

Open Letter
Monday, October 29, 2001

“Family Planning in Canada’s Capital”

On the 10th October, 2001, the local Ottawa Council (Latitude 45 N/Longitude 75 W, Ontario) made a disastrous “global” decision, one made in absolute ignorance of the consequences. It set a population projection to the year 2021. Can you guess which “species” Council picked? It may come as no surprise to you that out of more than 30 million species, they picked us - Homo sapiens.

Now the current human population in this 276,000-hectared chunk of the planet is 790,000. We come in many shapes and sizes, and weigh in at roughly 80 million pounds of human biomass. Quite a feed lot, consuming more energy and global resources than just about any other humans on the planet.

The choices for the Mayor and Councillors, as given to them by the “Planning Department”, were;

- Add 265,000 Humans (Projection A)
- Add 403,000 Humans (Projection B)
- Add 655,000 Humans (Projection C)
- Add 734,000 Humans (Projection D)

Projecting human population into the future is a fair and critical task, one that you can’t duck. The existing projection is 225,000 Humans. This projection is contained in our comprehensive land use plan (Official Plan) which is being updated over the next year. As one Councillor noted, everything follows from this projection.

There was only one background report, a \$100,000 effort by the “Centre for Spatial Economics” which laid out the four projections. The thesis of the report is to add extra humans for the purpose of “employment” in the high technology industry. The report had already been jeopardized by a critique by economist Erwin Dreessen, President of Greenspace Alliance of Canada’s Capital, but the Councillors didn’t appear to have noticed. In any event in my view the report, with a mandate for a 30 year projection, was belly up before the ink had dried. Further, the Planning Department report, under “Financial Implications” had said - “There are no financial implications to this report”. So councillors had to decide the population projection blind on the basis of importing extra humans, then start to consider the necessary physical infrastructure.

During the debate, some councillors didn’t want to get caught without the necessary infrastructure in place if the population went up faster than projected, while others noted that if you build too much infrastructure you pay a huge price. On the positive side (to me anyway) a couple of councillors were profoundly uneasy about the entire matter. Their instincts were right. Which projection would you have picked? After a couple of failed motions to lower the projected number, Council voted 11-10 to accept Planning Department’s recommendation of an additional 403,000 humans (Projection B). The

rationale for adding more humans than the historical population curve was for “employment”.

Now come into my world, the world of the living, what’s sometimes called biodiversity. Let’s project an additional 403,000 chickadees into Ottawa. According to the Canadian Forest Service the home range of a chickadee is .54 of a hectare (confidence limits aside). So we’re talking 217,620 hectares of “suitable habitat”. If you import the feed for your feeder then clearly the chickadees depend also on the original location where the feed is grown and on the energy that’s used to refine the seed.

Or, let’s project 403,000 snowshoe hares at 2.55 suitable hectares per hare, for 1,027,650 hectares (roughly eastern Ontario). So you could introduce the hares into Ottawa but you couldn’t keep them alive.

Finally, how about 403,000 grey wolves, or roughly 80,000 packs at 137,000 suitable hectares per pack, for the sake of theoretical debate, 10 times the size of Canada. Suitable habitat for wolves includes moose, deer, beaver, hemlock and so on. It’s all bound together. Clearly the wolves would die from overpopulation.

And so Council has for us to add another 403,000 humans. Sadly the Councillors, in planning to expand only the inert infrastructure of roads, sewers, buildings and bridges have no understanding how to plan for the living. This Council, with no legal opposition, on behalf of Ontario with the direct participation of Canada through the National Capital Commission (ie. no public accountability) is literally destroying the habitat of all living matter including Homo sapiens at this latitude & longitude at a rate of three acres per day. Council is adding living humans into a sterile planning framework. The humans can not stay alive.

Now Council, as passed at that meeting, as part of the Official Plan process shall “determine through community forums how best we can accommodate the level of growth anticipated in order to sustain the health and well being of our new city”. When your councillor comes to sell you on their agenda of support for the corporate land owners and associated industries and financial institutions, try asking them about the actual ecological goods and services that keep us alive. Oxygen, water and earth. Or, food for 403,000 humans.

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David McNicoll is a film maker,
and currently has an appeal before a quasi-judicial organisation,
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