

Toronto Star article:

CHRISTOPHER HUME

Already the cold winds of change have started to blow through the suburbs. Everywhere around us there are signs of looming catastrophe.

But as anyone who watches the upcoming television documentary *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* will see, that doesn't seem to have caused us even a moment's hesitation. If anything, we are rushing towards oblivion faster than ever.

The one-hour special, which airs Wednesday at 10 p.m. on Vision TV, should be a wake-up call to all those denizens of sprawl. If the talking heads who appear in this compelling and deeply disturbing Canadian-made program are right? and they most assuredly are? North America had better figure out new ways of living that don't depend on cheap, plentiful oil.

Perhaps the most compelling expert on hand, Matthew Simmons, chair of the largest energy investment bank in the world, puts the case against suburbia very eloquently.

"Everything in society we cherish ended when the blackout (of August 2003) came," Simmons states. "If that wasn't a fire drill for how important energy actually is ... but people didn't get it. I don't think we actually learned a thing from it."

Indeed, as other speakers make clear, rather than deal with these issues, we simply elect politicians who aid and abet our refusal to get real.

Their argument is simple: suburbia couldn't exist without cars, and people couldn't afford to drive those cars without endless cheap gas. As they also make clear, the amount of oil pumped out of the ground is expected to peak sometime between now and 2010 at the latest. After that, every gallon of gas grows more and more expensive, rendering auto-based sprawl obsolete.

"The whole suburban project can be summarized pretty succinctly as the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world," explains author James Howard Kunstler. "America took all its post-war wealth and invested it in a living arrangement that has no future."

What makes the situation even harder to understand is our unwillingness to face up to it while it's still possible. This cultural, intellectual and economic inertia can be seen right here in Ontario where the debate about the greenbelt has only just started. To his credit, Premier Dalton McGuinty has adopted a greenbelt plan, but the development industry and? God help us? some farmers will do everything they can to stop it. Groups such as the Fraser Institute and various home builders' associations parade their experts, mostly American, who for a fee explain people actually enjoy

commuting, that sprawl is good and global warming isn't happening.

If only. The truth is we will have to learn how to make do with much less. As Kunstler points out, the days where the ingredients of a Caesar salad travel 4,800 kilometres to your table are over, whether we realize it or not. Those farmers busy railing against McGuinty's perfectly sensible, desperately needed scheme to stop sprawl will soon find themselves part of an agricultural system based on proximity to local markets. Future growth based on oil and natural gas is not possible, Simmons warns. Those holding their breath for hydrogen fuel should get serious; it's not going to happen. Instead, we'd rather carry on building suburbs destined to become the slums of tomorrow, McMansions that will be obsolete long before the mortgage has been paid off.

"Though there's some discussion on the show about the New Urbanism, a movement that seeks to reform urban planning, it's unlikely to be the answer.

If author Richard Heinberg is correct, we are at the end of an era that stretches back uninterrupted almost 50 years. The question, he says, is whether future generations will look back on the second half of the 20th century as a golden age or a time of unmatched stupidity. Not surprisingly, he opts for the latter.

Christopher Hume can be reached at chume@thestar.ca