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Toronto's immaturity bound up in the power of unelected OMB

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If Toronto ever grows up, it won't be until we get rid of the Ontario Municipal Board.

This unelected and unaccountable body has been making a mockery of democracy and undermining the planning process since the 19th century. Along the way, it has created a culture of civic immaturity and petulance that has rendered city governance dysfunctional.

And this week the OMB began a hearing that will profoundly affect the city's future. Its decision will influence how Toronto develops in the years ahead, in particular whether the suburbanization of the downtown core will continue, or whether more urban values will prevail.

These are decisions that must be made, but it's wrong and regressive that the decision-maker should be the OMB. But that's how things work in this province and in this city.

Earlier this week, OMB adjudicators sat down to hear the cases for and against the controversial SmartCentres/Wal-Mart proposal for a 7.2-hectare site on Eastern Ave. The proposed mall was refused by the city, which has zoned the land for "creative industry" employment, but because of technical reasons, the board agreed to hear it anyway.

That was the OMB's first intrusion into the process, one that shouldn't have been allowed and one that's deeply embarrassing to a country that likes to think of itself as being so very 21st century.

So now lawyers for the two sides are lining up their trained seals who will slap their flippers on cue and offer expert testimony at great expense to taxpayers.

The decision will be made on the narrowest possible grounds. And in the end, three or four months from now, all of us will be losers, regardless of the outcome. Even if the OMB turns down the application, the city will have been diminished.

Yet this is the Spadina Expressway of our time. This is where the line must be drawn. This is where we must decide what kind of a city we want Toronto to become.

Will we stand up to powerful corporate forces that have saturated the suburbs with their big-box outlets and shopping malls and now want to do the same in Toronto? Or will the OMB give them what they want despite opposition from the city and its residents?

Most assume the OMB will side with SmartCentres.

When the Spadina Expressway was killed in 1971, the man who pulled the plug was then Ontario premier Bill Davis. Then, as now, it was the province that had the final say. All these years later, the premier could still overrule the board, but there's no indication that will happen.

Davis understood that the proposed expressway represented a point of no return. As he so eloquently put it, "If we are building a transportation system to serve the automobile, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to start. But if we are building a transportation system to serve people, the Spadina Expressway is a good place to stop."

Similarly, if we want to build a city to serve large corporate interests, Eastern Ave. would be a good place to start. If we are building a city to serve people, it is a good place to stop.

These decisions are too important to leave to the OMB. Only the city should decide what's best for the city. True, Toronto councillors and planning and public works departments verge on incompetence. That may be scary but they're the best we have. Growing up isn't easy, but sooner or later Toronto must be given responsibility for Toronto.

The irony is that this time the city did make a decision, the right one, only to be undermined by the OMB.

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