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# Housing Choice Behaviour and Location Efficiency in North American (A Case Study)

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**"…we just don't like the noise of having somebody there, noise, smells we could smell them cooking in the townhouse, we could smell their food."**

## Introduction/Background

Through supporting Location Efficient[1] (LE) housing development, municipalities can help provide homes in areas that result in fewer VMT (vehicle miles travelled) while increasing the accessibility of employment, amenities and services, active transportation (walkability, velomobility) and transit options (Poticha and Haas, 2006; Burda, 2012; 2014). Potential benefits associated with choosing an efficient home location may include reduced commuting time and costs, improved health and wellness, lifestyle effects (e.g. more leisure time), and lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Lyons and Chatterjee, 2008). A majority of North American homebuyers have still been shown to desire homes in suburban developments, and cities are still adding the majority of their growth in

[1] Location efficient neighbourhoods consist of compact mixed-use neighbourhoods with accessibility of employment opportunities, shopping and essential services, and convenient access to public and active transportation options (trails, walkability, bike paths).

these types of developments (Gordon, Hindrichs and Wilms, 2018; Saville-Smith and James, 2010). In order to decrease transportation energy use, GHG emissions and infrastructure costs associated with new suburban development, municipalities are attempting to promote the development of and the demand for homes that are closer to employment centres and along transit corridors (location efficient development) (Hoehner, Barlow, Allen, & Schootman, 2012; Litman, 2012; Natural Resources Canada [NRCAN], 2009; Rose, 2010).

Home location choice has been studied by diverse disciplines, yet little is known of how location efficiency factors into home location choice. A growing group of homebuyers are seeking easy access to amenities, services, employment and frequent destinations that are associated with location efficient neighbourhoods (Becker, Bernstein, and Young, 2013; Borth and Summers, 2017; Burda, 2014; Litman, 2010; Lewis and Baldassare, 2010; Nelson, 2009; Rauterkus, Thrall, & Hangen, 2010). These housing location preferences appear to be out of line with current development trends as homebuyers rather live in a more location efficient home, yet traditional suburban development still continues unabated in North America and other parts of the world. This research was undertaken to investigate the factors that influence home location choice with regards to location efficiency and to consider participants' inclusion of location efficiency in their home location behaviour.

## Methodology

Like many North American cities, Edmonton has identified urban densification, location efficient infill [2] (a goal of 25%), and TOD as principal components in changing the traditional development paradigm of new greenfield suburban single detached housing. Gordon, Hindrichs and Wilms (2018) study shows that of the 231,955 population growth experienced from 2006-2016 in Edmonton, 81% of it was classified as occurring in auto suburban developments (Calgary was the only higher city in Canada with 83%). This study recruited recent homebuyers in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and used semi-structured interviews to look into home location choice and location efficiency. Participants were recruited through multiple e-mail lists, message boards, social media, references through professional and personal contacts of the primary researcher and through local community groups. Snowball sampling was utilized to locate subsequent interview participants. Through this approach, 30 households were recruited, with a total of 39 participants (21 solo participants and nine couples). The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic

analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2014).

## Results and Findings

The qualitative findings of this research contribute to further understanding the inconsistency between homebuyers expressing interest in location efficient homes and the continued unrelenting growth in suburban areas. Results in four main thematic areas provide insights into participants past housing and commuting behaviours/experiences having a sizeable influence on home location choice, as well as participants misperceptions and miscalculation of the associated long-term costs (health, financial, time) of choosing location inefficient homes. Local amenities (social, services, commercial) and neighbourhood design (walkability, velomobility etc) were also shown to be contributing factors in participants home location choice behaviour. This study provides recommendations for housing growth policy, housing development standards and behavioural interventions to help influence more efficient home location choice.

## Discussions and Conclusions

These results give evidence for the improved LE prioritization in municipal outreach education and the real estate industry (resources for municipalities etc). By making homebuyers more aware of the benefits of LE, municipalities, developers, planners can attempt to influence their home location decisions while mitigating issues like declining budgets due to increased municipal sprawl, traffic, GHG emissions, and health issues related to long commutes and walkability. The areas of perception of transportation costs, past commuting and shared wall living experiences influencing home choice and culs-de-sac as community hubs offer some evidence that developers and municipalities could utilize to attract homebuyers to location efficient areas they wish to prioritize . Location efficienct developers and home builders could utilize these results to concentrate on acoustic upgrades and marketing. The snapshot provided by this research provides insights that can be built upon in future research directions on encouraging location efficiency and home location choice.

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