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New tool aids planning Program to track changes in neighbourhoods

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 8, 2011

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It can be an unsettling prospect for some, when after years of living on the same Calgary street where not much has changed, there is a move afoot to redevelop the area.

Now, a group of researchers at the University of Calgary is developing a web-based program to help planners and local residents get a better handle on future changes to their community.

"It will be a tool that will be a little more user-friendly and that can demonstrate in real time what the implications are of making these changes," said Beverly Sandalack, a professor in the U of C's department of environmental design.

The project will draw on neighbourhood, street and transit information from the city and funnel it to a website and touch-screen program.

People will be able to input changes they'd like to see in their neighbourhoods, or get a better visual look at proposed redevelopment, and then learn the outcomes of the alternatives they propose.

The focus of the project is on "middle ring" communities that sprouted up outside the inner core from the 1950s through the 1970s and are now facing redevelopment.

The researchers hope the program will help people in those communities, many of them single-family dwelling areas, get a better sense of what densification to their neighbourhoods will mean.

Advantages of higher density could include better transit, and stores that are within walking distance, Sandalack said.

The \$450,000 project, called PlanYourPlace, will be developed over two years and is being funded through a number of groups, including Geomatics for Informed Decisions Network, the Neptis Foundation and TECTERRA Inc.

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Andrew Hunter, an assistant professor of geomatics, said he envisions a large, portable touch pad that can be taken out to local neighbourhoods.

If, for instance, the revitalization around a certain intersection is being contemplated, residents can input what they want and where they think problems exist.

The program should spit out the outcomes of their changes.

"Not all development's good development," Hunter said. "There's going to be some limitations to some things and I think the public need to understand those things.

"Often there's a disconnect between public perception and the reality of development, as well."

The city is keeping an eye on the project, and says it could make development in communities more transparent for the public.

"It allows people those 'what-if' scenarios," said Thom Mahler, manager of established community planning for the city. "It allows the pursuit of that in a real-time conversation."

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