



# 15 Minute Cities

A Good or Bad Idea?

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# THE 15-MINUTE CITY – A GOOD OR BAD IDEA?

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Edmonton City Council has declared that the city will follow the example of Vancouver and become a “15-minute city”. Few people know what this means. A serious examination is needed of what a 15-minute city would mean for residents and what are its real costs and benefits.

According to the 15-minute city concept, cities would be designed and governed so that most daily necessities and services, such as work, shopping, education, healthcare and leisure would be located within a distance reachable by a 15-minute walk or bike ride in any part of the city.

The inspiration thus arises from three ideas. One is the long-held view of most urban planners that cars and urban “sprawl” are bad, and that increased density will reduce congestion. The second is the thesis that humans are causing catastrophic climate change by their energy use patterns and that eliminating Canadians’ use of hydrocarbons by 2050 is essential to solve this problem. The third is that government planning, zoning, infrastructure investments and various regulations are all acceptable ways to alter people’s choices as to where they reside and how they move within cities.

To meet all of a household’s needs would require nearby access to food, entertainment, education and jobs, among other things. Most grocery stores, bakeries, bars and restaurants are privately owned, so their size and location are dependent on market supply and demand for those services. The municipality has no legal means of creating and managing any business or of arbitrarily deciding its location. These are now decided by the market (i.e. people’s free choices) which already supplies all the food options needed; it would not be necessary to call upon municipal governments to make these choices. The same is largely true with the number and location of public kindergartens, primary schools, and other community services – they are linked to the demographics of the population served.

People choose freely to work where their best opportunities are. They choose to reside where they can find the optimal trade-off between the various employment locations of household members, the quality of schools, the residential environment, the housing price and a multitude of other considerations. It is reasonable to assume that people will go on wanting to exercise those choices, not to have them constrained by municipal governments.

The cities that already have adopted 15-minute city policies have restricted or taxed residents’ access to different areas and imposed taxes and fees to discourage outside the designated areas.

Urban planners seem to pursue ever-higher density for its own sake and seem to think we do not have enough land in Canada to accommodate urban growth. In fact, the non-urbanized inhabitable land area of Canada is about 864,000 square kilometers. Generally, experience shows that cities with high densities have more traffic congestion, not less.

For Canada as a whole, of the 15,740,000 commuters in 2023, 83.6% travelled by car, truck or van, 10.2% travelled by transit, and 6.1% by active transportation (mainly cycling and walking). The percentage of people commuting by transit still has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Planners' desires that people live in ever-denser cities go decidedly counter to the demonstrated preferences of the people. Statistics Canada in 2022 published a report on the areas of population growth in Canada's largest cities, and with few exceptions it reported that the populations are increasing faster in the suburbs located 20 kilometres or more from the centre than in any other areas.

Opposition to the 15-minute city concept is not limited to those who champion citizens' free choices over the preferences of urban planners. It also includes one of the most prominent of the urban planning theorists alive today. Edward Glaeser is the Chairman of the Economics Department at Harvard University and has published dozens of papers on cities and economic growth. He has characterized the concept of the 15-minute city as "a dead end which would stop cities from fulfilling their true role as engines of opportunity".

# THE 15-MINUTE CITY – A GOOD OR BAD IDEA?

Edmonton City Council has declared that the city will follow the example of Vancouver and become a “15-minute city”. Other Canadian cities are exploring the idea. Few people know what this means. The proponents, including most urban planners, present it as a way to make services more accessible in cities, to enliven neighbourhoods, and reduce congestion. Those who express reservations about the idea have sometimes been accused of being a conspiracy theorist, one step away from wearing a tin-foil hat. A serious examination is needed of what a 15-minute city would mean for residents and what are its real costs and benefits.

The screenshot shows a website for Amarjeet Sohi, a candidate for Mayor of Edmonton. The page has a green and white color scheme. At the top, there are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, followed by the hashtag #SOHIFORMAYOR. The candidate's name and title, 'AMARJEET SOHI FOR MAYOR', are displayed in a blue and white logo. A navigation menu includes links for HOME, ABOUT, PLATFORM, BLOG, and CONTACT US. The main content area features a large image of a person walking on a city street, overlaid with the text 'ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE POLICY: THE 15-MINUTE CITY'. To the right of the image is the article title 'MAKING EDMONTON A 15-MINUTE CITY' and the date 'AUGUST 9, 2021'. Below the title is a short paragraph: 'When I envision an Edmonton for everyone, I picture a city whose form makes the lives of people living in it easier. I picture neighbourhoods designed to reduce energy consumption for all, and I think of vibrant communities with active streets and citizens.' Further down, there is a paragraph of text and a bulleted list of points.

Over the past year and a half, some Edmontonians have changed the way they work, and where they work. As this shift becomes more permanent, we know more people will spend more of their time in their own neighbourhoods instead of commuting across the city. We need to create a city that supports this, and provides local amenities important for both business and leisure. That is why I support the city's planning goal of creating 15-minute districts, "small towns in our big cities," which will allow all of us to live locally, accessing shopping and amenities within 15 minutes.

The 15-minute city is about quality of life:

- Shortening commutes to work and amenities, like groceries, recreation, and restaurants.
- Supporting a greater variety of local small businesses serving their own neighbourhoods through community hubs, revitalizing strip malls, and supporting small-scale development.
- Reducing our environmental footprint by making it easier to drive less.

Here are some actions that we can take to bring the 15-minute communities concept to life:

## A Definition

The 15-minute city is a concept introduced in 2016 by urban planner Carlos Moreno. According to this concept, cities would be designed and governed so that most daily necessities and services, such as work, shopping, education, healthcare and leisure would be located within a distance reachable by a 15-minute walk or bike ride in any part of the city. The approach is largely based on the view that automobile use is undesirable for “healthy and sustainable

living” and that it is imperative to reduce that use in order to reduce congestion and greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2018, Edmonton hosted the first IPCC Cities and Climate Change Science conference, and the participants issued the “Edmonton Declaration” calling on cities to use “science-based” targets and reduce their emissions to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. In 2019, Edmonton declared a “climate emergency” and instructed city staff to update its community Energy Transition Strategy to meet the 1.5-degree threshold. The new City Plan calls for 50 per cent of new development to be close to the city’s core, intended to shift transportation from cars to walking, cycling and transit by creating “15-minute districts” where people can meet most of their needs within 15 minutes of their residences.



# Innovate4Cities - A Global Climate Action Accelerator Edmonton Declaration

[https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Edmonton\\_Declaration\\_Update\\_May23\\_v2.pdf](https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Edmonton_Declaration_Update_May23_v2.pdf)

The inspiration thus arises from three ideas. One is the long-held view of most urban planners that cars and urban “sprawl” are bad, and that increased density will reduce congestion. The second is the thesis that humans are causing catastrophic climate change by their energy use patterns and that eliminating Canadians’ use of hydrocarbons by 2050 is essential to solve this

problem. The third is that government planning, zoning, infrastructure investments and various regulations are all acceptable ways to alter people's choices as to where they reside and how they move within cities.

## Does the 15-Minute City Concept Have Merit in Practice?

Paris, France was one of the first cities in the world to accept the concept of the 15-minute city and to begin planning to achieve it. In 2022, Alain Bertaud of the Urban Reform Institute in Texas performed an [analysis](#) of the Parisian experience. He posed the issue simply: for people living in the centre of a metropolis of 12 million inhabitants, is it possible, or desirable, to limit their daily trips to journeys of less than a 15-minute walk for all daily needs, including commuting to work?

A pedestrian walking on Paris' sidewalks at an average speed of about 4.4 kilometers per hour will cover 1,125 meters in 15 minutes. Thus, to meet the goal, all the daily needs of a Parisian household must be located within 1,125 meters of each home. That is, theoretically, within a circle of 1,125 meters radius, thus an area of 398 hectares. An area of that size represents 3.4% of the inhabited area of the municipality of Paris.



*Paris is a high-density city. What works in one part of the world may not work in another.*

To meet all the household's needs would require nearby access to food, entertainment, education and jobs, among other things. Most grocery stores, bakeries, bars and restaurants are privately owned, so their size and location are dependent on market supply and demand for those services. The municipality has no legal means of creating and managing a bakery, for example, or of deciding its location. According to the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (APUR), within an area of 398 hectares in Paris, there are an average of 59 bakeries and 197 food shops. **In other words, due to Paris's high density, the market (i.e. people's free choices) already supplies all the food options needed; it would not be necessary to call upon the efforts of urban planners to redesign the city.** The same is largely true with the number and location of public kindergartens, primary schools, and other community services – they are linked to the demographics of the population served. Further, as the demographics change, the educational institutions already reflect the changes in their decisions about when and where to open and close schools.

If a Parisian wants to attend a concert, a ballet or a music festival, she or she is unlikely to be constrained by the choices within walking distance. The same is even more the case with employment. **Today, only 12% of Paris's working population access their jobs in less than 15 minutes whether by walking, cycling or driving. In fact, the daily commute of 55% of employed Parisians exceeds 30 minutes. People do not regard that as a sacrifice, but as an exercise of their freedom of choice.**

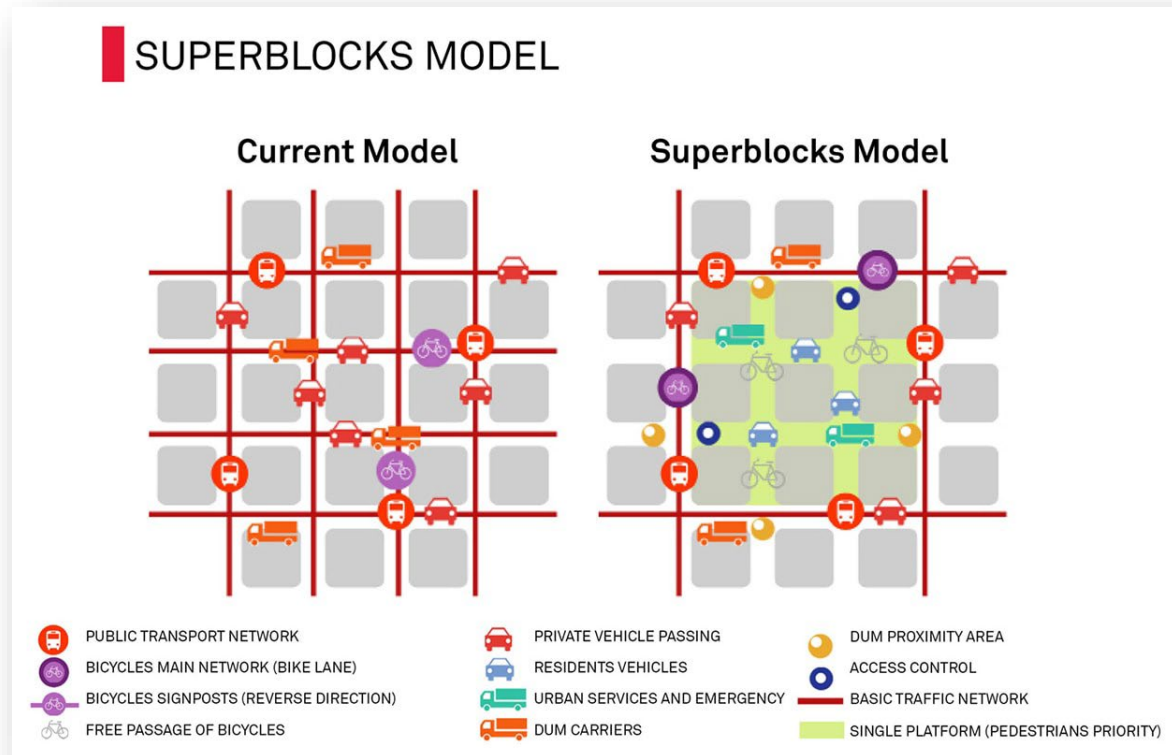


C40 Cities correlates lockdowns to a better way of living: <https://youtu.be/McGyONofhi4>



Similar considerations apply in large Canadian cities. People freely choose where to shop. While there may be a grocery store nearby, those who prefer to patronize large retailers like Costco are quite willing to drive considerable distances to go to a Costco warehouse. People choose freely to work where their best opportunities are. They choose to reside where they can find the optimal trade-off between the various employment locations of household members, the quality of schools, the residential environment, the housing price and a multitude of other considerations. It is reasonable to assume that people will go on wanting to exercise those choices, not to have them constrained by municipal governments.

There are many ways in which the goals of the 15-minute city might be implemented and some of them already are. In Canada, car use is already being discouraged by a long list of measures. These include carbon taxes to increase fuel costs, increasingly stringent emissions intensity requirements that raise the cost of the vehicle, electric vehicle subsidies and mandates, parking restrictions, restricting cars' access to vehicle lanes, and many more. As I documented in a recent article, [immense subsidies](#) are being paid to [expand public transit systems](#). Some cities like Toronto are being encouraged to introduce congestion pricing, which entails imposing a charge on vehicle operators every time they enter the city core.



*Model of transportation restrictions in 15-minute city concepts.*

[https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/may/17/superblocks-rescue-barcelona-spain-plan-give-streets-back-residents?CMP=fb\\_a-cities\\_b-qdncities](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/may/17/superblocks-rescue-barcelona-spain-plan-give-streets-back-residents?CMP=fb_a-cities_b-qdncities)

The cities that already have adopted 15-minute city policies have considered or implemented many more. The Mayor of Paris is proposing to ban traffic crossing a central area of around 14 square kilometers; motorized access would be allowed to residents, people with disabilities and public transit, deliveries or services within the new zone. The ban would be enforced by special permits, and implementing the system would of course require the creation of a new bureaucracy. Alternatively, she is advocating a new tax on motorists that drive across the central area of Paris; how this tax would be collected is a mystery, but politicians would welcome the additional revenue. In Oxford, England, the Oxford Zero Emission Zone (ZEZ) became operational as a first phase in February 2022, covering a central area of the city centre. A wider zone is expected to be announced in the near future, based on the findings of the pilot scheme. The ZEZ is an area throughout which zero-emission vehicles can be driven without paying a charge. However, gasoline and diesel vehicles will incur a charge during the hours of 7am to 7pm. In other words, non-compliant vehicles can't be driven through the zone without paying a daily charge. The charge varies depending on the vehicle, but ranges from £2 to £10 (CDN \$3 to \$15). These are the prices for the period February 2022 until August 2025, after which the rates will double, costing from £4-£20 (CDN \$6 to \$30). Oxford also plans to impose fines on motorists for driving between sections of the city rather than remaining in their zone.

Canadians have already had a taste of what living in 15-minute cities could be like when they experienced pandemic restrictions on movement, gatherings and locations of work. One wonders how well they would enjoy such restrictions on a permanent basis as a way to “save the planet”.

## Other Considerations

### *The Density Question*

Urban planners seem to pursue ever-higher density for their own sake. It is almost as though we do not have enough land in Canada to accommodate urban growth. The statistics of land use demonstrate how bizarre such a view is. Canada is one of the largest countries in the world. The total land area is 9,093,507 square kilometers. While much of that area is not habitable, 12% is, and that amounts to 1,091,220 square kilometers, about twice the total land area of France and more than four times the total land area of the United Kingdom. The current urban land area of Canada is 227,338 square kilometers. In other words, the non-urbanized inhabitable land area of Canada is about 864,000 square kilometers. There is no land shortage for the growth of cities!

One of the most obvious effects of increased urban density is increased congestion.

To quote from Demographia, a [publication](#) of Wendal Cox Consultancy of St Louis:

*“It is true that lower population densities are likely to lead to greater volumes of traffic throughout the entire urban area. But that does not mean that traffic congestion is worse. Assuming equal roadway capacity, an urban area with higher densities will have higher traffic intensities than an area with lower densities, because more cars are on the roadway system at any given time. This means that people will generally be able to make their trips more quickly where there is more suburbanization and that less of their travel will be in stressful conditions of intense traffic congestion. Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson of the University of Southern California make this point by noting that “suburbanization has turned out to be the traffic safety valve...”*

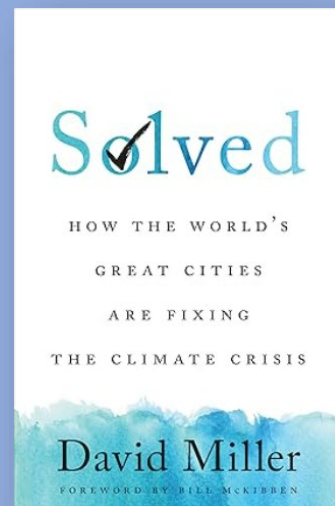
### *Commuting Preferences*

In a recent article, I described the [trends in commuting](#) in Canada. A Transport Canada study based on Statistics Canada data from 2016 (still the latest available) indicated that in the ten largest Canadian cities, the percentage of people commuting to work by car ranged from 68% (Vancouver) to 82% (Edmonton), while the percentage of people walking or cycling ranged from 5.2% (Edmonton) to 9.8% (Vancouver). For Canada as a whole, of the 15,740,000 commuters in 2023, 83.6% travelled by car, truck or van, 10.2% travelled by transit, and 6.1% by active transportation (mainly cycling and walking). The percentage of people commuting by transit still has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. We are a long, long way from 15-minute cities.

Planners’ desires that people live in ever-denser cities go decidedly counter to the demonstrated preferences of the people. Urban density in most North American cities has in fact been declining, not increasing, since at least the 1960s. The reasons are not difficult to see. As noted previously, higher density results in significantly more traffic congestion. It also leads to higher prices for houses on smaller lots. The public instead wants more affordable housing on larger lots and closer to nature. Statistics Canada in 2022 published a report on the areas of population growth in Canada’s largest cities, and with few exceptions it reported that the populations are increasing faster in the suburbs located 20 kilometres or more from the centre than in any other areas.

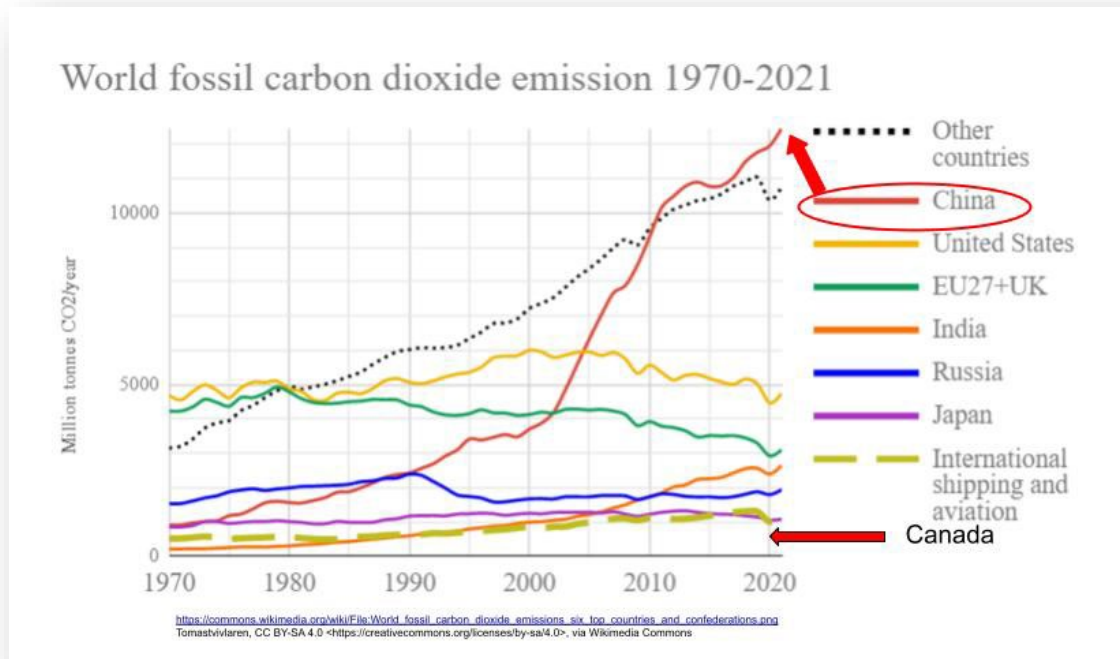
### *The Climate Catastrophe Thesis*

I and others have written at length concerning the fallacies that underlie what I refer to as “climate catastrophism”. Climate catastrophism includes claims that human greenhouse gas emissions are causing catastrophic climate change and an increase in extreme weather events; that international collaboration is actually serving to reduce those emissions; and



Cities actually have no mandate to address climate change. Their mandate is to serve municipal taxpayers, businesses, and residents.

that Canada, with its 1.5% share of global emissions, can make a measurable impact on global emissions or temperatures.



There is not enough room here to revisit all those topics. Those interested in a highly readable discussion of the issues should consult the books *Unsettled* by Steven Koonin, *False Alarm* by Bjorn Lomborg, or *Why Scientists Disagree about Global Warming* by Craig Idso and others.

As I write now, the United Nations is preparing to convene the [29<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change \(COP29\)](#) in Baku, Azerbaijan. The main item on the agenda concerns how the wealthier countries will respond to the demands of the developing countries for at least USD one trillion per year in climate-related aid. If their demands are not met, the developing countries, which now produce over two-thirds of global emissions, will not collaborate to sharply reduce their emissions. There is zero chance that the developed countries will pay such an amount, and therefore there is no prospect that the UN's emissions reduction goals will be met.



The climate campaign, while supported by the media and most politicians, is little more than costly and pointless virtue signaling. It certainly does not justify granting urban planners control over where people can live and how they should move within urban areas.

## A Final Nail in the Coffin

Opposition to the 15-minute city concept is not limited to those who champion citizens' free choices over the preferences of urban planners. It also includes one of the most prominent of the urban planning theorists alive today. Edward Glaeser is the Chairman of the Economics Department at Harvard University and has published dozens of papers on cities and economic growth. He has characterized the concept of the 15-minute city as "a dead end which would stop cities from fulfilling their true role as engines of opportunity".

He wrote:

*"The basic concept of a 15-minute city is not really a city at all. It's an enclave – a ghetto – a subdivision. All cities should be archipelagos of neighbourhoods, but these neighbourhoods must be connected. Cities should be machines for connecting humans – rich and poor, black and white, young and old. Otherwise they fail in their most basic mission and they fail to be places of opportunity".*



### About the Author

Robert Lyman is an economist with 27 years' experience as an analyst, policy advisor and manager in the Canadian federal government, primarily in the areas of energy, transportation, and environmental policy. He was also a diplomat for 10 years. Subsequently he has worked as a private consultant conducting policy research and analysis on energy and transportation issues as a principal for Entrans Policy Research Group. He is a frequent contributor of articles and reports for Friends of Science, a Calgary-based independent organization concerned about climate change-related issues. He resides in Ottawa, Canada. [Full bio.](#)

### About Friends of Science Society

Friends of Science Society is an independent group of earth, atmospheric and solar scientists, engineers, and citizens that is celebrating its 22nd year of offering climate science insights. After a thorough review of a broad spectrum of literature on climate change, Friends of Science Society has concluded that the sun is the main driver of climate change, not carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>).

Friends of Science Society

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