

Avoiding urban sprawl could reduce pollution, boost economy: report

BY MIKE DE SOUZA, POSTMEDIA NEWS OCTOBER 4, 2010



Former B.C. premier and QUEST spokesman Mike Harcourt (file photo).

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Victoria Times Colonist

OTTAWA — Steering away from urban sprawl in Canada's cities and communities would significantly reduce the growth of greenhouse gas emissions while boosting the economy, says a new report to be released Tuesday.

The study, published by a coalition of industry and government stakeholders, warns that a business-as-usual scenario could wind up costing billions of dollars and lock the country into a path that ensures higher energy consumption and pollution.

"Unlike many other GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions reduction strategies . . . many of these policies and actions can be enacted effectively and independently by local (municipal) governments, provided that they are empowered to do so," said a summary of the report, obtained by Postmedia News. "This allows our communities to make a substantial contribution to GHG emission and energy use reductions, even in the absence of significant federal action."

The coalition group, Quality Urban Energy Systems of Tomorrow, spearheaded the study that was conducted by the Vancouver-based consulting firm MK Jaccard and Associates. It analyzed three different models of urban development — a business-as-usual scenario, one involving a moderate integration of energy solutions and a comprehensive integration scenario.

Former B.C. premier Michael Harcourt, the chairman of the QUEST group, said the study demonstrates that Canadians could save money and create jobs by coordinating sustainable strategies in 120 cities and communities that make up 95 per cent of the population.

“If we focus those kinds of ideas into those 120 cities and communities we could have quite a powerful and positive set of results,” said Harcourt. “I think it starts with land use. If you don’t have policies and plans that are supported by municipal, provincial and federal governments, it’s very hard to accomplish this integration.”

The moderate and comprehensive policies would consist of better planning on new municipal services as aging infrastructure is replaced to promote smart growth through various investments, such as better rapid public transit and the integration of new renewable energy technologies such as biomass, biogas and waste water sewer heat.

The report estimates that a business-as-usual scenario would result in a 20 per cent increase in direct and indirect urban emissions over the next 40 years, while the moderate and comprehensive scenarios would result in a 15 per cent or six per cent increase in emissions over the same time period. The resulting savings in energy consumption from the second and third scenarios could result in up to \$29 billion in savings for the economy, according to the report.

But Harcourt said there is the potential for many more benefits if all levels of government work together in dedicating resources and implementing policies that set conditions on land development and planning to discourage sprawl.

Urban emissions now represent about 40 per cent of Canada’s overall greenhouse gas emissions, and the Harper government has pledged to achieve a reduction of about 70 per cent of overall economywide emissions by 2050.

Ken Ogilvie, the former executive director of Pollution Probe, an environmental research group, said that the federal government could also promote demonstration projects to support development of systems such as district water heating that would allow a large group of buildings to share hot water at a lower cost.

“The more the buildings are closer together, the more efficient the heating (will be),” said Ogilvie. “The federal government has been a big (funding source) of infrastructure. Infrastructure funding could also be linked to communities (and provinces) coming forward with more energy efficient designs.”

The Canadian Gas Association, a member of the QUEST group which represents natural gas distribution companies, said the report demonstrates the continuing evolution of energy needs in

communities.

“It also makes for different kinds of services,” said Shahrzad Rahbar, a senior vice president at the association and the study project manager for QUEST. “When we first came into (existence), we were serving the street-lighting market. We’re not doing that today. The fact that in the future, we might be doing something else is imminently OK.”

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