity for it.

In Winnipeg, these lessons may be beginning to penetrate, but it has taken awhile. Indeed, the strategies that were tried at first were badly flawed. In the late 1980s, it dawned on Winnipeg business and civic leaders that an era of government cutbacks and intensified global competition were presenting the city with a changed set of circumstances, and new challenges. In response, a report on the city's economic strengths and weaknesses was commissioned and an economic development agency, Winnipeg 2000, was created. The report, produced by Price Waterhouse (1990), recommended an economic development strategy typical of a slow-growth centre trying to pretend it has a potential for rapid growth. Repeatedly, a heavy stress was placed on the attraction of industry to relocate to Winnipeg, as in the following recommendations:

*Attract health care therapy, services, equipment and products manufacturers, and research and development centres...Start approaching firms in [data processing, credit card processing, information retrieval, telemarketing, mail order, market research, insurance claims and billing, reservation centres and banks]*

Small, flexible enterprises have in recent years been prospering, while the fortunes of large centralized firms have been on the decline. One result has been a great deal of frantic downsizing of large, diverse firms.

*with a view to relocating or opening up new facilities...Encourage the existing Manitoba Aerospace Group...to promote...the*

*creation of new ventures and the attraction of suppliers...Campaign to attract a prime contractor in the computer industry...Encourage out-of-province suppliers [of high-technology support goods and services] to set up operations in Winnipeg...Explore the opportunity of developing Winnipeg as a world grain centre (Price Waterhouse 1990: 93-97).*

Initially, Winnipeg 2000 tried to follow the consultants' advice, and pursued a policy focusing primarily on smoke-stack and glass-tower chasing. But, except in the area of telemarketing—which is appropriate to Winnipeg, thanks to a modest cost of living and a relatively well-educated, bilingual population with a widely-understandable accent in English—these efforts bore little fruit.

At the same time, the agency encountered opposition on City Council, which began to question its effectiveness. In response, it appears that Winnipeg 2000 may gradually be moving toward a more appropriate strategy<sup>5</sup>, emphasizing the cultivation

of local resources, including development of the health care, transportation, and aerospace industries; initiatives designed to tap the economic potential of Francophone and Aboriginal communities, and contributions to the fostering of micro-enterprise (Winnipeg 2000 1995: 9-14).

Initiatives elsewhere in the community also suggest the gradual development of more appropriate strategies. For example, the Crocus Fund gets government support to generate local investment for the expansion and/or retention of local business. Provincial government "grow bonds" allow for local investment in local business ventures. SEED Winnipeg makes micro-credit available for small entrepreneurs, and the Assiniboine Credit Union has a policy of offering loans to social agencies and businesses in the core area. A local branch of CIBC, a major commercial bank, allows Winnipeg Harvest, a food bank, to use its training facilities in off-hours to teach job and job-searching skills to its clients. A federal government program provides incentives to banks to make loans to small businesses.

Such ventures as these are a starting-point in a viable economic development strategy for a slow-growth centre. A great deal more could be done to improve the level of education and job training—including education in the skills necessary for running small businesses—for lower-income people generally and the burgeoning population of lower-income aboriginal people in particular. That allows the building of the local economy while addressing the problem of poverty, instead of building the economy, as is so often the case, to the accompaniment of the production of poverty.

The gradual development of more appropriate economic development strategies suggests a groping response to experience, rather than a consistent policy change. The recent failed attempt to retain major-league hockey, as well as public discussion that continues to emphasize the search for "the big break" shows that the effort to think through the policy implications of slow growth is, at best, in its infancy.

## Immigration

Immigration is always a sensitive political issue in Canada, and it has been especially so in recent years, as immigration legislation has undergone a series of hotly-contested revisions. Throughout these changes, the government has been under pressure to limit immigration, on the basis of fears that immigrants will place undue burdens on the social safety net and that they will take jobs from Canadians. The evidence that such fears are justified is less than compelling. Indeed, much of the evidence seems to suggest, on the contrary, that immigration produces more benefits than costs (Beach and Green 1989, Loveless *et al* 1996, Reischauer 1993, but see also Rao and Kapsalis 1982).

That said, it is also true that immigration is a complex issue, and it is not our intention to attempt a contribution to the extensive literature on this subject. Our point focuses on the observation that much of the controversy surrounding immigration is centred in major metropolitan areas, notably Toronto and Vancouver. In Toronto, much is made of fears that the city will become a magnet for large numbers of immigrants with limited skills, many of whom, it is feared, will end up a burden on the state, and perhaps

become involved in criminal activity. In Vancouver, there is controversy over allegations that Asian immigrants are driving up the cost of housing.

If such arguments have any substance at all, they are not relevant for a city such as Winnipeg, which is not in danger of becoming a magnet for large numbers of any population. By the same token, the city is an ideal location for people—especially those with limited resources—who are looking for a stable community and a chance to make a future for themselves and their families: a large stock of affordable housing; some decent schooling at all levels, even in the poorer neighbourhoods; and—for people from any of dozens of countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Southern and Eastern Europe, and Asia—a supportive community environment.

Evidence suggests that, even in major metropolitan centres, local authorities need not fear that immigration will produce adverse consequences. Loveless *et al* (1996: ch 5) provide a careful calculation of the hard-to-measure impacts of immigration on municipal revenues and expenditures in the City of Miami and conclude that, over an eight-year period, each immigrant incurs net costs of \$25 a year. The authors declare this an insignificant finding, considering the relatively small amounts of money involved, as well as the difficulties of estimating impacts accurately.

As insignificant as that cost is, the finding needs to be qualified, and the qualifications tend to strengthen the case for immigration in a slow-growth centre. The study wisely made no attempt to undertake the

probably impossible task of calculating the effect on the economy as a whole of the influx of a new population: the jobs that are created, the houses that are renovated, the decaying neighbourhoods that become enlivened with commerce and street life imported from another country. In fast-growing Miami, where housing is already priced beyond the reach of many, and the existing street life presents a formidable challenge to police and social agencies, a fresh influx of immigrants may be seen primarily as a problem, and an expense.

But, in a slow-growth centre, with a large stock of affordable housing going begging,

it is possible to see immigration in a very different light. In Winnipeg, immigrants could occupy houses that will otherwise decay, pay taxes,

create jobs, and help to reinvigorate the inner city. Undoubtedly they would also bring social problems with them and find conflicts waiting for them. Any responsible immigration policy needs to prepare for such problems, and have counter-measures in place (Loveless et al, 1996). But it seems more than probable that the long-term benefits of encouraging such an influx would greatly outweigh the costs, especially in a slow-growth city.

To a limited extent, this is being recognized, although the case for recognizing it is based on provincial economic considerations, rather than concerns with urban development. In 1996, the Canadian federal government permitted Manitoba to nominate

a limited number of immigrants in order to increase the numbers of workers available for employment in the garment industry. For its part, Manitoba is promoting itself as a destination for immigrants, and has set the goal of increasing from about 3,500 in 1995 to 8000 eventually (Barkman, 1997).

A web site expounds Manitoba's advantages (<http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/immsett1>)—and offers practical advice—but puts a great deal of emphasis on such things as recreation and leisure, with special attention to rural Manitoba. Affordable housing gets the barest of mentions. In short, the attraction of immigrants to help build Winnipeg's economy and rebuild the inner city does not appear to have figured prominently in the design of the policy. If all concerned can be persuaded of the importance of making policy in slow-growth cities that suit their particular circumstances, it would seem that consultation with the city, and the city's involvement in developing provincial immigration policy, could produce some important benefits.

Here, as in the other policy areas we have considered, a glimmering that different policies need to be formulated for fast- and slow-growth cities may have dawned, but the idea has not truly penetrated.

## Overcoming the "Big Apple" syndrome

It is not immediately obvious why the policies characteristically associated with fast growth exert such an extraordinary influence on so many people—a pull often strong enough to override what in other circumstances might well be seen as ordinary com-

The city is an ideal location for people—especially those with limited resources—who are looking for a stable community and a chance to make a future for themselves and their families.

mon sense. One does not have to be a genius to puzzle out the consequences of stringing infrastructure to the horizon at low densities or to see that different cost structures for housing yield different policy opportunities, but the attraction of fast-growth policies seems to be strong enough to block such ordinary ideas from entering the minds of many otherwise prudent people.

An obvious explanation is that all these apparent policy errors are not errors at all, but willful subservience to powerful interests—developers who profit from low-density suburban development, ordinary people reacting against immigrants out of a combination of xenophobia and fear of competition for jobs, and so forth. There is much truth in that explanation: economically powerful groups and the fears of ordinary people always carry a great deal of weight in politics.

But an explanation resting exclusively on the power of interest groups is not quite good enough. It might help explain why an argument for uniform national immigration

policies wins the day over advocacy of regionally differentiated policies, but it does not explain why the latter argument is not even a serious factor in the debate, nor does it explain the extraordinary psychological power—amounting virtually to intimidation—of the threat that departure of the Jets will rob Winnipeg of the status that comes with being “on the map”. The fact that the threat of being taken off the major league sport map has produced public subsidies in many cities confirms its power.

Undoubtedly, at least part of the explanation lies in the realm of psychology, well beyond the scope of this study. What is important for us to notice is that the desire to be in the “major leagues” or, failing that, at least to **act** as if we are, has an important influence on city politics. At the same time, the analysis in these pages suggests that there is a great deal to be gained by overcoming that influence. And, paradoxically, policies appropriate to a city’s actual circumstances—in other words, policies based on rational calculation rather than hunger for big-league status—are much more likely to lead to the big leagues than inappropriate ones.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Exact figures are hard to find because economic statistics that are taken for granted by analysts of the national and provincial economies are often unavailable for census metropolitan areas. Jane Jacobs (1984) laments the lack of attention paid to urban economies.

<sup>3</sup> A figure in the range of \$28-30 m, which is often cited as the cost of the effort (Silver 1996: 164-67), is arrived at by deducting the proceeds to the public purse from the sale of the team, which was partly publicly-owned. However, the National Hockey League's refusal to agree to revenue sharing to benefit smaller teams made it clear that the league was not prepared to support a team in a market Winnipeg's size. If government had acted on the basis of a sober recognition of the difference between fast-growing and slow-growing cities, the team could have been sold before money was spent on trying to keep it in Winnipeg, and there would have been no need to write off losses against that gain.

<sup>4</sup> Downs (1994) offers an extensive catalogue of alternatives to conventional, low-density development patterns. See also Blais (1995), *CUPR Report* (1996), Greater Toronto Area Task Force (1996).

<sup>5</sup> For a contrasting view see Silver and Black (1997), who argue that nothing significant has changed.

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# URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN A SLOW-GROWTH CITY: The Case of Winnipeg

## Abstract

The paper distinguishes between cities experiencing high rates of growth and those growing more slowly, and argues that North American slow-growth cities have tended to follow policies more appropriate to fast-growing centres, to their own detriment.

Using Winnipeg as the primary example of a slow-growth city, but drawing on a wide range of data, the paper considers the following policy areas: housing, management of infrastructure, economic development, and immigration. In each of these areas the argument is that policies that may be defensible in fast-growing centres are unthinkingly and inappropriately followed in slow-growth cities, where different lines of policy would be more beneficial.

Appropriate policies for slow-growth cities are suggested, and tested against empirical evidence.

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