

Planners help to shape city

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They may not have built this city on rock 'n' roll, but they built Calgary, nonetheless — and more likely on niggling details and many, many consultations with the various groups involved in residential construction and government.

“We offer visionary, strategic solutions to planning a neighbourhood

BELA SYAL,
BROWN AND
ASSOCIATES
PLANNING
GROUP

in the diverse, new neighbourhoods that are home to tens of thousands of people.

The unsung heroes of land development have been “fairly instrumental in shaping the city,” says Bela Syal, one of the principals of Brown and Associates Planning Group, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this

They are the consultant planners who put together the details to turn a piece of dirt into an active, vibrant community where people can live, work and play.

This group of experts in land design work together with the residential land development companies to bring the developers' visions alive — resulting

Input from public has grown during past two decades

year. “We offer visionary, strategic solutions to planning a neighbourhood, and bridge the gap between the city policies and developers.”

The planners are the liaison between city council and administration and the urban developers — but “we also go to the public for input,” says Greg Brown, who founded Brown and Associates.

“We believe as professionals that we can use our creative ideas and experience to come up with solutions so it is a win/win, and that vision will be implemented to everyone's satisfaction,” he says.

It's not an easy row to hoe, either, due to the many and ever-expanding regulations regarding the growth of the suburbs which have been often maligned as urban sprawl.

During the past two decades Brown and Associates has been in business, change has been a constant factor in all aspects of residential development, says Greg Donaldson, another of the principals who make up Brown and Associates.

“One element that's become of significantly greater importance is the amount of public input in land development and the higher level

of detail across the spectrum, from elements of design to the environment,” he says.

Buyers are more astute, says Syal, “and they want more input.”

Add on the trendy sustainability of land development that people currently desire and the whole field of residential land development is changing constantly, says Syal.

“There is quite an awareness to achieve sustainable solutions,” says Syal. “Everyone is looking at more responsible growth.”

A greater variety of housing is wanted, as well as things like different services, shops and office buildings in a mixed-use community — and that makes a more vibrant neighbourhood, says Syal.

“People want more amenities where they live, and they want to be close to where they work.”

But one thing hasn't changed, says Brown.

“People are still looking at forms of housing that they can afford,” he says. “That's always been an issue and it still is today.”

In spite of the Plan It document — a vision for Calgary's future created by the city administration which aims to guide the transportation and municipal development of the city for the next 60 years — “there is still a strong demand for single-family housing from people,” says Syal.

Plan It emphasizes more compact growth in the inner-city



Courtesy, Brown & Associates Planning Group

From left, Brown and Associates Planning Group principals Darrell Grant, Greg Donaldson, Greg Brown, Ron Wrigley and Bela Syal, who recently celebrated the group's 20th anniversary.

communities. By the end of the document's time frame, the city envisions 50 per cent of growth will be in the inner city.

Plan It sees such growth concentrated in multi-family housing developments of higher density around transportation hubs, rather than new single-family housing, which would be particularly discouraged in the suburbs.

“The city is doing the right stuff creating the vision, but is forcing change the right answer?” says Syal. “When you start putting densities over a certain limit, the market has to be ready to accept it — and Calgary is not. You may see it evolve, but at this time, there is no demand for it.”

Another of the principals of Brown and Associates, Ron Wrig-

ley, who is an advocate of more compact growth, says it must come from the market rather than policies.

“I've been fighting for increased density all of my career, and the market will accept it at certain levels and in certain locations, but it evolves over time,” he says.

The key is allowing for choice and letting the market decide, says Brown.

“It's my belief if we don't supply the form of housing that people want and they can't find it here, the buyers will go elsewhere outside of Calgary,” he says. “We need small steps to enable the developers and builders to create innovation, allow intensification to happen and, hopefully, keep housing affordable.”