

Municipal Leaders Correct to “Think Big”: Profound Changes in Urban Energy Systems Needed

By Mike Harcourt, Ken Ogilvie, and Michael Cleland

Saskatoon’s municipal leaders are bang on and should be commended for their efforts to “think big” when it comes to planning the future development of the city.

We wanted to pass on some important considerations with respect to the relationship between making gains on environmental objectives and improving the energy systems in our growing communities.

CIBC economist Jeff Rubin noted in a recent report that improvements in efficiency have so far done little to reduce actual energy consumption as consumers have opted to drive bigger cars farther and heat ever larger homes. Is that the end of the story on energy efficiency?

For about two years now a group of more than 60 experts and key stakeholders have been talking about developing *Quality Urban Energy Systems of Tomorrow*. For this group of senior executives from the energy, transportation, building and development industries, representatives of environmental groups and the consulting community, politicians, academics and government officials; reducing Canada’s emissions must focus on urban centres – the places where about 80% of Canadians live and work.

Put simply, we must reduce the environmental footprint of Canada’s growing communities through ensuring a more systematic approach to planning our cities and providing the infrastructure that supports them.

Statistics Canada has projected that Canada’s population will grow from 33 million people today to around 43 million in 2050. Most of this growth will be in or around our largest cities. This means increasing demands for housing, hospitals, schools, commercial buildings, transportation systems, waste disposal and water treatment. For the group of 60 unusual collaborators now thinking about energy systems, there is resounding agreement that for Canada to show leadership on climate change, we must make profound changes in how energy is delivered and used in growing urban and suburban communities.

Leadership is needed from all levels of government, businesses and citizens.

From municipal leaders:

Too often land-use decisions, energy production, delivery and use, urban transportation, waste disposal and water systems are thought about independently. There is an opportunity with our ageing infrastructure and growing communities to achieve greater efficiency by looking at the relationships between energy and related infrastructure systems. While one size doesn’t fit all, municipal leaders should ensure that future city and community planning, bylaws

and regulations take an integrated approach that will make more effective use of energy grids and increase the use of local energy sources, such as on-site solar, geothermal, landfill and agricultural waste. The result can be better performing buildings, new district energy systems, higher density land uses, and more efficient, accessible and affordable transportation.

From business leaders and service providers:

As Jeff Rubin correctly notes, a prosperous society will continue to demand reliable water and waste management services, efficient transportation systems, and energy to keep houses warm, lights on and businesses running. At the same time, public opinion polls consistently show that people want to meet their demand for services more sustainably, which means that businesses and service providers must find the most environmentally clean and energy efficient ways of providing such services while ensuring their continued safety and reliability.

From federal, provincial and territorial leaders:

Measures to induce emissions reductions by large industry need continuing attention, but there is an immediate need for Canada's political leaders to pay greater attention to the other 50% of our greenhouse gas emissions. Politicians must ensure that the energy pricing and regulatory environment facilitates the required shift to cleaner and more efficient energy services. And they have to provide funding support consistent with this shift.

The group of individuals of varying disciplines and sometimes different ideologies that continue to think about this overwhelmingly recognized that the communities and neighbourhoods being built today, and the energy systems and infrastructure that support them, will determine a huge part of Canada's environmental impact for decades to come.

Decision-makers, including our municipal leaders need to seize the opportunity that exists now to develop a broader vision and turn it into action by ensuring more integrated and systems-based approaches to providing energy services and infrastructure.

The public wants action and the technology exists to deliver performance. Now is the time to put it all together.

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