



Big-box development around Polo Park

sitelines

BY STEVE COHLMAYER

Polo Park is essentially a downtown mall

*Occasional traffic
snarls shouldn't
curtail development*

IN an attempt to address traffic concerns, city council recently announced its intention to severely restrict future development in the areas around Polo Park.

I hope that this attempt at crisis management, and its possible side effects, receives further examination by our city fathers, and that some of them have serious second thoughts.

In the world of shopping centres and big-box retailing clusters, Polo Park stands out as something of an anomaly. This concentration of major shopping centre and associated large-scale commercial outlets is much closer to downtown than is normal; parking is well below standards in the industry; and land costs are much higher than is normal for big-box commercial outlets.

Yet business in the area keeps growing, land values keep rising, and Polo Park is one of the best-performing large-scale shopping centres (based on sales per square foot) in North America.

The other main shopping malls in Winnipeg are considerably further from downtown, and serve their own "corners" of the city. The Polo Park area, on the other hand, is close enough to the centre to feel reachable — and usable — by people from all parts of the city.

It is, in effect, the city's central shopping mall. It is so central that it can be considered as an integral part of the central city — and the next step in this logic is to realize that it is more a downtown shopping area than a suburban mall.

Saturday traffic in the areas around Polo Park has become heavy. Yet customers continue to come because of the convenience and range of goods and services available. The current pattern of use, and continuing development, tells us that it is not too much trouble for consumers to come to Polo Park to shop — and it tells us there's room for more commercial activity to come.

If this is really a downtown service area (which is slowly replacing an industrial area), what are we complaining about?

Two intersections on Empress Street have become serious bottlenecks for traffic movement, and some minor traffic-lane realignment at these intersections would relieve a real — though minor — problem.

Surely dealing with these localized issues is preferable to the large-scale traffic interventions requested by some, or to a blanket ban on further development.

Polo Park really was the park where they played polo 50 years ago. The site was surrounded by huge cottonwood trees, which were all cut down as the first act of redevelopment of the site. The paltry landscape development that was installed 15 years ago has been allowed to deteriorate badly.

City fathers and the owners of the shopping centre would do us all a lot more good by replanting the cottonwoods and allowing a success story in our city to continue to unfold.

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is a Winnipeg architect.*