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COVID-19 could be the catalyst for Toronto embracing its suburbs again

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COVID-19 has become a defining moment for how we plan our cities.

For decades, the prevailing wisdom of our downtown planners has been that a good dose of more urban density is the right way forward in our suburbs.

Well, not so fast. Maybe it's time to recognize the value that our lower-density suburbs bring to a complete urban ecosystem and be thankful that Toronto offers so many vibrant suburban communities. Maybe the time has come for a suburban renewal.

The way forward isn't to make our suburbs look like the city centre. It's to embrace our suburbs as part of the urban fabric that makes Toronto a great city.

We are fortunate to live in a city that offers our residents a wide range of neighbourhood choices, both urban and suburban. Some people are attracted to the buzz of downtown living and embrace the noise, density, congestion and high housing costs that come with this.

Others have different priorities and make different choices. That's why two thirds of Toronto residents live in our suburbs because, on balance, suburban living offers a better quality of life for what matters to us.

We may have longer commutes and we lack certain amenities, but look at what we get in return: more living space, green space, affordability, and quieter neighbourhoods.

Which brings us to COVID-19.

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There's been much chatter about how urban living will be affected by the changes we are now experiencing. These changes may point to a suburban renewal.

People may be wary of congregating in crowded spaces, be it on public transit, crowded streets or office towers. This may accelerate the trend of working from home and normalize what was once the exception.

Demographic trends are also supporting suburban renewal. There is considerable evidence in the U.S. that Millennials starting families are choosing to relocate to the suburbs. We can assume this is also happening here.

So technology and demographic forces can be catalysts for suburban renewal. But for suburbs to thrive in this new environment, we need:

More local jobs. Workers will be less comfortable commuting and not everyone has a job that can be done from home. We need planning policies that encourage local employment, including office jobs in both the private and public sectors.

Better public transit, especially in Scarborough. This is starting to happen. This needs to be sustained.

Better internet service. Believe it or not, parts of Scarborough still don't have high-speed internet to support our local businesses. That has to change.

More local arts and cultural amenities. Scarborough already has great restaurants from around the world, but "hipster" Millennials relocating here may create the market incentives needed for more arts and cultural vitality.

Our vibrant city centre will remain our economic engine and cultural hub. But not everybody wants to live or work there. Many choose to live in suburbs for positive reasons.

Toronto's planning policies need to enable suburban livability and prosperity while maintaining what has made our suburbs so attractive in the first place.

Larry Whatmore is president of the [Scarborough Community Renewal Organization \(https://scro.ca/\)](https://scro.ca/).

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