

The Downtown's Downward Slide

(797 words)

When I was a kid, Portage Avenue was an exciting destination. In addition to banks and businesses, there were two huge department stores selling everything from groceries to furniture, surrounded by boutiques, jewelry stores, cinemas and restaurants – all within easy walking distance.

And lining the streets that led onto Portage Avenue, from Balmoral to Fort, were apartment blocks filled with people who could live, work and shop downtown.

Better still, I grew-up in the West End, so I was just a 10 minute electric trolleybus bus ride from the downtown action.

Now, the streets off Portage are lined with parking lots, and our once celebrated major artery is clogged with office towers, boarded up buildings and dollar stores, with a few retailers scattered in between.

And what was once the crown jewel of downtown, the corner of Portage and Main, is closed to everything but that paean to urban sprawl – the car.

By any measure, Portage Ave isn't an exciting destination for anyone save, perhaps, a Jets fan. In fact, our downtown, like those in other cities documented in the Canadian Urban Institutes' post pandemic report, "Case for the Core," is excluding, unsafe and, in many ways, unliveable.

Which impacts not only the people living there. It also impacts the financial stability and future wellbeing of the entire city.

Because, to riff on the words of Chicago's onetime mayor, Richard Daley, just like an apple, a city rots from its core. And that's certainly true for Winnipeg. Instead of embodying the energy and resources of a successful city, Portage Avenue may be the SOS signal of Winnipeg's decline.

Why? Well as studies have shown, it's cities that manage sprawl and invest in livable, walkable downtowns that win the competitive race. And that's because the core is a hub for the commercial and financial sectors that tend to generate a lot more cash for the city.

In other words, the money is not in the suburbs – the big money is downtown. Or at least it should be.

We can't turn back the clock, but we could, with the right information, transform Portage Avenue into something more than a thoroughfare for cars. But how do we do that after decades of trying and failing?

The good news is that some city councillors are seriously interested in downtown revitalization, pitching everything from affordable housing to rezoning to allow for mixed use development.

Good ideas, to be sure, but here's my question - does the city have the data needed to make evidence-based decisions that will transform the core area into a vibrant, inclusive centre?

Based on what I've seen, I'm not sure they do. And if I'm right, that's a problem.

Because in order to change things, you need to know what you have, what you don't have and what you should have, to take actions that are sustainable and environmentally sound.

So, does the city have data on assessments and property tax revenue generated by the core? Do councillors even know what percentage of the city's capital budget is spent there?

Well, my statistician friend and I dug up some info on property taxes, and it turns out that Fort Rouge/East Fort Garry Ward, which includes South Portage, generates about three times the amount of tax revenue per acre than Waverley West. And Daniel Mac Ward, which includes a chunk of North Portage, contributes almost two times the revenue per acre.

So, how much of that revenue is being reinvested in downtown wards versus the suburbs? Unfortunately we can't answer that question because it appears that no one's keeping track.

Although, take look at neighbourhoods like Spence, and you can pretty much see where the money isn't being spent.

And what about data on the number of jobs, office space and building permits issued downtown? Does the city have an inventory of core amenities – everything from streetlights and bike paths to grocery stores and greenspaces - that would make the core safer and more livable for residents?

If the answer is "No," then the question about where to spend money to address Portage Avenue's decline is basically guess work. It's like me trying to come up with a budget, without knowing what I earn, what I spend and where I need to invest for the future.

So, before doing anything, maybe councillors need to do some research. They just might discover that it's smaller investments aimed at improving life for people already living in the core that's key.

And here's a thought – maybe they could ask residents what they think they need.

Because here's the thing - Portage Avenue renewal won't happen until the streets and neighbourhoods surrounding it are safe, vibrant and livable.

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