

# Breaking down our Top Troubles

by Myron Belej

At any given time, Canadians are concerned about many different issues. The particular ranking of these issues varies when you look back over time, but available survey data from polling agencies like Angus Reid (<http://www.angusreidstrategies.com/polls-analysis/opinion-polls>), highlights some commonalities over the years.

Prior to the last Canadian Federal Election in fall 2008, an Angus Reid poll showed that "at least 83 per cent of people across the country cite poverty, the environment, health care and the economy as electoral issues important to them."

In the face of a recession, more recent surveys from early 2009 show the economy and related concerns ranked significantly higher for Canadian voters, with health care and the environment being mentioned as distant runners-up. The latter two had been ranked as higher priorities in 2007.

Crime, which has a relationship to poverty; and jobs or unemployment, which have a direct relationship to the economy, are typically ranked near the top as well.

## What does this mean for the Mensan community?

If we are to have any hope of addressing and solving these issues, we need to have an understanding of how they connect. Knowing the interrelationships will allow us to focus our minds, our time, and our financial efforts on the ideas and projects that matter most.

The majority of Canadians live in Canada's 20 largest cities. The smallest of those has a population of over 150,000 people, so we are a nation of urban dwellers. Our greatest concerns are unquestionably related to our urban condition.

## How We Live

The urban sprawl created by the development patterns of our growing cities has destroyed vast amounts of farmland, wetlands and animal habitat. That same urban sprawl has led to the construction of neighbourhood after neighbourhood of cookie-cutter residential housing all over North America.

As our cities have spread out, into suburb upon suburb, people have been forced to drive. It is literally impossible for an incredible number of Canadians to comfortably walk to all the amenities and services they need. They simply can't walk to the grocery store, the hardware store, the doctor's office, even to their place of work. A car is needed to get to the health club, pharmacy, tailor, lawyer, flower shop, coffee

shop, hairdresser, and most other things we need.

Unfortunately, our cars require a tremendous amount of space to be useful, including garages, parkades, vast surface parking lots, and giant highway interchanges that are actually larger than some European cities (e.g., Florence, Italy; Vatican City). Every shop requires its own parking spaces.

As we drive, we pollute. We burn fuel and create greenhouse gases whether we're moving or we're sitting in traffic.

We also waste a lot of time behind the wheel, often alone. Many Canadians commute long distances to and from work, but time is also lost shuttling the kids to and from daycare or clarinet lessons, and driving to each individual store. Canadians wait seasonally for their cars to warm up or cool down, wait at traffic lights, wait for gaps in traffic before turning. The list goes on.

When I visit a small town grocer near my house, I am typically in and out of the store in five to ten minutes. But making the same trip to a big box grocery store can easily cost me half an hour to an hour of time trying to walk around, and then wait in long lines to purchase the same items. It can take five to ten minutes just getting to and from the entrance of the store, by the time you factor in the time to park, get a cart, and walk in with the line of patrons.

Because we lose so much time, we have less time for work and play, and our relationships with our families and friends suffer. Back in the day, people used to have regular spontaneous encounters with friends downtown, lived within walking distance of family members and trusted neighbours, and trusted each other more. Having fewer family and friends nearby places much greater stress on couples and marriages to provide the full spectrum of social interaction and need; so much so that over half end in divorce.

Our urban societies are also consumer societies, because not knowing or trusting your neighbours in your suburban community where people are never seen except for when they drive in and out of their house (the attached garage), means everyone needs their own lawn mower, snow blower, rakes, shovels, weed whackers, washer and dryer, and more, even though most of the time these things are unused, and we simply need more space (which we also pay for) to store them. And when divorces happen, that is another whole new set of goods to fill a house that a person must purchase.

So we buy more things - more "stuff" - than we need, and in doing so, we also create a lot of waste. Incredible

amounts of paper are wasted by the goods we buy, and also from endless store receipts, utility bills, advertising flyers and mass mail outs, workplace "documentation", and even school notes. We throw out incredible amounts of packaging – boxes, styrofoam, and more paper – before we even assemble and use the product we bought in the first place. As an example, I recently bought a webcam, and the packaging was about 15 times larger than it needed to be. Times how many products. Times 34 million Canadians.

## Making the Connection with Canadians' Concerns

**The Environment:** Our environment is directly impacted by the way we live, work, travel, and consume goods and services. Continuing patterns of urban sprawl makes our environment worse. Fixing our environment requires more compact development that reduces the environmental footprint, supports more community interaction, uses less energy, significantly reduces waste, and promotes more plant and animal life.

**Health Care:** The health of the environment is directly related to the health of the general public. Canadians are getting fatter because people drive too much and don't exercise enough. People don't have time to exercise or to prepare healthy meals. Asthma and lung disease are related to air quality, which worsens as we pollute. Canadians also suffer from a number of stress-related illnesses, including heart attacks, and our relationships suffer from the intense stress placed upon them. Reducing stress levels will reduce the drain on the health care system.

**The Economy:** When people live in closer proximity to their family and friends, they have a greater capacity to help each other out through tough times. Local economies in more walkable communities are more resistant to economic downturns, partly because people know each others' needs, but also because people have the capacity to quickly help each other find new jobs. Canadians spend more at big box stores because of the "convenience" they provide, yet considerable dollars from those purchases leave the local economy, padding the pocketbooks of multinational corporations. Much of the current Canadian economy revolves around the consumption of goods and services which are directly related to how much people make, but if the economy were focused on providing local goods and services based on local community needs, we would all be in a better position to weather the economic storm.

**Poverty:** We don't have enough money because we spend too much on things we don't really need. Big screen TVs, MP3 players, and video game systems are less important when you live in a walkable community. Owning your own tools for renovations or lawn and garden are less important when you have good relationships with your neighbours, and can share. Transportation costs are high, since fuel, storage, insurance and maintenance are required, and saving these costs in a walkable community would help a great many Canadians below the poverty line.

It is also worth noting that extreme poverty, in the form of homelessness, creates a significant drain on the health care system.

## Conclusion

The biggest issues on the minds of Canadians can be addressed to a large extent by addressing larger problems on the city scale. Poorly planned and designed communities create a significant drain on our environment, our economy, our health and stress levels, and our resistance to poverty and tough economic times.

As Mensans, I believe we have a responsibility to use our natural gifts and talents for the greater good. We have the potential to help a great number of Canadians (and beyond) if we combine our efforts to make a difference in the public realm.

To that end, I am interested in connecting and collaborating with other Mensan architects, urban designers, engineers and city planners, to develop big picture solutions to help cities, citizens, and communities.

Please visit my website ([www.cityplanner.ca](http://www.cityplanner.ca)) and/or email me ([myronbelej@yahoo.com](mailto:myronbelej@yahoo.com)) if you share this ambition and desire to affect change in our Canadian cities.

