

Have a Donut, Mr. Mayor



Amsterdam

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You may have noticed that a lot of my op eds are aimed at our city government, urging the mayor and council to take bolder action on climate change by investing less in new roads and related suburban expansion and more in its natural infrastructure assets like carbon-eating trees, wetlands and intact forests.

The reason for that is simple - based on carbon emissions, cities like ours are the main contributors to climate change, so they should also be ground zero in the fight against it. Some cities are taking that task seriously, putting emissions reduction and climate resiliency at the top of their agendas. Other cities, like ours, are still playing major league catch-up.

Cities ahead of the curve include, among others, Barcelona and Copenhagen, but one of the most interesting is Amsterdam, a city that has taken a two pronged, or should I say a “double circle” approach to sustainability, by adopting something called “donut economics,” a term first coined by economist Kate Raworth.

The donut approach envisions a city’s economy not as a vertical line of endless growth, but as a set of concentric circles. The goal in the donut’s inner ring - its social foundation - is to ensure no one is left behind, while the outer ring establishes an environmental ceiling for sustainability.

The “sweet spot” is right in the middle – where every citizen is assured life’s essentials at minimized environmental cost.

Fall in the donut hole or overshoot it’s environmental limits and your city looks, well, something like ours: with the lowest greenness score of any major city in Canada, 1200 people homeless, another 4000 at risk of homelessness and \$1 billion set to be spent on new or wider roads we don’t really need and can’t afford.

To be fair, the city is making some headway on environmental sustainability – the Urban Forest and upcoming Greenspace Strategy, Biodiversity Policy, the signing of the Montreal Pledge and a modest commitment to retrofitting public buildings are positive signs. But there’s still a long way to go.

So how might donut economics set our city on a better path?

Rather than measure growth solely by GDP – the old capitalist benchmark – “donut” cities equate growth with improved quality of life, reduced carbon emissions and a sustainable economy that puts less pressure on a planet with finite resources.

At its heart, it’s an integrated approach to everything from road and building construction to consumer goods, which applies the principle of reduce, reuse and recycle. That doesn’t mean you toss GDP out the window but instead view it, to quote Raworth, “as a means to reach social goals within ecological limits.”

Amsterdam, by the way, has a population of 872,000, so it’s not impossible to imagine our city adopting a similar approach.

Admittedly there may be differences in jurisdictional authority, but that’s true for other cities that have adopted the donut approach, like Nanaimo BC. Essentially, each city uses the authority it has to make it work, while engaging citizens to mount their own efforts.

So, what does it look like on the ground?

During the pandemic, Amsterdam realized that low income families without computers were at a severe disadvantage during lockdown. Their solution? - ask businesses and citizens to donate used computers. The city then hired a company to repair them and distributed 3500 computers to those in need.

A modest effort, perhaps, but the Dutch city has also established, among other things, carbon neutral building codes that require sustainable materials be used in all new builds which can then be reused when the structure is torn down.

Donut cities are also taking a variety of approaches to address homelessness, from increased access to affordable housing to paid employment on municipally owned urban farms - a project that's not just good for people. It also improves food security.

By 2025, Nanaimo, a city of 100,000, aims to eliminate homelessness and provide supports to at least 20% of people at risk of homelessness. Simultaneously, the BC city has established environmental indicators to accurately measure and improve everything from urban canopy cover and wetlands to water conservation, to enhance climate resiliency.

In essence, the donut approach doesn't see action on social problems and the climate crisis as separate competing priorities, but as linked. Bottom line? - you can't have a city that's healthy for people without protecting the environment, and you can't have a healthy city without protecting its most vulnerable citizens.

At base, it's a wholistic approach that reimagines growth as what's best for both people and the planet. And it's not rocket science. All Winnipeg needs is donut-informed leadership to make it happen.

For more on doughnut economics see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rhcrbcg8HBw>